

Lucien

After four long years of war they came, suddenly, out of the night sky. Just after midnight on the 6th June Lucien Hasley's parents sat at their kitchen table, flashes from exploding anti-aircraft shells lighting up their home as waves of American C47 aircraft passed just 500 feet above them.

Over the next two hours almost 13000 US paratroopers would fall from the sky, the vanguard of the greatest invasion in history. The liberation of Europe had begun.

Lucien was 10 years old on that memorable night. The oldest of 4 boys they lived in a small rustic cottage in a hamlet of just 12 houses - and to add to the drama unfolding about them - his mother was 8 months pregnant! As his house shook to the sound of the huge Pratt and Whitney engines roaring over head the window panes and his mother's ornamental wall plates vibrated and rattled in sympathy with them.

His father realised something extra ordinary was happening and waking his four young children he dressed them before putting his sleepy charges back to bed. He no doubt realised that the decisions he made over next few hours could mean the difference between life and death for him and his family.

Lucien's was a very 'ordinary' family. His father worked on the land and his mother had started work at age 11 (!!) cleaning for the Chateau de Bernaville a few miles away before her marriage at 16. Their life through a modern perspective must seem incredibly harsh yet in fact it was the norm - so it was very much a harshness shared.

Between June 1940 to June 1944 life had continued pretty much as normal in their part of the world - or as normal as life in a defeated and occupied country could be. He vividly remembers the arrival of the first German occupation forces in late June 1940. He was six years old and at the village school in Amfreville when the children heard the sounds of motorcycles - many motorcycles, approaching on the dusty road to the school.

For the children of that era any motor vehicle was interesting as they were so rare and the children excitedly ran to the windows to watch as the long column of German motorcycles with machine gun mounted sidecars roared by. The children all chattered in excitement, pressing their faces to the glass to see better and only their teacher, who knew exactly what this meant, stood with tears flowing down her cheeks.

Asked today Lucien will tell you that the Germans in occupation were very 'correct'. There were rules to followed, curfew's to remember but generally life continued in this rural setting with the usual wartime privations - food being the main one always on their mind, commodities were rationed but they survived - again with the commonality of problems shared.

The years of German rule rolled on and rural life did its best to carry on as normal - harvest festivals, spring sowing, marriages, births and deaths and the war was little heard of. Censorship and a general lack of radios in a poor community meant that actual news of the war was very limited though it was generally accepted by 1944 that liberation might not be too far away.

The Germans, to small children such as Lucien, were just like Gendarmes in different uniforms. This was not a plunder occupation as was the war in the east, here the Germans were told to 'get on' with the civilians and to some degree this was not that difficult.

If they wanted something from a shop they'd pay for it - though Lucien remembers they would walk straight to the front of the queue - these were the victors after all!

He remembers being sent as a 7 year old to carry a jar of cream to his aunt's house in St Mere Eglise. This was a round trip walk of maybe 10 miles and after dropping off the jar he was wending his way home via the top road just outside of St Mere. I wonder what a modern view of such a thing today would be - or in some 'civilised' parts of the world whether you would ever see that child again.

It was a late July afternoon, hot and dusty and he had a 5 mile walk ahead of him. Approaching from behind him he could hear a clanking noise slowly getting louder and eventually, passing him came a German sergeant on a bicycle - the clanking was his bayonet tapping on his metal gas mask canister as he peddled along. After a few yards the German stopped and turning to watch Lucien approach he said

'Who are you?'

'Lucien' he replied.

'And where are you going on this hot day?' Lucien said he lived in Port Filiolet and pointed in the general direction. The German looked down the dusty road, smiled and pointed to the crossbar of the bicycle. Lifting Lucien on to the crossbar the German peddled him home the full five miles, right to his door. As the little boy dismounted the German merely smiled, waved and then peddled off - Lucien never saw him again.

His memory of that day is as fresh as if it happened last week. The smell of the soldiers leather ammunition webbing and belts, the 'aroma' from the wool uniform, sweat soaked on a hot day and he often wonders, as the German was not a young man, if perhaps he had a son his age back in Germany somewhere. Maybe he too was a country lad and as the Germans rarely got leave, perhaps this was his way of making some contact with the life and the perhaps the little boy the war had taken from him.

Lucien's mother had tragically lost two babies since the start of the German occupation. Most probably these infant deaths were due to an illness brought on by the measures the Germans had taken to hinder any local allied landings. Besides the concrete and steel fortifications of the Atlantic wall they had resorted to many simpler and less costly measures to impede any allied landing.

