

Stelma Bull
Nov 1943

Planning the ruin of the Nazis at Clifton College

At the beginning of World War II in 1939, Bristol luckily found itself beyond the range of the Nazi bombers and unconcerned about air attack. But, the following year, after the fall of France to Hitler's advancing troops, the city came into the firing line.

On June 24 the first bombs fell on Bristol and the Clifton College governors decided to temporarily send their pupil boarders either home or to a camp in the Forest of Dean. But after that scare it was soon school as usual. However, as a precaution, air raid shelters were constructed in the school grounds.

Then came the devastating 148 bomber raid of November 24, 1940 in which the whole of the old historic Castle Street/Wine Street/High Street shopping area went up in flames. Two hundred Bristolians died and nearly 900 were injured. Parts of Clifton were hit and the Prince's Theatre on Park Row gutted. The following month a stick of high explosive landed near the school air raid shelters and damaged some buildings. The governors then decided that enough was enough and decided to evacuate the school. The prep school was packed off to historic Butcombe Court in North Somerset but there was nowhere for the Upper School to go – most buildings large enough to take a whole school had already been requisitioned.

Then the army top brass rallied round and said that they would release some of their hotel buildings in Cornwall if the college would let them use their empty Clifton buildings in return. So in January 1941 the school, directed by energetic headmaster Bertrand Hallward, packed their bags and by the middle of February were entrenched in the seaside town of Bude, on the north Cornish coast. The boys thought that it was great fun, describing it as like "camp life under a roof". Many traditional school routines went by the board and things were never quite the same again. It was a time of great creative activity and certainly the house art and drama

competitions were inaugurated during those wartime years.

But upwards of 30 boys stayed behind in the Clifton school and experienced the arrival of General Bradley and the US troops who took over the college in the run up to D-Day.

The first US troops arriving in the build-up for the invasion were stationed in Northern Ireland. The senior tactical headquarters was V Corps, and in November 1942, V Corps Headquarters moved to England to Clifton College. Other units in the meantime were billeted in the West Country.

V Corps arrived at Clifton on November 13, 1942 after the bulk of the US troops in the UK had departed for North Africa. While at Clifton it had two main tasks – the training of new units as they arrived, and the making of a series of plans involving, for instance, a quick cross-Channel movement in the event of a sudden German collapse.

One officer recalls how, when the first group arrived in Bristol, they were royally entertained by the Lord Mayor and other officials and a representative of Harveys.

They made their way to the school where they slept in a building on Guthrie Road (probably the Music School). They had not realised in the blackout that they were next to the Zoo, and on looking out the window they were astonished to see Alfred, the gorilla. Later the corps chief of staff was frequently seen talking to Alfred – about what nobody knew.

In the summer of 1943, the general in charge met Queen Mary who told him that she had seen a baseball game during World War One

and would like to see another.

The General immediately invited her to Clifton, and in late July she arrived for a game between the two best army teams in the UK.

It was held on the Close in the corner near the Memorial Archway. The royal party sat on the benches below the parapet and two active ball players, in uniform but with fielder's gloves, were placed on either side of the guests with the strictest orders to field any ball coming in that direction.

After the game, tea was served in a tent on School House lawn and the Queen signed autographs.

In October 1943 General Bradley arrived from the Mediterranean where he had commanded II Corps in Sicily. He brought a nucleus of his staff and was joined by another group from the US. By D Day, the headquarters had 361 officers on its rolls. V Corps then moved to Taunton.

When the US First Army arrived in October 1943, it reached Bristol late at night. The next morning all the talk of the officer's mess was that Lord Haw Haw had welcomed them to Bristol in his broadcast the previous evening.

For the first four months of 1944 the big decisions were made in London, while the detailed planning was done at Clifton.

General Bradley and his principal staff officers lived in The Holmes on the other side of the Downs. The building is now a University of Bristol dormitory.

