

## A ROYAL MARINE

**M**y war story begins with an early courtship. I first saw Doris Whittles cycling when we were both on our way to work one day in 1939. She was a gorgeous blonde (to me anyway), who had recently moved with her family to a nearby semi. I was rather too scared for a direct approach, but luck was on my side as some days later, on the same route, her bike sustained a puncture. There she was, walking along and pushing the bike, so I stopped and asked if I could help. “You live in Bowness Avenue,” I said. Things developed from there, and Doris and I started to have fairly regular meetings. These would continue until the end of 1940, though the funny thing was that I was never invited to meet her family and I don’t think she ever met my parents.

Talk of war had started to materialise at the beginning of 1939. But I don’t think it affected me unduly at that time: newspapers were not a regular part of our lives and the only other source of news was the wireless, which did not broadcast constantly. I didn’t follow the news anyway. Nobody did in the north of England. We were in our own happy little world. We knew, of course, that there were rustlings in Germany, and air-raid shelters were being built and that sort of thing, but it all seemed incredibly distant, and of course after the Great War nobody believed that anything like that could happen again. I suppose also that I was more concerned with my football and with Doris. Funnily enough, I sometimes went down into the shelter

with her—but only for privacy, not because of any danger. (I once made a fumbling attempt to undo her blouse down there.)

In September 1939, war was declared with Germany. I was nearly 19. I didn't hear the broadcast, but my brother did and he told me all about it. Mother cried, which was a rare occurrence. I suppose she thought of Dad, badly wounded in World War One and losing the sight in one eye, so it's understandable—especially as she had two young sons. Sadly it was only when I was seeking information for this book that I found out about the tears; had I known at the time, perhaps I would have shown a little more compassion towards her.

This might surprise the modern reader, but I didn't really know what to think about the outbreak of war. It was unnerving, obviously, but back then the propagand machine was a highly effective thing indeed. These days grim news would be everywhere, as it absolutely should be because war's an abomination, but when the Second World War began, all the reports were positive things about how many German planes had been shot down and how many enemy soldiers killed and so on. I should have been far more frightened and full of dread, but that was how things were then. We simply didn't know.

Life continued. At the end of that month, Frank Broadhead and I arranged a camping trip at a farm near Buxton that Uncle Wilfred had found for us. He camouflaged our tent (government orders) and delivered it with food and so on to the site, while we cycled there. It was a terrible holiday, it rained more or less continuously for the week, but luckily the farmer allowed us to use his barn providing we did not smoke or use our cooking appliance inside. So, with the tent more or less relegated to kitchen duties, we slept in the barn. Frank produced a 50 tin of Passing Clouds cigarettes, which was an expensive brand. I had never seen so many cigarettes together of any brand or indeed smoked terribly much (just a bit behind the toilets, passing the odd fag around). Smoking was a comfort, but nonetheless we arrived back home looking like drowned cats.

Then came the war preparations. Windows were covered with criss-cross strips of brown paper to stop flying glass if we were bombed, and blackout curtains were hung. Torches were partially

covered so that they showed just a strip of light, as were cycle lamps and those of cars and buses. Street lighting was reduced, a public air-raid shelter was built near the Rec, and the Home Guard came into being—with Dad one of the first to join, going off at the weekends on training and exercises. What really stopped me in my tracks, though, was when the call-up for 20-year-olds was introduced, and with that I secretly began to hope that my 20th birthday would never come. But it did, and a few weeks later—on Christmas Day 1940, would you believe?—the call-up papers were dropped through the letter box. Yes, the Royal Mail delivered on that day. Not only did I receive this unwelcome present, but I was also expected to go for a medical on New Year's Day. Happy Christmas from the British government.