One measure was to keep flooded the low lying fields - in order to provide a barrier to allied troop and armoured movement in the area.

Since Roman times between the months of December and March every year the fields for several miles in any direction near to Lucien's home had flooded to a depth of up to 6 feet. It still occurs to this day - it is a natural inundation caused by the heavy annual winter rains and over the centuries all property and roads had been built 10 feet higher than the surrounding fields in order to cope with these winter floods - they were a kind of Nile inundation.

In the 1700's a canal had been dug near to Carentan and lock gates now controlled the flow of water - stopping sea water coming in twice a day - and allowing the river water to egress. However in winter, with the high seasonal rains, the fields still flooded as they had always done.

But it was always a seasonal event lasting just 3 months and by March the animals, horses and cattle, were brought down from high ground and the fields once again were a tranquil scene of rural life - until the following January when the cycle would start again.

This natural cycle was interrupted in 1942 when the Germans locked closed the estuary gates near to Carentan and the annual flood, with no means of escape, stayed. The winter of 1943 added to the water and made matters worse and the unexpected result of this now annual flooding was that the water was not flowing. In the hot summer months of 1943/44 the water became stagnant and with stagnant water came - Mosquitoes. These were the cause of many deaths and tragically it seems they took two of Lucien's siblings.

In the early hours of that historic night of June the 6th his parents sat by their kitchen table knowing something momentous was happening around them. Lucien's mother went to the window to see what was happening and looking to the west she said: 'An aircraft in flames has just crashed on the Village of Founcroup!'

This was the village of Lucien's Grandmother and today, the Manor of Founcroup, is the writers home. Missing all the houses by just a few yards the aircraft exploded on impact and his mother saw the flash from the explosion and as this happened just half a mile from their home they all heard the blast.



The wreckage of the aircraft that fell at Founcroup

For one of their neighbours, Adrienne Bueuckly, curiosity had got the better of her and she had gone outside into the garden to see what was happening. Looking into the night sky she exclaimed that so many parachutes were coming down they 'looked like grapes on the vine'.

As dawn broke on that day of days Lucien's father stepped from his small cottage and there, just feet from his door was a soaking wet US 82nd airborne paratrooper. His father noted in the early dawn light the 'Stars and stripes' emblem on the paratroopers arm and that several other paratroopers were silently moving into their small village and starting to dig in - some were injured and several had no weapons - lost on the jump.

Later that day his father called the villagers together - 23 persons in total, 13 children and 10 adults and they weighed up their options. The battles raging within earshot meant that they were likely to become casualties whether they tried to move away from the fighting - or if they stayed where they were.

Sensing that staying put and together was the better option the villagers abandoned all their houses and moved into the central house in the middle of the village - thinking that if fighting broke out it was likely to hit the edges of the village first.

Lucien's brother Albert, aged 7, had been ill since the previous day. Lucien is pretty sure this was his fault, caused by some foolery on a garden swing the previous afternoon. He'd got bored with just pushing his brother backwards and forwards - so he'd wound the seat around several times and then let it go. Albert had fallen off, banged his head and he'd now been vomiting almost continuously for several hours. When they transferred him the 50 yards to the 'safe' house he was laid on a mattress on the ground floor - still looking very ill.

Later that morning an American medic arrived in the village with two injured paratroopers and he took over the now empty last house in the village, owned by Mr and Mrs Laisney, as a first aid post - placing prominently outside a 'red cross' flag.

Yvette Laisney was their daughter, 18 years old and it was her home that was now the first aid post. Seeing from the 'safe' house the red cross armband on the medic she assumed he must be a doctor. Yvette said to Lucien's father that perhaps he could help Albert and she walked down to the house, the first aid station, to speak to the medic. As best she could - given that neither of them spoke the others language - she explained that a 7 year old boy was very ill and could he help.

She seems to have got her point across as the medic left his post and together they dodged from building to building to the central 'safe' house where the villagers were taking refuge. He entered and seeing the boy laid on the mattress and noting how small he was, took off his helmet and jacket so as not to scare him. He knelt down and examined the boy and fairly soon he seems to have sensed that it was probably an inner ear problem causing the vomiting.

Airborne medics always carried the perfect solution for airsickness in their jacket - Dramamine. He stood and taking from his pocket a tablet he said slowly to Lucien's father 'Give him this - and I'll call back and see him tomorrow.' Rather like a GP might have done! Given the state of confusion, exploding ordinance and general uncertainty that was the first 40 hours of D Day - this was a very human response to the plight of a small boy.