General Bradley's office was the

Housemaster's drawing room in School House. The war room, the heart of the invasion planning for the headquarters was the Council Room, which contained maps, troop dispositions and intelligence data.

Everything there was classified Top Secret-Bigot and, inevitably, if you were privy to such matters you were deemed to be bigoted.

The G-2 (intelligence) and G-3 (operations) officers were in and around the Wilson Tower. G-1 (personnel) and G-4 (logistics) were in the classrooms around the quadrangle.

The Top Secret Ultra room was in the crows-nest in the Wilson Tower; to this room came the intercepts of German radio messages from such places as Bletchley Park.

The houses were used both as offices and billets. The Provost Marshal was in Brown's, but there was no lock-up there; malefactors were whisked off to the nearest stockade at Flax Bourton. Muir House was a billet for full colonels. The guard company was in Wiseman's. Big School was the officers' club when V Corps was there, and the enlisted men's mess under First Army, with the officers eating in the preparatory school.

In 1942 and 1943 a Christmas party for local children was held in Big School. The chapel was used for services by Protestants and Roman Catholics. Jewish soldiers went to services at local synagogues. The pavilion housed the medical dispensary while Beggars Bush Lane offered a landing strip for small aircraft.

There was a dance nearly every night at the Victoria Rooms, and even today many Americans still have fond memories of the Llandoger Trow pub.

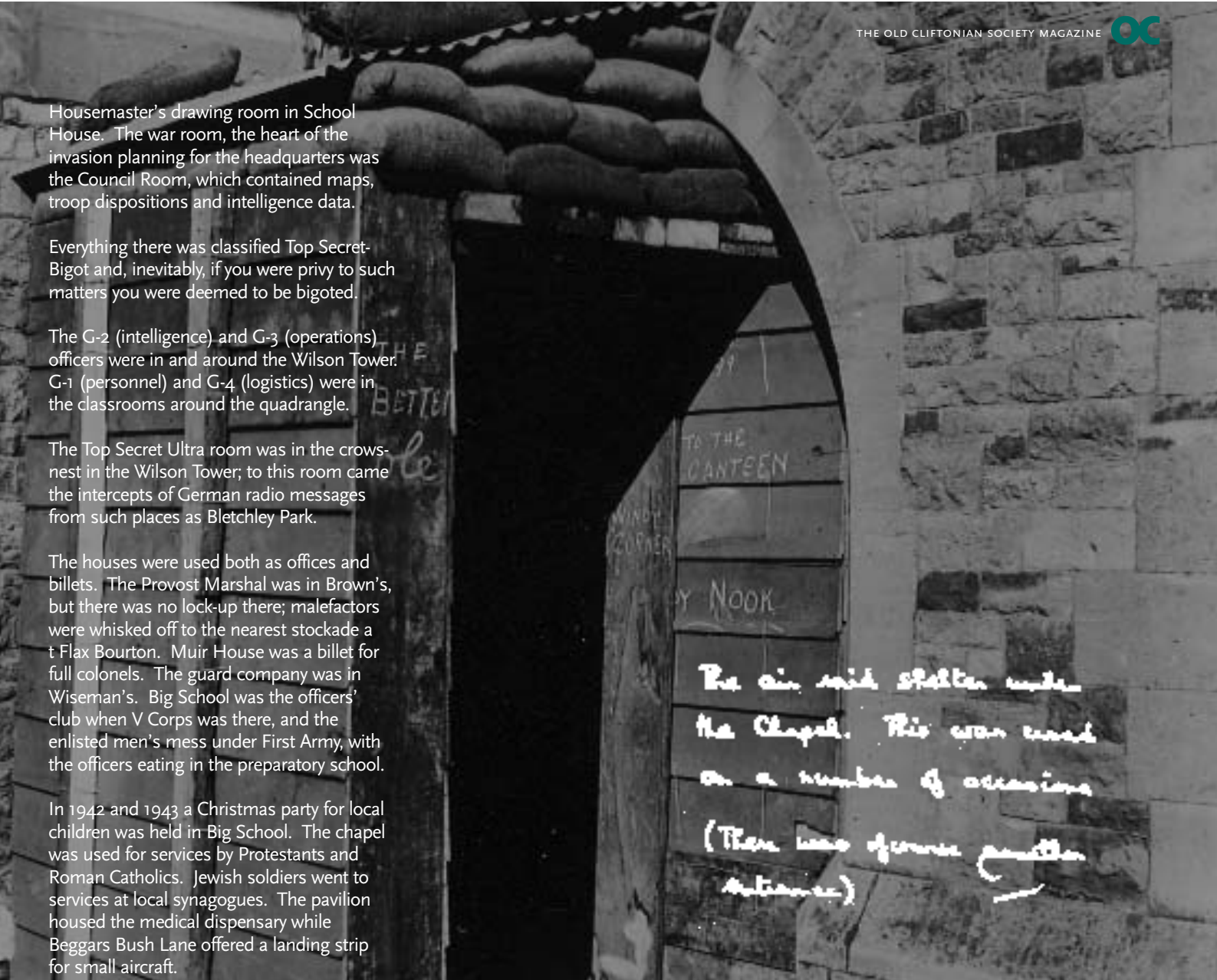
The security surrounding the invasion was intense, yet Lieutenant William P Bird once found his colonel reading the plan for Operation Neptune, as Overlord was renamed.

