

## **SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL**

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### **Lief Aalbu's Scrapbook**

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Amongst the papers of former Town Clerk H. C. Stacey in the Saffron Walden Town Library is a cheap red scrapbook that provides a unique insight into life in Saffron Walden during the second half of WW2.

This scrapbook was compiled by Staff Sergeant Leif A. Aalbu of the 52nd Fighter Control Squadron (Air-Sea Rescue Service) that was attached to the 65th Fighter Wing of the USAAF. Aalbu worked in the Control Unit established in the gymnasium of the Grammar School in Ashdon Road (now the Dame Bradbury School) and was billeted in 'Hatherly' on Chater's Hill. The scrapbook contains a wonderful mix of photographs of the US personnel who worked with Aalbu together with many of the ephemeral items such as ID cards, 'messing' cards and official passes that controlled the airman's life during the war. There are also glimpses of war-time Walden including evidence of the continuity of small-town civic life with a wonderful photograph of Borough Councillors and Aldermen processing through the empty Market Square for the annual 'churching' of the Mayor. Behind the Councillors the Town Hall arches are stacked high with sandbags as a precaution against bombing.



In addition to printed ephemera such as a copy of the *Saffron Walden Weekly News* dated Friday 30 July 1943, and a tennis club programme

there are also some drawings and simple pencil sketches of the town including one of Hatherly. Some of these sketches are humorous. A former mailman who came from St. Louis Park, Minnesota, Aalbu loved to draw, and his scrapbook contains several issues of a mimeographed newsletter, *The Happy Squadron Bull* - usually a single sheet with cartoons contributed by Leif. One issue of this newsletter (2 October 1943) describes a visit by a group of U.S. airforce men to the children's home run by Kitty Wilson at Little Bardfield:

We were a bit disconcerted with the abrupt efficiency of the Matron, who had taken us too literally at our word, and who passed out the orders with rapid fire swiftness. 'I want two of you to cut wood. Two may mind the children, and two to pick apples. I'll have something for the rest of you shortly.' This left us a bit open-mouthed at first... Biggest laugh of the day tho was the task assigned to the Boston Beanery boy, Pvt Tighe. A land army gal gave him orders to clean the 'dung' from a duck-shed. We whooped and hollered at this. The last laugh was on us tho, for he came back later with a big smile on his bespeckled map and a big red apple in his hand.

The scrapbook contains examples of contemporary currency together with cuttings and maps related to the D-Day landings and to air sea rescue work. In one letter Aalbu recalls going out on a PT rescue boat into the English Channel during an air raid:

Every wave is a bone-jarring crunch you can feel to the marrow. And the salty spray whipping into one's face can be mighty sore and tiresome after several hours of looking into it. And the pitch & roll of the boat is such that only an experienced old tar can stand without holding onto something solid.

Leif Aalbu was discharged from the USAAF in 1946 but never forgot his time in Saffron Walden or the friends he made here. A bench he donated to the town in 1949 still stands by the Park wall on the Audley End Road, overlooking the valley where it is used to advantage by out-of-breath walkers and breathless teenage romantics. He continued to write to his friends in England, although a letter he sent in 1980 talks of his long struggle against cancer, and how he was looking forward to meeting Joyce Trinder (the headmistress at the Secondary Modern School) in San Francisco later in the year. After his death in 1981, his wife, Maggie, sent the scrapbook to Cliff Stacey, who deposited it in the Town Library in 1988.

**Note: The Scrapbook can be viewed, by advance booking, at Saffron Walden Town Library. Photograph of Lief Aalbu by courtesy of the Town Library.**