

This story ran in the *Stow Independent*
on October 15, 2008

World War II Reenactment

Stow residents take drastic measures to keep back the apple pickers...No, this was a scene from the Collings Foundation's World War II live reenactment, "The Battle for the Airfield."

Photos by Ralph Fuller



NOT QUITE QUIET ALONG THE ASSABET

By Ralph Fuller

To get the real World War II out of the way: The Allies won.

That wasn't the case Saturday at the Collings Foundation's World War II reenactment, "The Battle for the Airfield." In short, American, British and Canadian soldiers made an effort to capture an airstrip supporting a German spotter airplane but lost two tanks and a jeep to a German counterattack before retreating.

It was hoped that the Allied assault would go better in a repeat on Sunday but some Americans were worried that their soldiers would go home to watch football, and they weren't sure what would happen.

The Collings Foundation is all about "history by immersion" – the idea that people may learn more by seeing historic aircraft, vehicles and artifacts up-close than by reading about them.

Thus, Saturday's portrayal of a small-unit skirmish – all with blank ammunition, of course – brought into play Sherman and Chaffee tanks, a half-track troop carrier and several jeeps on the American side. On the German side, there were an 88-mm cannon, machine guns, troop-transport trucks and motorcycles with sidecars. A Stuka dive bomber flew over.

The aerial highlight was the flight of the Collings collection's Fiesler Fi-156 Storch, a small, unarmed aircraft used for air observation that was renowned for its short-take-off-and-landing capabilities and its ability to fly as slowly as 25 miles-per-hour.

And there were soldiers – or, at least, some 50 reenactors portraying soldiers on all sides. In addition to contingents representing the American 101st Airborne and Yankee Divisions, there members of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and the Black Watch of Canada. The Germans, about 20-strong for the day, portrayed the 3rd Panzer Grenadiers. There were also a couple of US Marines, an infantryman from the French army of 1940, and a Dutch nurse.

They came with authentic uniforms, tents, weapons, jeeps and other equipment, some for use in battle, some just set out for display as historical artifacts. Some of the pieces, like the 88-mm flak cannon and the half-track, were from the Collings collection.

WWII Reenactment - continued

Some of the WWII machines and equipment brought for the reenactment.



The people who take part in these activities are members of “Living History Groups,” dedicated to keeping the memory of actual units and people alive through reenactments, encampments and “static shows” – displays of artifacts. Everyone admitted the weekend’s activities weren’t a reenactment of a specific event but a mock firefight typical of many such actions.

Historically, the “Yankee Division” – technically the 26th Infantry Division – encompassed soldiers from all six New England states. The reenacted Yankee Division has about 75 members, with about 15 taking part Saturday. The 101st Airborne unit is comprised of separate platoons in New England and Virginia who operate separately except when they join up once each summer to reenact the Battle of the Bulge.

While most took part in the battle for the airfield, some who wouldn’t have been part of any 1944 Normandy engagement – like the Marines, nurse and French infantryman — were there just to display their personnas.

The British unit, the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, is mostly made up of Americans of Scottish heritage from Massachusetts to Maine. Normally, they focus on portraying their soldiers as they existed in Operation Market Garden, the unsuccessful 1944 assault in Holland described in the book *A Bridge Too Far*.

Thus, Katherynne Krause of Springfield was there portraying Kate TerHorst, a real-life Dutch nurse who cared for 300 British soldiers in her home during that battle.

Ron Dufault, Jr., of Cumberland, RI, represented a soldier of the French army that was quickly defeated by the German invasion in 1940. It’s an unusual choice; he noted that he’s “the only 1939-40 French soldier in New England.”

“I do it because it’s not being represented,” he said. “All time periods and factions need to be represented.”

The panzer unit has about 50 members from throughout New England. Since there are so many choices, it brought up the question: Why would anybody want to play the German army?

Responded Bryan Clauss of Sutton: “Somebody’s got to be the bad guy. And there are lots of cool toys in the German side.”

From a raised platform on the sidelines, Foundation head Robert Collings narrated the battle as events unfolded. Tanks rumbled, the Storch flew, the Stuka zoomed overhead, bodies on both sides fell – done in by blank ammunition – the Americans withdrew. War was done for the morning.

Over the PA system, Collings noted that there would be another show, same script, in the afternoon. And if people came back Sunday, he said, there would be two more skirmishes, possibly with different outcomes.

Then he asked that all reenactors, living and dead, come to the sideline for a round of applause.