When the colonel had finished, he simply locked the document in his desk, and the two of them departed. There were no guards at the entrance and anyone in a uniform could have entered with no questions asked.

First Army's operations order for Neptune was issued on January 20, 1944, but an enormous amount of detail had to be filled in during the next weeks.

The goal was to get enough men and weapons ashore in order to survive what Field Marshal Rommel described as "the longest day."

The Bigot room was expanded to include



the library, and here clerks armed with pencil and paper wrote and re-wrote loading list after loading list.

The air force had the goal of establishing forward air bases in Normandy, but this involved hundreds and hundreds of tons of steel planking. So outrageous were their demands that General Bradley finally said, "Why don't you fellows take all the landing craft, seize the beaches, and then we soldiers will come along later." The completed operations order was over 1,500 pages long.

As D Day drew near General Bradley called his corps and division commanders for a

last meeting, held in the Council Room. He held a similar meeting for the headquarters staff in the Chapel.

When First Army had completed its preparations, the headquarters moved to Southampton and other ports for embarkation.

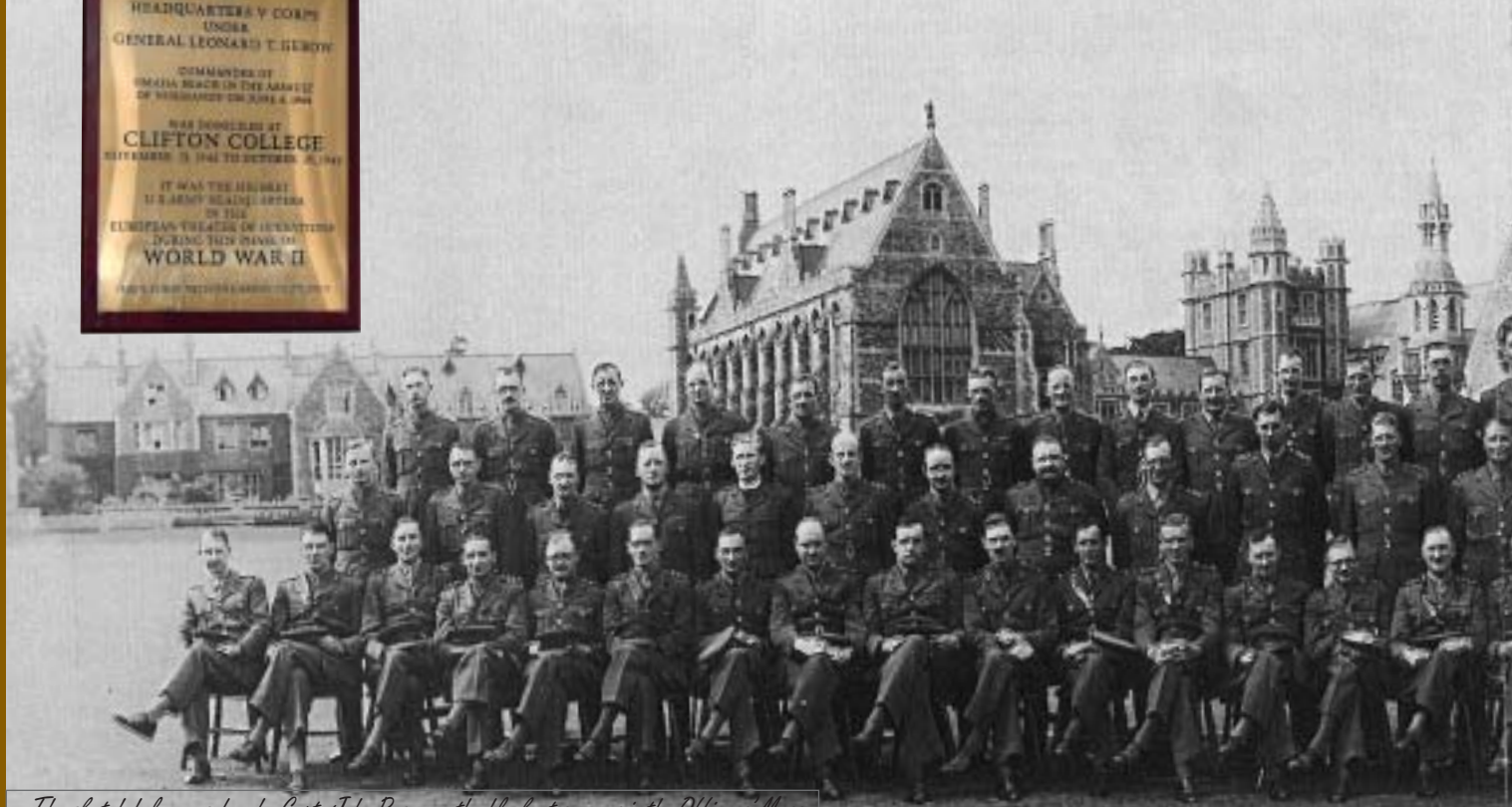
The commandant gave a flag, which had flown from the Wilson Tower, to a small group from the Prep School which had not gone to Butcombe. Later it was placed in a glass case in the main building with a suitably inscribed plaque.

Shortly after First Army left Clifton, the Ninth US Army under Lieutenant General William H. Simpson arrived from the US. Ninth Army directed the training of the troops still streaming into the UK.

The headquarters departed at the end of August and went into action along the Dutch-German border between Second British and First US Armies.

General Bradley was made an honorary Old Cliftonian in 1949, but it was not until 1953, when he represented President Eisenhower at the Coronation, that he was able to get back to Clifton. It was during this visit that General Bradley asked that the Stars and Stripes be flown over the Wilson Tower on July 4 forever. This Clifton has faithfully done.

