

Panorama Hill

During much of the duration of the Second World War, there was a U. S. Army observation post atop this 1445-foot high hill, situated in Colebrook just north of the Winchester town line between the Old Colebrook Road on the east and Conn. Route 183 on the west. In those days, the upper reaches of this hill were devoid of large trees, and the view was nothing short of spectacular for 360°. It was for this reason that the site was chosen to observe aircraft flying in the area. There were actually two observation sites in Colebrook during that war, the other being atop Stillman Hill near the present home of John Garrels at 33 Stillman Hill Road. The Stillman Hill post was manned by civilians comprised of Colebrook residents.

The U.S. Army negotiated an agreement with Adrian Godenzi, the father of two present town residents – Elton Godenzi and Norma Spada. Mr. Godenzi owned and operated a large dairy farm at 3 Old Colebrook Road that stretched from east of Old Colebrook Road all the way west to Conn. Rt. 183. Near the center of this area is located Panorama Hill, and from its summit more sky could be viewed than any other in town. The agreement called for the Army to construct a small building to accommodate four soldiers along with a tower at the summit. The access road left the Old Colebrook Road just north of 35 Old Colebrook Rd. and wound its way to the top of the hill. The soldiers were to take their meals at the Godenzi home. Those of us who knew Mrs. Godenzi have no doubt that the soldiers who drew this assignment were the most fortunate of all the American armed forces during WWII, because Mary Godenzi was a truly legendary cook. She and Mary Gray were cut out of the same cloth when it came to kitchen skills.

This relationship allowed the Godenzi boys free access to the facility on top of the hill. Before long Johnny, the youngest boy, became as adept at spotting and identifying aircraft as were the soldiers. Sometimes when there was good weather on a weekend, the soldiers would go down to Winsted on a Saturday night and might not return until Sunday morning – late in the morning sometimes, as it turned out on one occasion when Johnnie was alone, manning the facility and doing a professional job of it, and awaiting the return of the official observers, when who should drive up but the officer in charge, who was stationed at headquarters in Hartford. Needless to say, he was rather interested in the whereabouts of his men, and asked Johnnie where they were. “Why”, said John, “they’re down in Winsted, going to church!”

Another time the army had a load of coal delivered to heat the building. True to the stories you may have heard about military logic, instead of delivering it to the top of the hill (a good half-mile), they deposited the load just off the Old Colebrook Road along with several 5-gallon pails in which the four soldiers were to carry that load up the road to the summit of the hill. They would have produced more BTUs carrying all that uphill than there was in the load of coal. Elton Godenzi solved the problem by loading it on the farm pickup truck; two or three trips and there was a neat pile just outside the small building at the summit of Panorama Hill. The very next day a staff car arrived from Hartford. The officer looked around, saw that there was no coal and inquired as to its whereabouts. “Why sir, we carried it all up the hill last night in the pails you left us!”

With the end of the war came the abandonment of the observation outpost. The tower was dismantled and the small dwelling didn’t sit there long before an enterprising citizen of the town cut a few trees for rollers and skidded it down the road and off the hill

to what today is number 3 Old North Road. After a couple of additions, it still stands today scarcely revealing its interesting origin.

While we are on the subject of World War II aircraft observatories, it might be well to describe our other post, the one that sat atop Stillman Hill. This was a small, one-room affair, much like the shacks the itinerant lumbermen around these parts used to live in while on a particular job. The more I think about it, the more I believe it most likely was one of these. It was about 12 to 14 feet long by 8 feet wide containing one door and two windows. These shanties were constructed on wooden runners about ten inches wide and as long as the length of the building. They were easily drawn from location to location by either team or tractor. This building has survived the ravages of time and is currently serving as the tool shed at the Eno Hill Cemetery.

This is the building that Colebrook residents spent many thousands of hours in from 1943 – 1945. The furniture consisted of a cot, a small stove, a couple of chairs, a small table and a phone connected to command central located in Hartford. There were identification cards for aircraft – all types of aircraft; German, Japanese and Italian on the Axis side as well as the Allied nations of England, France and the Soviet Union, and of course American. It was intended that the observers would spend their time while not actually observing airplanes in studying these cards. I believe that this rule was observed and carried out, because I recall that all of us at the Center School were quite adept at identifying all types of aircraft, most of this information acquired while we accompanied our parents on four-hour stints.

The ground rules were as follows: as soon as a plane or planes were spotted, the spotter would pick up the phone, which instantly was answered at the Hartford end. The Colebrook spotter would identify the location by saying “This is Bertram 57, I have two single-engined aircraft bearing due east and flying at moderate elevation traveling from northeast to southwest.” I will never forget one incident involving a US Air Force B-17 that actually buzzed our location. It was a day with unlimited visibility, as I recall, and the plane was upon us before we (my father and I) could react. This bomber was flying literally at treetop level, I’m almost certain at full throttle; consequently virtually impossible to see approaching. He was coming straight for us from the east, a course that took him directly over Colebrook Center, which is probably where we first spotted him. By the time my father ran inside and grabbed the phone, he was passing overhead so low that the big maples in front of John Garrels’ were lashing wildly back and forth. I was standing outside the door, looking up transfixed. I distinctly saw the tail gunner laughing and waving to me before being whisked out of sight in the general direction of South Norfolk. My father couldn’t make himself heard above the din at first, but finally reported one multi-engined aircraft flying from east to west at treetop level. He emerged from the hut laughing – the woman at the Hartford end had said something to the effect of “He was, wasn’t he!”