

Red Dominoes And Green Tins Of Dubbin

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(Article from A Miscellany of Merriott Memories)

*A*mongst my boyhood treasures, I have a set of pocket dominoes. They are made of thin, bright-red Bakelite and they fit in a khaki canvas wallet. Originally issued by the US Army, they were given to me by an American soldier in 1944, shortly before D-Day.



Red dominoes and miniature playing cards

I'd love to be able to tell you something about the soldier but I can remember nothing about him, not even his name. He was just another soldier, one of many camped in Merriott recreation ground.

Some of the men lived in Nissen huts that had been erected on the site but the majority of them, including the one who gave me the dominoes, lived in tents pitched in line up and down the field. They were infantrymen; I remember the crossed-rifles lapel badges they all wore.

The soldiers were, of course, a big attraction for small boys but, unfortunately, the camp was out of bounds. Or supposed to be. We knew better than to try to get in

past the guards manning the front entrance, so what we did was go round the back; out through Beadon Lane, along the top of Arthur Rumsby's ground, down the edge of the next field and then through a gap in the hedge into the camp.

On one occasion, we were met by a power-mad NCO who bellowed at us to '*get the God-damned hell outa here!*' So, back through the gap in the hedge we scampered. But usually our back-door strategy paid off and we met with no military resistance whatsoever and so would spend an hour or two wandering around the tents chatting to the soldiers. I say 'chatting' but to tell the truth we were scrounging, exploiting their legendary generosity for all we could.

They gave us all manner of things. A particular prize would be a carton of cigarettes, Chesterfield, Camel or Lucky Strike, twenty packets of twenty that we could sell in a flash back in the village for £1 a carton. Then there was chewing gum of course, and also packets of Life Savers, which were little, round fruit-flavoured sweets with a hole in the middle. There were thick adult comics and paperback books by the armful. Packs of playing cards were another frequent gift. One soldier even gave me a sewing kit in a rather large, khaki workbox; my mother used it for years afterwards. And of course, somewhere amongst the loot there must have been my set of pocket dominoes.

The GIs also gave us their 'K' rations. These were intended for issue to troops going into combat. They consisted of a greased cardboard carton in which there were a number of things like two or three cigarettes, a book of matches, a small tin of meat, a tin of cheese, some chocolate, a couple of very hard biscuits, and so on. The contents varied, so to small boys opening the cartons was great fun and something of a mystery. There was, however, one item that never seemed to be missing: a small, round, green tin of dubbin. Nothing could possibly have been more boring so we threw them away in disgust.

The camp in the recreation ground was not the only site the Americans occupied in the village. They also built a cookhouse on land next to the tithe barn, opposite the church. The tithe barn itself was used as a mess hall. Straggly columns of GIs used to march along Church Street, mess cans jangling, heading for their meals there. My friends and I were of the opinion that British soldiers were much smarter, although we were rather impressed by the way a whole column of men moved from one side of the road to the other. They didn't 'snake' across but, as they approached the school, and in response to a bellowed command, all the soldiers did a right turn, marched to the other side of the road, and then did a left turn before continuing on down the road. Not even Merriott Home Guard, whose Sunday morning parades were pretty impressive when seen through the eyes of small boys, couldn't match that for efficiency.

The GIs were also billeted in other buildings around the village, including an empty shop in Lower Street. The shop was then known as Greenwood's, in more recent years it was Hamlin's Stores. The main room and a garage alongside were packed with camp beds and on these the soldiers lay or sat relaxing; reading, playing cards, playing with red pocket dominoes perhaps. I particularly remember a musical interlude when a soldier called Johnny played a guitar, which instantly made him a cowboy in my eyes, and another accompanied him on a recorder.

The Americans also made use of the hand-operated petrol pumps down at Arthur Miller's little garage at the bottom of the village. Queues of lorries, jeeps and motorcycles formed in the road, trailing way back beyond The Bell inn, waiting for their fuel tanks to be replenished. Oh, how we boys longed to have a ride in a jeep, but I don't recall anyone ever being so lucky. We had to make do with imagining what it must be like and with marvelling at the wide-handled, Harley Davidson motorcycles with speedometers that catered for a top speed of 120 miles per hour. Such potential speed seemed out of this world to us, bearing in mind that our experience of motorised travel at the time didn't go much beyond a ride to Crewkerne and back on a Safeway bus.