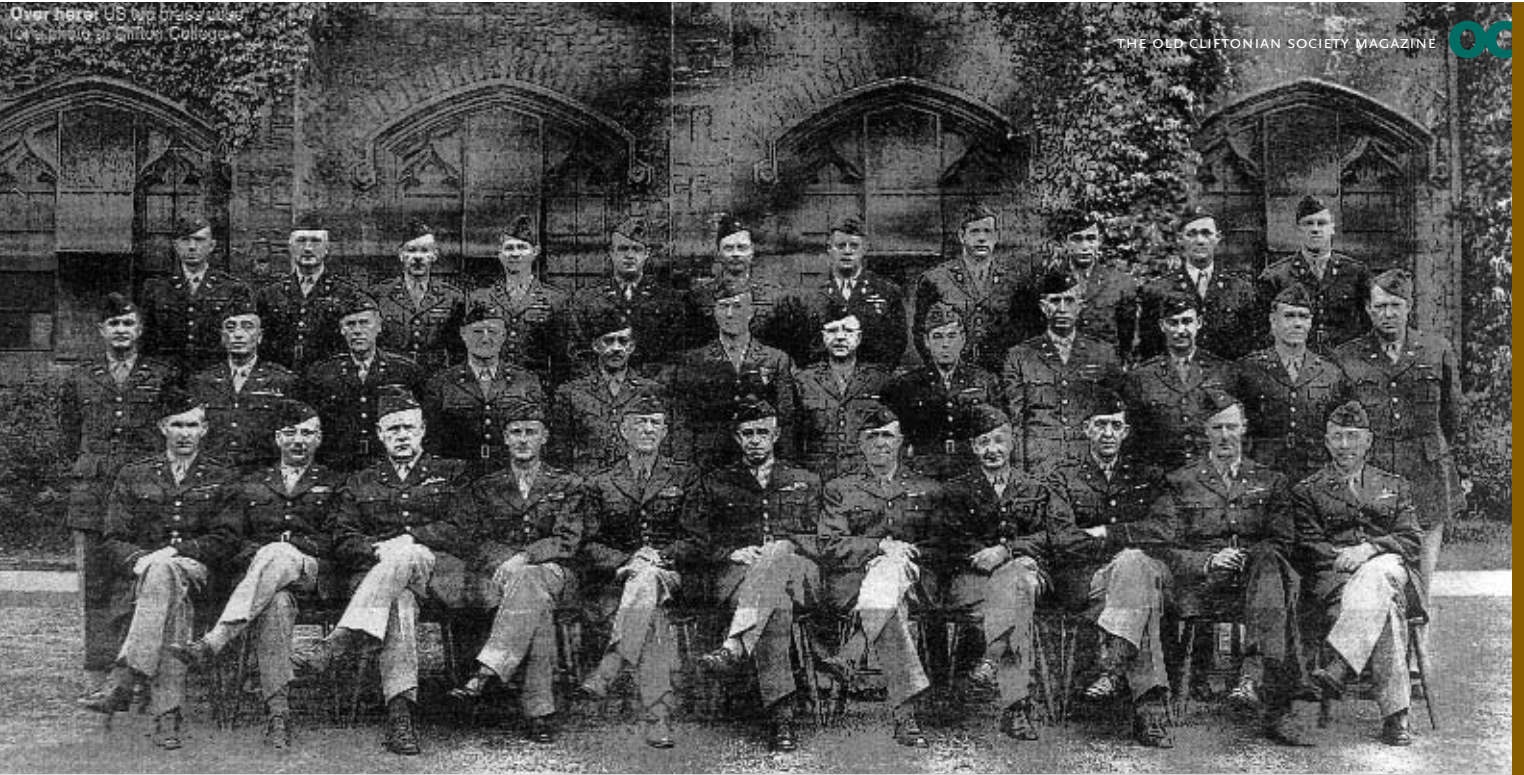
The US Army sent a representative to the centenary celebrations in 1962. On July 4, 1983 Bird presented to the school a new flag with 50 stars which had been flown from the Capitol building in Washington.



The sketch below was done by Capt. John Pusey on the blackout screens in the Officers' Mess during the American occupation of Clifton. John Pusey was a well-known commercial artist and a member of the Engineer Section in the Army.



8
81st Air Bn
Nov 1945



Back view of 'Little Audrey'



December 1940 Bomb damage at Clifton College