He then put back on his helmet and jacket and returned to his first aid post at the end of the village. Albert recovered fully within a few hours and Lucien's father decided that the villagers should move to another place of safety. He could see Germans from the top floor window who were within sight of the village and felt that they might believe American soldiers were at the property. He suddenly felt that the 'safe' house might perhaps not be as safe as he'd thought and he herded everyone to a small barn 80 yards away.

It proved a fortuitous move. Within the hour a single heavy mortar shell, most likely German, fell into the village hitting the 'safe' house and collapsing walls and part of the roof. The villagers had had a lucky escape - and it was not to be their last.

Yvette had returned to the first aid post with the medic to help tend the wounded. Later the following day she was still helping when a German truck drove into the village. Seeing the red cross flag flying at the house it slammed to a stop. Five German soldiers jumped out and moved to enter the building. The medic, seeing the truck arrive, told Yvette to get the wounded out of the rear door while he held the front door closed.

The Germans tried to smash their way into the first aid station but the medic held the door long enough for the three to evacuate from the rear of the building.

Tragically when the medic tried to exit himself the Germans broke in and bayoneted him in the back. Dragging him from the house they tossed an incendiary grenade into the building which very quickly set the entire house ablaze .

Other US paratroopers alerted by the noise arrived on the scene and in the fighting which ensued two other American paratroopers were killed along with 5 of the Germans. Some of the Germans managed to remount their truck and the survivors took off heading west followed by a fusillade of bullets from the Americans.

However even with the arrival of his comrades it was too late for the medic. He could not be saved.

He died some little while later from loss of blood, laid by the roadside in this small French village.

A second paratrooper, possibly also a medic came up and knelt by his side, gave him a cigarette and talked to him, providing what comfort he could as this young, big hearted American's life slowly ebbed away.

Opposite the fire raging in the house was all consuming. It took the much needed medical supplies that he had carefully stored there and Lucien's mother (8 months pregnant) had run to fetch him from just two houses away telling him to go quickly to the barn, the new safe house. He remembers standing, awestruck, in the road just 50 feet away, watching the house blazing from end to end, hearing the 'crack' of exploding roof tiles and watching the flames leap high into the air from the windows and roof.

One mile away a fierce battle was beginning for Hill 30 as Col Shanley and 200+ 82nd Airborne paratroopers attempted to take their assigned task - the capture of the hill.

The Germans also knew well the strategic value of this small piece of high ground and were equally determined to stop them.

Those US paratroopers who had been dug in about Lucien's village since early on the 6th moved out from the village on the 7th of June to join in the fighting at hill 30.

Shortly after a convoy of German trucks drove into the village and some 150 German soldiers dismounted.

They fanned out rapidly and professionally through the village looking for Americans as their officer had the villagers - men, women and children - dragged from where they were taking cover. To avoid the building collapsing around them if fighting broke out the villagers had taken refuge in the ditches and foxholes dug by the American paratroopers. The Germans rounded them up. The officer himself, pistol in hand, reached into the foxhole where Lucien was taking cover and grabbing him by the collar had yanked him bodily out of the hole. Throwing him in with the rest of the village they were stood, hands over their heads, by the wall of the barn. The soldiers rapidly formed a semi circle around them, their weapons levelled.

The German officer in charge, enraged and not seeming to be having a good day, paced backwards and forwards behind his men shouting something for several minutes in unintelligible German.

Lucien often says that he felt at any second the officer would snap his fingers and the shooting would begin. Matters and in particular the officer's agitation, were not helped by spent bullets from the battle for hill 30 over a mile away were repeatedly heard striking the roof of the barn that they were stood by.

However gaining control of himself the officer finally calmed down and ordered the villagers into the barn. For the next 30 hours the villagers were confined to the barn, they had no food, just a little milk and a bucket (for obvious purposes).

On the late evening of the 8th June as the Germans on hill 30 were retreating the Germans in Lucien's village also made to move out. Before they could get clear of the village 82nd airborne paratroopers ambushed the German column.

In the barn for the next 5 hours the villagers cowered in one corner as the air was filled with the noises of battle. Rifle and machine gun fire, screams and exploding grenades rent the night air and just before dawn - all became silent. 55 Germans were killed in the 100 yards of ground that is the footprint of this tiny village. Every house was damaged, some worse than others. Lucien's little cottage had all the windows blown out and machine gun bullets had raked the interior walls. Their armoire and cupboards (they had little as it was) had been rifled and their few belongings were strewn everywhere.