Eventually the Americans moved out. As a child I had only a vague idea about what was going on, or why the Americans had come to Merriott in the first place, or where they were now heading. But wherever they were off to, on one summer evening, as lorry after lorry loaded with troops left the recreation ground, I recall being in a small crowd of young people who had gathered at Newchester Cross to wave and cheer them on their way.

In the days that followed, there were more convoys passing through the village: lorries, jeeps, half-tracks, all packed with soldiers. And there were also Sherman tanks, passing within three or four feet of the old thatched cottage in which my family lived, shaking it on its doubtful foundations. The wonder was the cottage, and those alongside, didn't fall down.

One of the tanks that rumbled by had a message scrawled on it: *'BOUND FOR BERLIN'*. I wonder if it ever got there? I wonder if it ever got beyond Normandy?

A few years ago, I exchanged correspondence with Colin Osborne whose family came to live in Merriott for the duration of the war. His boyhood memories of the Americans have much in common with my own. But he went further.

He knew that the soldiers stationed in Merriott were various companies of 115th Infantry Regiment, 29th United States Infantry Division (Blues and Greys). Colin's family befriended one of the young soldiers, William (Bill) Breece Joines, who came from Knifley in Kentucky. Shortly before he left the village, Bill gave Colin a New Testament with a supposedly bullet-proof cover, which at the time he wrote to me he still had. Written inside were the soldier's private details. He asked Colin to write to his brother, Hadon, which Colin duly did. Hadon responded and for some time after the correspondence continued, Hadon kindly sending food parcels containing candy which Colin very much appreciated.

But sadly, it was from Hadon that Colin's family eventually learned that Breece had been killed shortly after D-Day. And he was not alone. The 29th Division led the attack on Omaha beach. The 115th Infantry Regiment in particular landed at 10.00 hours. On the first two days of battle, the Regiment lost 33 soldiers killed in action and another 126 were missing. By the end of that eventful month, 264 had been killed and 730 were wounded. It's likely that a good number of the soldiers we befriended as children died or were wounded around that time.

As an adult, I have often visited Normandy. Like many other tourists I have stood on Omaha beach and tried to imagine the hell on earth it must have been as the Allies,

including the soldiers who had been stationed in Merriott, fought so bravely to gain a foothold in northern Europe. I tried to imagine the noise of battle and the carnage that took place there. It's not an easy thing to do with laughing children happily building sandcastles at your feet.

I've also visited war cemeteries where so many of the Americans who lost their lives are buried; row upon row of headstones, row upon row of young men struck down in their late teens or early twenties. They were not men at all really, just boys. Such visits never fail to leave me feeling very, very sad.

I'm also greatly attracted to the Normandy war museums where you can see the artefacts of that mighty military endeavour, all manner of things from buttons to bazookas. It occurred to me that somewhere amongst all this stuff there might be another set of pocket dominoes just like mine, but I have never seen one.

On one visit, however, I did come across a tin of dubbin from a K ration. Never did I think all those years ago, when we contemptuously discarded those little green tins, that one day I'd be so delighted to see one again, or so touched.



As a result of the above article being published several years ago, I received an email from America from the niece of Breece (Bill) Joines. She said my article had made her cry to think he was still remembered here in the UK. She had grown up hearing the story of how Uncle Bill was lost his life in the D-Day landings and the effect it had on her family. She also told me that Uncle Hadon was still alive and would be showing him a copy of my article. I replied to the email in the hope that a little more information might be forthcoming but heard nothing more.

US American Army K Rations



K rations were supplied in three packages; breakfast, dinner and supper. All meals contained two packages of dried biscuits, cigarettes, gum, sugar (granulated, cubed, or compressed), and a key to open a small canned portion. Items specific to the Breakfast meal were canned meat, eggs, a fruit bar and instant coffee. Lunch items consisted of canned cheese and a lemon, orange or grape drink packet. The Dinner package contained toilet paper, a bouillon packet, and a lemon, orange, or grape drink packet. Late production meals had a disposable wooden spoon. Items specific to particular units were sometimes included.

Collectively, the meals were about 3,000 calories per day. The small tins of dubbin with which my pals and I became familiar were probably 'unit specific'; perhaps further evidence that the Merriott GIs were infantrymen relying on their boots to be in good shape.