

1943 - Memories of a very special Christmas (By Hugh McGrattan)

MY memories of the Second World War are fleeting and fragile. I have vague images of such things as lines of ships far out to sea, of aircraft droning overhead by night as well as day, of grey painted motor launches anchored in the harbour and of people in uniform everywhere.

The uniforms that I remember are mostly Army, representing the various regiments that were temporarily stationed in Portrush from soon after war was declared. The names of the majority of those regiments I don't remember, but there is one notable exception - I remember the Americans!

The U.S. Army, in the form of the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment, had arrived in the town without fuss on 17 December of 1943, the final element of the 82nd Airborne Division which was assembling in the area in preparation for D-Day. The smart uniforms and rubber soled boots marked the American soldiers as "different" and their spontaneous handouts of candy and gum made them firm favourites with us local kids. The war was just entering its fourth year and households everywhere were on tight budgets. Christmas was going to be a fairly muted celebration. I had just started school and, like most of my chums, had never been to a Christmas party. And Santa Claus was just a picture in an annual. Despite the trials of global conflict, my childhood memories of Christmas from the depths of the War are happy, thanks to sacrifices made by parents, sisters, aunts and uncles. But that Christmas of 1943 was to be particularly memorable, thanks to the United States Army!



Distinctive badge of the 82nd Airborne Division.



The old Portrush Orange Hall where the 1943 Children's Christmas party was held.

An announcement appeared in the local press – presumably the *Constitution*, revealing that through the courtesy of the Commanding Officer of the American Forces, all Portrush school children between the ages of five and 14 were being entertained on Christmas Day afternoon. The venue was the American Red Cross Services Club, which was now operating from the Orange Hall in Dunluce Street. declared the announcement. "An American soldier will call for your child and return him or her on Saturday evening"



The programme for the day would include “Santa Claus, refreshments, candy, chewing gum, Jeep rides and amusements”.

I had started school just a few weeks previously and was probably one of the youngest children there. And though my recollections of the event are minimal, they are my earliest memories of Christmas. Each GI



Barry's Racing Cars

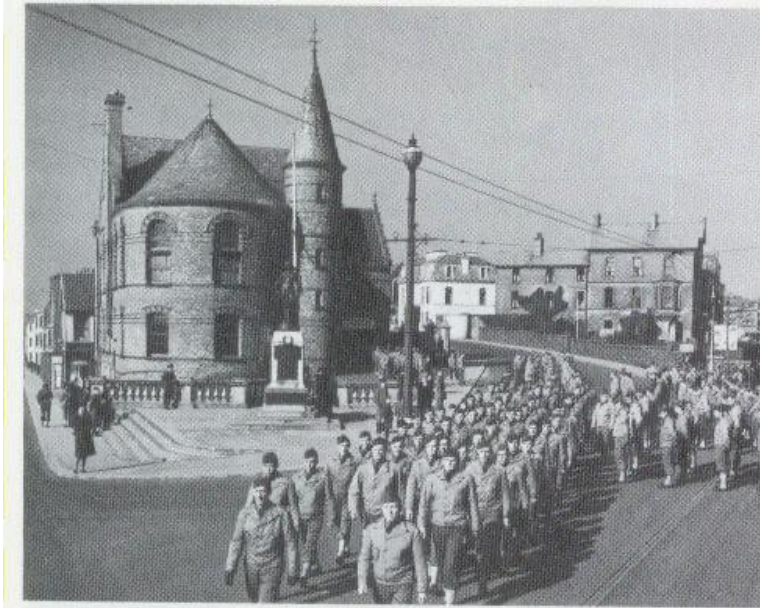
had two or three youngsters to look after and I found myself along with Danny and Colette McGonigle in the care of a young soldier whose name I probably never knew and whose face I cannot remember. We spent most of the time in Barry's, taken there by jeep, where the proprietors threw open the entire premises, including the little boating pond in the entrance area, and we had a great time – all free. Next we saw Santa Claus for real and for the first time in the Orange Hall. There were so many children there that we had to be admitted in relays! There was also a Christmas tree and I got a present, although I was terrified when the big man in the red coat and white beard spoke to me!

A report in the local papers afterwards revealed that no fewer than 500 children had been entertained by their American hosts. Many of the young soldiers admitted that they had enjoyed themselves as much as the children! And not one accident or mishap was recorded and every child was safely returned home at the close of the day. The report in the newspaper concluded: “The party will be long remembered by the children who were privileged to be present and they will have happy memories of the kindness and generosity of our American friends”. And so it was. My sisters and I were left home by our respective benefactors in the late afternoon, our pockets filled with candy, chewing gum and the cash which our American allies showered on us. In fact, there was so much money that my mother tried to return some of it, but the jeep had gone and we never saw the soldiers again.

Memories of later childhood Christmases, of course, are more vivid than that pre-D-Day outing, but the shadow of war was to remain for many years afterwards with continued rationing and shortages. It was to be many years before I tasted turkey. Our Christmas tables in the forties were graced by roast chicken – a rare treat thankfully received. “Afters” came in the form of tinned pears, courtesy of our grocer, W.R. Knox, who treated each of his regular customers with a free tin of fruit every Christmas. The joy and wonder of those childhood Christmases I tried in later years to extend to my own children and now the grandchildren, in turn, are experiencing the same wonderment and joy. It's a vastly different world today, of course, from the one which I knew as a child.



The roast turkey is no longer just a picture in a book but something with which many of us sadly moan we are getting bored. In the local supermarkets yard upon yard of stacked shelves fill buildings that would have housed a squadron of bombers back in 1943.



507th Parachute Infantry Regiment ,at Station Square

The Americans left as suddenly and with as little fuss as when they had arrived. In the early hours of 11 March 1944, eight trainloads left Portrush rail station with all the American soldiers from both Portrush and Portstewart, now trained for the storm that was to come.

We now know that there were just over 2,000 members of the US 82nd Airborne based in Portrush during those crucial months of late 1943 and early 1944. These young men, though thousands of miles from home themselves and no doubt lonely and

full of fear, took time and trouble to see that we local children had a memorable Christmas during the war's darkest days. Within six months of leaving us, 300 of them were dead, hundreds more missing or wounded. They died in Normandy, Belgium, Holland and Germany, before the war was finally won. For so many of them, that fun-filled afternoon in Portrush was their last Christmas on earth. That's why it is so special and why it should never be forgotten.



A member of the American Red Cross pictured outside a Service Club at Mark Street, Portrush, in 1944.



Lansdowne, Portrush, becomes a training ground in the use of the anti-tank mortar for these members of the 507th Regiment.



A Memorial to the men of the 507th Regiment which is sited at Royal Portrush Golf Club.

Our thanks to Hugh for this moving contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters.

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