



## **Written memoir to aide interview of Mr “Bill” Shephard**

### **William Alexander Shephard (British Army – Royal Corps of Signals)**

Born in 1923, William, known as “Bill”, is the son of a British Soldier of the Great War who had been an expert Signaller in the Royal Corps of Signals and who then taught Morse Code to the young Bill. In 1940, Bill, then living in Tottenham, joined the London Home Guard and spent many hours fire-fighting, following Luftwaffe bombing raids.

In 1942, Bill was called up to the British Army. Initially, he was sent to an infantry training Barracks in Cardiff. However, the induction process quickly identified Bill’s skill with Morse Code. He was immediately posted into the Royal Corps of Signals, where again, his superior skill with Morse Code and an aptitude for learning languages were identified. This resulted in Bill receiving a draught into one of the Specialist Signals Squadrons, that had been formed to support troops in close engagement with the enemy. Following specialist training at Bletchley-park and shortly after the victory in the desert of General Montgomery’s Eight Army, Bill was posted overseas to North Africa. In Tunisia and Libya, Bill and his comrades were to support the United States First Army, as it prepared for the invasion of Sicily and mainland Italy.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1943 the Allied invasion of Italy began. Numerous ships attempted to cross the strait of Messina. Bill was aboard a landing ship with his Specialist Signals detachment. A sudden explosion damaged the ships steering, resulting in the ship’s Captain losing control. The ship steamed in circles, as enemy bombers dived at the stricken vessel. Eventually, the enemy aircraft were driven off and along with his detachment of Signallers, Bill set foot on mainland Italy at Taranto. Bill commented that he forever loved the British airborne forces, as by the time he landed, the Paratroopers had defeated the German defenders who were retreating north.

As the Allies moved up through Italy, they encountered fierce resistance from German Army units that were entrenched in towns and cities. A bitter 14- month struggle ensued, where Bill found himself supporting fighting units at the front line. His small detachment travelled in a van, that was equipped with communications equipment. The main task set for the specialist Signallers was to listen in to German communications, decipher the messages and pass them back to field communications headquarters as fast as possible. Technology at the time meant that the Signallers had to maintain a close distance to the front line, in- order to intercept the enemy transmissions. This led to some dangerous situations and Bill particularly remembers one specific incident.



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His unit was tracking a Panzer division, which was engaged in a fighting retreat. His driver was attempting to return to the main British unit that was engaging the Panzers. Bill recalls looking up and becoming aware that they had joined a column of vehicles travelling along a main road. Then came the realization that they were in fact driving along in the middle of the very same German Panzer division they had been tracking. Bill and his comrades were not too happy with the Driver who had unwittingly put them in mortal danger. By that time, Bill had become adept at speaking German and was quickly rehearsing what he planned to say to the German soldiers. They were immediately behind a truck full of Panzer Grenadiers and Bill can recall soldiers sat in the rear of the truck, showing a sudden interest in the vehicle he was travelling in. Bill feared the worst and braced himself. The next thing he can remember, is his Driver making a sharp turn off the main road and speeding away from the German column. Disaster had been avoided at the last minute. Bill quietly mentions that he and his fellow comrades let the Driver know what they thought of his navigating!

The Allies fought increasingly hard battles, across rivers and mountains and into northern Italy. Sometime in the autumn of 1944, Bill found himself and his unit at a temporary base south of the Austrian border. They were exhausted after months of fighting. The situation at the front was something of a stalemate. However, rest for Bill was to be short lived. He was called before his company Commander and detailed to immediately travel back to southern Italy and report to an Army officer at a port that was possibly Bari. Here he was to join another specialist signals unit, that had been rapidly formed, to support the 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Gurkha Rifle Regiment (Part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian infantry brigade). The Gurkhas had been tasked to immediately deploy to Greece and fight off the advancing National Populist Liberation Army (ELAS) who were mainly Communist and attempting to take control of Greece.

So, once again Bill found himself amongst a small detachment of specialist soldiers, as part of a large force of Allied forces, preparing to arrive into a turbulent and hostile country in the Mediterranean. However, this time, there was to be no repeat of the long and fierce battles fought against highly trained and motorized infantry divisions. Bill comments that the Gurkhas made short work of it and the civil war in Greece came to a rapid end.

Bill returned north to find his unit preparing to move into Austria. The move was to happen sometime in or near to the end of April 1945 and Bill's unit found that they were entering a turbulent and devastated country. Parts of Austria was occupied by a vast Soviet Army and until the Allied and Soviet governments agreed an occupation plan, the soldiers on the ground were confronted with numerous dangers. Eventually, a plan was agreed Bill found himself stationed in one of the three British sectors in Southern Austria. Interestingly, organized sport had returned to the armed forces and Bill took full advantage, playing football for the Corps and regimental teams. He was a talented player, which benefitted him during service and shortly after, as we will hear. He was to remain in Austria, supporting the rebuilding of the country until 1947, when he returned to the United Kingdom for de-mobilization.



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Worth mentioning and relevant to Bill's later career, was his aptitude for learning languages. In addition to learning German, whilst in Italy Bill had learnt Italian from many engagements with children and adults in the communities his unit travelled through.

Back in the UK, after leaving the Army, Bill secured a trial at Tottenham Hotspur FC. However, the manager at the time, Joe Hulme wasn't enamoured to servicemen returning from overseas. Not to be discouraged, Bill was introduced to the manager at Watford FC, believed to be Jackie Bray. Jackie was impressed with Bill and put him in the first team, as they battled to remain in the old third division south. Bill made several appearances and helped secure the team sixteenth position in the league that season. He even scored some goals including a vital winner.

However, the wages available to professional Footballers in the 1940's were poor and Bill's travels throughout the war, had given him a taste of travel. Encouraged by his ability to learn foreign language, he successfully applied for a career in the Diplomatic service.

Thereafter Bill served his country over a long career in many countries across the world. He particularly remembers fondly his time in Hong Kong, Singapore and the far east. He served as deputy Ambassador on two occasions and was responsible for safety and security on many of his foreign postings.

Bill sadly passed away in Cardigan on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024. His dear wife Elizabeth was beside him as he passed away.

Bill, a man of Christian faith, was a much-loved member of his family and the community, who respected his service in World War two and his many years of service in the Diplomatic Corps.

To quote the many: "A lovely man"

*This interview took place at Bill's home in Cardigan, west Wales on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2023.*

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