

Sergeant William McMurray SBS

On Boxing Day in 1994 David Hannay recorded a discussion between himself and William McMurray about the latter's wartime memories. The C90 tape was converted to a couple of .mp3 files in early 2020 so that the discussion could be played on a computer.

The notes below were made after listening to the above.

William McMurray joined the Army in 1939 at Dumfries when he was only 18. He travelled there with the Girthon minister Rev. Easton.

He had wanted to join the Navy but that would have required a longer-term commitment.

Sholto Douglas (Mill House, Ann Street) suggested that the 6th Cavalry might be suitable. This was a Territorial Unit based in Worksop, Nottinghamshire.

When this unit was due for embarkation he was told that because he was a tradesman (joiner), he could not go, so he was posted as a Private to the RASC (Royal Army Service Corps) at Aldershot. Once he arrived there he volunteered for a posting abroad.

His RASC unit were to deliver new trucks containing ammunition and fuel to the British Army (1st Corps) at "the front" in Belgium..

It was a very cold winter and many of the truck radiators burst. By the time they were at the front half of the trucks were out of action.

His unit were spread over 3 villages. Facilities e.g. Mess, ENSA (Entertainment National Service Association) were poor. His billet was a pigsty. Many of the villagers were pro German and not friendly. When his unit got a new commander he ordered the pro German mayor in the village to give the soldiers clean accommodation.

One day they came to a farmhouse where the farmer and family were fleeing from the expected German advance. In the kitchen, Willie found identity cards and also WWI medals including a Croix de Guerre which he packed safely in his bag.

Years later, after the war had ended, he told this story to Mrs Steel at Whiteside (on The Cut, Gatehouse). She had worked in France during the war and offered to try to find the family to which they belonged. She was successful and the medals and photos were returned. One of the sons wrote a lovely thank you letter to Willie.

May 1940 - Evacuation of Dunkirk

When Willie's unit was about 13 miles south east of Brussels it became obvious that the Germans were close behind them so they were ordered to get to the coast.

A Mechanical Sergeant Major was in charge of about 40 or 50 men. They started off in trucks but soon ran out of petrol and started walking - often through the night.

They had little or no ammunition and the roads were clogged up with refugees. German planes came over from time to time and machine-gunned the roads. The only protection was to dive into the ditches - which were full of dead bodies.

By the time they reached the coast the unit was down to about 20 men. There were many casualties on the beach but Willie was so numb by now that he barely took it in. They had to walk quite a way along the beach before they could get onto a rescue boat – destroyer Shikari.

He was given a bunk as soon as he got on the boat and he fell sound asleep and didn't wake until they reached Dover. He only had the trousers and shirt he was wearing and he was still filthy and smelling when

he arrived back home in Elgin where Annetta, his future wife was staying. He was given leave from the RASC for just over a week.

Willie's unit was re-formed in Northern Ireland although he had a couple of interruptions.

Firstly – he had to have his appendix out and then he married Annette Downie on 1st September 1940 in Morayshire.

At Woking his RASC unit was told they were to join the 8th Armoured Division in North Africa. This division was all tanks.

Each tank had a truck which kept it supplied with petrol and ammunition. Willie was involved with the trucks.

The journey to North Africa was a roundabout one taking 8 weeks. They sailed from Liverpool to Bombay and then to Suez where they were off-loaded and kitted-out for desert warfare.

During the voyage they were re-fuelled at sea. During one re-fuelling Willie discovered that he had just missed his cousin, who had recently left the refuelling barge. Willie never saw his cousin again as he was killed later in the war.

They had training for 2 to 3 weeks near the Pyramids before being sent to head off the Italians who were heading towards Cairo.

Travelling across desert sand was very challenging. The sand changed from soft to hard and it was difficult to see the difference. They used long metal channels for the truck wheels to run in. These were heavy and hard to handle. The tanks had no problems with the terrain

Willie's unit were involved in the Battle of El Alamein where they took munitions up to the front line. They sometimes had to battle through sandstorms. They worked for 2 days and nights with the supplies.

When the battle happened Willie remembers little of it. He was so exhausted he slept through most of it. In June 1943 King George VI, with Churchill's approval visited troops in North Africa to help boost morale. Armoured vehicles formed a circle around the area. Willie's unit were instructed to guard a nearby village and allow no one to leave - much to the consternation of the locals who could not get to their well just outside the village.

Willie became ill with jaundice which was later diagnosed as malaria in the Scottish Hospital in Tripoli. He was there for a month before being transferred by hospital ship to Alexandria. During this trip he was paralysed for a time but he recovered.

During his time in hospital his unit had been moved to Persia. He, and some others from his unit, were transferred to the Special Boat Service (SBS) where their knowledge of using small boats was invaluable. This unit was still part of the RASC but now they were supplying clandestine units in the Greek Islands who were involved in raids and reconnaissance work.

In April 1943 a Small Scale Raiding Force was set up under the control of Major, the Earl Jellicoe. The training base was at Haifa in northern Israel, but later Willie was sent to Famagusta, Cyprus where he was trained in the use of canoes.

All the work he was involved in was around the Eastern Mediterranean - the Greek Islands and Turkey. During this time he was promoted to sergeant.

By 1945 Willie was back home in Inverness. He was demobbed in 1946 and his son Brian was born in 1947. The family returned to Gatehouse (Skyreburn) shortly after that.

