

Paul Williams remembers his uncle, Joe Balfe



You may remember the comedy *Allo Allo* or the more serious one called *Secret Army*.

This is how my family became involved with the actual people that these programs were based on.

Joseph Balfe junior is the man who at the end of the war met and married my aunt Britta in Paris.

Joe senior was actually British, born in Manchester in 1897 he served with the Irish Guards in WW1 after which he remained in France, took French nationality and married Madelaine.

Madeleine's mother owned the Hotel de France in Hornoy-le Bourg east of Amiens which is halfway between Dunkirk and Paris; Joe senior and his wife ran the café with his mother-in-law in the background. He was a large man in build and personality. Whether his wife could sing is unknown.

As the war engulfed France, the café was used as a holding cell for allied service men, with bedrooms in the hotel being blocked off so that the Germans who regularly searched the area did not find the men. Large rewards were on offer for informers and if captured the resistance members and their families were tortured and shot. The estimated figures show that for every escapee three French people died.



Hotel de France, Hornoy Le Bourg

Joe junior, with his brother, escaped from France and, arriving in England he was recruited by MI9 who had the responsibility of co-ordinating the resistance in helping the escape of servicemen and the attacking of German supplies and organisation. Joe returned to France where he was instrumental in running the COMETE escape route while his brother Jack ran BOURGOGNE. During 1943/44 many men were passed from one area to the next *en route* to either Spain or Switzerland.

Joe built up a strong group of supporters including Rene and Odette, the owners of a hairdressers in Amiens. I think this is where the names came from for *Allo Allo*. The policeman in Hornoy was also a member of the group but in April 1943 after an attack on the prison in Amiens he along with about 20 other men and women from Amiens and Hornoy were taken by the Gestapo and shot.

As the war came towards its end and the escape routes were no longer in demand Joe was sent to Paris where my Aunt was based with the Womens Auxiliary Airforce (WAF). They met and were married. At the end of the war they both returned to England and based themselves in Stowmarket in Suffolk Leaving the rest of the Balfe family still running the hotel in Amiens.

Joe started a company making Venetian Blinds and formed a new group in the Suffolk area helping people, not to escape, but in the French art of winemaking.

When Joe senior died my father and Joe made their way to the ferry where Joe discovered that he had forgotten his Passport. On explaining that he was Joe Balfe and he was going to France for his father's funeral, he was waved through, no papers required, such was the esteem his family were held in.

I expect from his resistance training he could have acquired papers.