

# **Archie Thomas (b1923) WW2 RN Beach Commando**

## **Port Talbot**

**West Wales Veterans Archive**

**Date and Location of Interview 22.5.2024, Margam, NPT**

**Interviewer: Hugh Morgan**

**Cameraman: Owen Dobson**

## **Written Description**

### **Early Years in Port Talbot**

Archie Thomas was born in Llewellyn Street, Port Talbot, on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1923 and became a pupil at the Mountain School (which eventually closed in 1965). Archie's father was a Tin worker, referred to by Archie as a 'Furnace Man'.

Archie describes the early year of the War in Port Talbot becoming an apprentice painter and decorator joining the 'Town Home Guard' at the age of 17. The Commanding Officer of the 'Town Home Guard' being 'Cartwright' who was the '*boss*' in the Port Talbot Steelworks. Archie recalls and his neighbour being on sentry duty and the bombing of Port Talbot and Swansea. In particular he remembers the air raid siren sounding at which point Archie and his brother watched through an upstairs window, as a Luftwaffe bomb dropped in nearby Leslie Street. They immediately leapt down the stairs, and he believes now that 'two or three' were killed.

Aged 18yrs, Archie volunteered for service in the Royal Navy, joining up on 29<sup>th</sup> July aged and was quickly enlisted in the elite Royal Navy Beach Commandos.

### **Royal Navy Beach Commandos**

The Beach Commandos were a select group of tough frontline personnel. It was a Force originally formed in 1942 with the purpose of establishing, maintaining and controlling beachheads during amphibious operations with the essential task of quick and safe turnaround of all boats on the beaches.

By the end of the War only 3000 RN personnel had served as RN Beach Commandos, many losing their lives, and at the time of this interview held in May 2024, 101yr old Archie Thomas from Port Talbot, is the sole surviving RN Beach Commando of WW2.

### **Achnacarry: Commando Basic Training Centre**

Archie describes the brutal training he undertook in March/April 1943 at the Commando Basic Training Centre located in the grounds of Achnacarry Castle in the Scottish

Highland region of Lochaber, before being awarded the Commando Dagger and Green Beret. He speaks about live ammunition being fired narrowly overhead by machine guns whilst they trained, and live grenades thrown and exploding near to them as they were on the boats. He describes the training as 'hell' but is obviously immensely proud that as a young man of just 10stones he successfully completed the course.

The story of Achnacarry is captured in many books and post-war movies. Additionally Age Cymru Dyfed collected the stories of former Royal Marine Commandos like Ted Owens from Pembroke Dock (1924-2023) who related to his training at Achnacarry when interviewed for the West Wales Veterans Archive in 2021, and this can found on [Ted Owens audio recording 2021-11-24 with Roger James | Peoples Collection Wales](#)

An impressive memorial to all 25,000 Commandos of the Second World War, now stands around a mile away overlooking the training grounds at Achnacarry on a point that all potential Commandos would have passed on the way to the Commando Basic Training Centre from the Spean Bridge rail station.

### **'N' Commando**

Over the next three years of War, 22 Royal Navy Beach Commando companies were raised each being designated with a letter from the alphabet. Archie was in 'Nan' Commando a unit consisting of 70 split into three sections, 'N1', 'N2', 'N3' with a Lieutenant in charge of each section. Archie was in 'Nan 2' commanded by Lt Redshaw. He refers to two other Port Talbot Beach Commandos, Jack Ball who was in 'O' Commando and Jim Clegg who was a member of 'R' Commando.

### **Sicily & Italy**

On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1943, 'N' Commando set sail from the Clyde and on the night of 9/10<sup>th</sup> July took part in Operation Husky the Allied Invasion of Sicily. Archie's 'N2' were ascribed 'Green Beach' near the Sicilian town of Pachino. Six days later, they moved to 56 Beach, Portopalo, just a few miles away. Archie describes ensuring that the invasion landing craft got onto the beaches, discharging their troops and machinery of War and then got them off the beach as quickly as they could, to return to the host ship to load up again and repeat the exercise. In fact seven RN Beach Commando's took part in the invasion of Sicily in July 43: 'C', 'G', 'H', 'K', 'M', 'N' and 'O' and between them they covered 27 beaches on Sicily.

On 25<sup>th</sup> July 'N' Commando were shipped from Sicily to Malta, arriving the following day. They were boarded in a local barracks and throughout the night they were aware of an attack on the aircraft carrier HMS Indomitable in Grand Harbour. They made a quick get-away from Malta, arriving at Oued Marsa, near Bougier in Algeria, meeting up with the British 4<sup>th</sup> Army Division.

'N' Commando thought they might be going home but instead found themselves going back to Sicily via Egypt. In Catania during September Archie recalls that they were told that they were going to be involved in the invasion of Italy, taking the landing craft to Messina in the north-east of Sicily. At 0430 the call came through to get down to the landing craft and to cross the Messina Straits.

In was on Gallico Marina beach that Archie *'caught it'* (as he describes) and was badly wounded. The Marina was attacked by 3 Junkers Ju 87 dive-bombers, single-engined aircraft notorious for their unique ability to dive vertically to drop its bombs on troops but also unfortunately also on civilian populations. Upon the leading edges of its faired main gear legs were mounted ram-air raid sirens known as *'Jericho trumpets'*, creating a high-pitched screaming noise, designed to maximise fear and terror in those on the ground.

Shrapnel punctured Archie's left thigh which knocked him off his feet. A fellow member of his company put out a hand to Archie to try to help him get to his feet and then Archie saw that he too had been hit by shrapnel, falling down, fatally injured. Still on the ground, Archie noticed that blood was welling up from his thigh down to his boot.

Archie was put on a stretcher and treated immediately in the Red Cross tent. The sirens went off again and another raid commenced. A nurse or attendant came to Archie with a pillow and said, *'put this over your head'*.

Archie was transferred to hospital ship Leinster and then taken to Bizerta in Tunisia where he was disembarked and put onto a goods wagon and taken to a field hospital. Following a two week stay at the field hospital he was discharged and taken to Djidjeli in Algeria to a transit camp called HMS Hamilcar.

Whilst at HMS Hamilcar he and his party received a signal from Cmdr Redcar that they were to rejoin N commando at Kibrit in Egypt. Arriving at Kibrit he was to find that N commando had already left for Anzio so he was ordered to join D commando and board a ship The Empire Elaine to join an American task force at Naples for the invasion of the South of France.

Fortunately or otherwise the American Task Force decide to go it alone so he was laid off and sailed to Corsica where he and his group camped in the mountains..

Three weeks later he sailed to Malta and joined the Empress of Scotland and was homeward bound.

Following a fortnight's leave in the UK Archie then travelled back to Scotland and joined the ship Franconia with the purpose of joining K commando who were preparing for the invasion of Japan.

With the end of the War in Europe 'N' Commando was one of eight Beach Commando units allocated to prepare for the home islands in Japan and for Malaya. But despite

being shipped out ready to resume the War in the Pacific, the Atom Bombs dropped by the USAF in August 1945 on Japan made their deployment unnecessary. Archie was formally demobbed on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1946.

### **Post-War**

Archie was advised by his GP to apply for a War Pension and after being assessed in Cardiff in 1947 was awarded 14s 6d for a period of eight weeks only. He then describes how only decades later in the 1980's he belatedly received a small War Pension which continues to this day.

Archie returned to his pre-service career of painter and decorator working for West Glamorgan County council and latterly at the Abbey Works before being made redundant in the 1980's.

This important interview with Archie Thomas, the last surviving Royal Navy Beach Commando of WW2, was undertaken at Geoff, Archie's son's house in Margam.