After all had been quiet for some little time the villagers still stayed crouched in a group, up against the gable wall of the barn when the door to the barn suddenly burst open. Standing there in the morning light was a soldier who surveyed the crouching villagers with his Thompson machine gun before slowly lowering the barrel and pushing his helmet back on his head saying in understandable French

'Don't be afraid - I'm Canadian. I've come from Utah beach. What are you all doing in here?'

The villagers had no understanding of 'Utah Beach' as this was the allied code word for what the French called La Madeleine Plage (the beach at the hamlet of 'la Madeleine).

It turned out the trooper was Canadian - working with the US forces so he spoke what Lucien describes as 'old French'.

Lucien's father got to his feet and said they had thought it was safest place to be because of all the fighting. The paratrooper, taking from his pocket a bundle of wires and detonators said that the wall - behind which they had been hiding - had been primed with explosives by the Germans and he had just pulled the detonators, defusing the device. It seems the Germans had been intending to blow up the barn as they left the village, collapsing the rubble onto the road to form a road block in order to slow down the advancing Americans.

The ambush of the retreating column had taken place before they could hit the firing switch and they had abandoned the firing mechanism in the confusion - but the circuit and explosives had remained 'live' all through the fighting! Another lucky escape - though this time his father was rather lost for words.

Going outside the road was now a hive of activity with US columns of soldiers, tanks and vehicles passing by - at that moment Lucien said 'We now knew the long awaited liberation had finally arrived.'

With more American's arriving and the immediate threat seeming to be receding Lucien's family returned to their cottage on the 10th June. The village was badly damaged with every building showing signs of the battle. Their own home was a scene of devastation to them. All the windows had been blown out, machine gun bullets had peppered the interior walls and their meagre possessions were strewn everywhere. Contents of drawers were scattered across the floor, as was their linen, the armoire had been ransacked and it was a mess. Lucien's mother set to work with a brush, as did all the children and within a short while

On the 10th of June there was an amusing event, cutting into all the tragedies of the preceding days. Tom Porcella, an 82nd airborne private walked up to Lucien's hamlet having spent the previous four days living on his wits - and K-rations.

As he approached the village he became aware of the smell of cooking, wafting on the breeze and coming from one of the old courtyards - and he followed the smell. Crouched in a rubble strewn yard

was Madame Lagueste whose kitchen and house being badly damaged had formed a circle of stones in her courtyard, lit a fire and was now busily cooking crêpes (pancakes). Tom walked up, breathing in the smell of cooking and after a bit of staring at the pan Madame took the hint and offered him one. Tom didn't need asking twice and this disappeared, quickly followed by another and by the third crepe Tom decided to leave before he overstayed his welcome.

Walking into the main road by what is now Lucien's house he walked up to a colleague sat cleaning his gun. The colleague seeing Tom munching into the crêpe said 'where'd you get that?' 'Round the back.' Said Tom 'There's some woman cooking them.' Needing no second invitation the colleague stood and was about head off to get one when he turned and said 'Hey, what's she called?'

Tom came up with the first name that came to mind 'Crêpe Suzette!'

The word spread - as did the name - and over the next several days she cooked many more crepes for the hungry soldiers that passed by on their way to the war. The name also had a long life - with even the local French referring to her as 'Crêpe Suzette' and it stayed with her long after the war - until her death in the 1980's.

In 1982 - probably as a way of purging himself of the gratitude that he felt to the liberating forces - Lucien built a memorial wall at the side of his house with his own hands. On the wall he has proudly displayed the names of many of those brave men who fought or died there during those traumatic days. However there has always been one sad exception to this honour roll - the medic. For over 70 years Lucien tried, without result, to find the name of the kindly medic who went out of his way to help his brother and died so tragically - and so young.

In March 2016 Susan Eisenhower visited the village with her students and was much moved by the story of the young medic. Returning to the US she put substantial effort and resources into tracing the man - and she found him.

On the 4th June 2016 she presented to Lucien at his commemorative wall the name and the details of the medic who died so sadly there - and she closed the circle for an 82 year old French 'boy' who still remembers fondly the sacrifice of the brave and kindly young American who helped his brother.



This is that medic.

Pfc Frank E Mackey Jr

Medic 508 PIR



Enlisted: August 1942

Hometown: West Philadelphia

Frank was married to Loretta and had a son, John Mackey. John was just 18 months old when his father died.

After graduating high school he became a plumber and pipe fitter and supported his mother and siblings. He joined the airborne mainly for the additional pay of \$54 a month as he continued to support them along with his wife and child.

His high school year book entry read:

Ambition: To find seats for the standing army of the unemployed

Activities: A Patrol; Senior dancing club; Alternate Senator