

West Wales Veterans Archive

Written aide to the memoirs of National Serviceman Harry Comley

- The interview was filmed and conducted by Neil Davies and Steve Munro on Age Cymru Dyfed Veterans project at Harry's home in Ceredigion on the 16th August 2023.

The interview begins with Harry telling the viewer how in 1950 he was learning his trade as an apprentice at a Stone masonry and wood carving business in Lichfield, Staffordshire. Harry found he had a talent with carving materials and his work was becoming to be appreciated. A new apprentice had been taken on, whom Harry was set to help train. However, being in good health and of age, Harry received call up papers to complete National Service. It was assumed Harry would complete two years national service and then return to Lichfield to complete his apprenticeship.

Harry requested to join the infantry and was posted to the Cheshire regiment. This was a regiment that was being brought up to strength. He learned of the history of the regiment, particularly with regard to the Machine gun speciality during the Great war. Following basic training, he was identified as having the skills required in the Signals platoon.

Harry found that he was adapt at operating, repairing and maintaining the Radio equipment, so enjoyed working within a smaller unit and using his skills. He soon found himself accompanying the regiment overseas, where they eventually arrived in Egypt, via Cyprus. Harry describes Egypt and day to day life in the Army on operations as a "more serious business" and admits he found life tough. However, his natural tendency to work around situations and find more efficient ways of working, came to the fore. He was up for the challenge, so to speak. The regiment's role at the time was to support efforts to keep the Suez canal open and protect British interests in the region.

Harry revelled in finding ways to improve the conditions himself and his fellow soldiers were operating in. In fact, this became a recurring theme of Harry's national service. Giving a wonderful example, he talks about "acquiring "some extra Coal, to provide fuel to heat the basic accommodation his platoon was living in, whilst training in Co Durham, back in England.



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The interviewer asks Harry to recall an experience in Egypt, which offers wonderful insight into his experience of national service overseas. Harry happily tells of his fear of swimming and how he used his nerve and bravado in order to avoid an order given by an Officer, who seemed to have Harry Comley in his sights. The order would have had meant Harry swimming in Suez, a terrifying prospect for him. The account, describes how Harry cleverly manoeuvred himself onto a re supply convoy, taking charge of the operation and tells the viewer how it played out. The enterprise nearly came to a disastrous end, had it not been for Harry showing particular bravado, by securing fuel for the convoy to continue out of Port Said. Having been out all day, undertaking an important task for the regiment, he missed the swim! "I loved it" was how he felt about getting one over on this officer.

Harry goes in to talk about being promoted to Corporal and his regular duties. This involved providing a reliable communications facility for Officers, which afforded him some opportunity to travel in the region. He talks about the Suez-canal zone, the activity and people he witnessed.

Harry remembers the journey back to the UK, aboard a Royal Air Force aircraft. This was a particularly concerning experience, as it was an old war time aircraft in poor condition. His fellow soldiers were not keen on boarding this old transport. Their fears were born out as during the flight, the aircraft experienced mechanical problems and had to return to Egypt. The troops were billeted on straw bedding near the airport overnight, whilst the aircraft was repaired. This was a prospect Harry wasn't keen on. Again, he used his talents to avoid a straw bed and convinced a Chef to allow him to sleep in the Mess. He even managed to arrange a morning wake-up call, complete with a nice cup of Tea! Upon arrival back in London, the troops were housed overnight in disused air raid shelters.

Demobilization awaited Harry, although not before another little win over a Regimental NCO who made comment at Harry's promotion.

After leaving the Army, Harry met the lady who would become his wife. Jean was a Civil Servant and proved to be a great support to Harry, who found settling back into life back in civvy street challenging. One advantage of his time in the Army which became useful was a driving license. This allowed him to find employment, driving lorries for north-western farmers, delivering produce to retailers.

Harry found that he wasn't altogether finished with the Army. He was obligated to complete a fortnight's training every year for three years, as part of the Territorial Army Z reserve force. He remembers an order to report to an address in Rhyl, North Wales, should the government announce an emergency.

It was Harry's desire to return to his apprenticeship. A nasty surprise awaited him. Upon reporting to his previous employer, he found that the Apprentice he met who had joined the firm two years previous, had in fact taken Harry's job. This left a bitter taste with Harry, who felt he had been penalised for serving his country.



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Although not included in the interview, it is worth recording that Harry never let the setback of losing his apprenticeship hold him back. He went on to develop into an accomplished Sculptor. His work can be seen adorning historic places, such as Lichfield Cathedral, Cardigan Castle and many more buildings such as St Mary's church Cardigan. Photographs of his work can be seen in his collection.

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- **Our thanks to the National Library of Wales for the publishing and retention of this material.**



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