It was on Boxing Day that Doris the blonde bombshell finished with me. I had arranged to meet her on Christmas Day in the afternoon but I had forgotten. Who wouldn't after getting his call-up papers? Regardless, she said that if I forgot a meeting on Christmas Day, I didn't love her (or words to that effect). To be quite honest, I think she was waiting for an excuse to finish with me, and I wasn't that surprised as things had been cooling down for some time. To this day, though, I think it was a bit cruel to do it just then.

I went to Dover Street in Manchester for my medical on New Year's Day 1941. Manchester had been bombed over the Christmas/New Year period. There were numerous smoking buildings and general devastation as I walked from Victoria Station. What a frightening start to my service career. I duly passed my medical. I didn't want to go into the army at all, but mostly I was scared of flying, so I opted for the navy. It was rather a surprise, therefore, when I was drafted to the Royal Marines, the United Kingdom's amphibious light infantry force.

It was 15 March 1941 when I stood with my mother and father at Rochdale railway station waiting for the train. I was feeling like a lost child, and it's important throughout all that follows to remember just how young, inexperienced and scared I was. We all were really, those of us who were drafted in from civilian life. My dad, who had served in the 1914–18 war, was proud that I was joining up, which is

something I've never been able to understand. He had a terrible time at the Somme and had lost his sight in one eye while gaining a dent in his forehead that looked a bit like a bellybutton.

Nearby on the platform were a man and his wife. We got talking and, to my amazement, I learned that he was going to the same unit as me. Harold Burton was his name, and he assured my mother he would look after me. In the end, though, it was more a case of me looking out for him and making sure he didn't get into any trouble with the temptations that are an inevitable part of being in the army and serving abroad during wartime.

My destination was Arborfield, and it was there that I commenced my training. That consisted of the usual—drills, marching and assault courses. Route marching was particularly difficult for me because while they weren't flat, my feet weren't perfectly arched either. After 15 miles of marching over rough terrain carrying full kit, they started to protest.

We slept in Nissen huts on straw mattresses. Despite the lack of home comforts, sleeping wasn't a problem because we were always exhausted from the endless, punishing physical activity. At 6.30 every morning we had to be on parade, making sure that our boots and brasses were all polished to a dazzling shine. I soon got used to the authoritarian nature of the army—it wasn't that different from being at school—although I found some of the punishments for misdemeanours a bit silly. A popular one involved sending the offending soldier off with a paintbrush and a tin of white paint to coat the stones around the roads. Completely pointless.

After a short while, I was drafted to the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (MNBDO) to receive training as a mobile anti-aircraft gunner. The idea of the MNBDO was that we would invade somewhere and take over before setting up our guns and making a base for supplies and so on. We were trained to pack up easily, move on and set up somewhere else as needed. After four months' training, we had a passing out ceremony in May 1941.

The Marine component of the organisation was divided into eight batteries, A to H. I was in F Battery, which numbered a little

over 100 with three officers and 30 or so gun crew, the rest being staff, cooks and so on. There were four guns in each battery and we men had dual roles in that, besides manning the guns, we also trained as normal combat Marines.

By this time there was another girl in my life—Sheila, a school friend of my cousin Joyce on whom I'd had a crush forever. I met her the first time at one of Joyce's birthday parties when I was 17. After that Joyce did her best to get us together but to no avail. I did have her name in a diary which I had started to keep though—a habit which continued throughout the war—but I had no more contact with Sheila until some two or three months after I joined up.

One day in August 1941, while I was on a rest break from guard duty and checking an address in my diary, I suddenly saw her: Sheila Cowperthwaite, 14 Prince St, Rochdale. Why not write to her? I thought. So I did and—greatly to my surprise—she replied. (She told me later that when she showed her mum my letter and said she wasn't interested in me, her mum said, "I think you should at least reply this time. He is fighting for us,"—or words to that effect. God bless Mrs Cowperthwaite.)

The letters continued. Sheila kept me updated on her life including what she had been doing at work. Having left school at 15, after gaining some office skills like me—typing, shorthand and bookkeeping—Sheila's first job had been office girl at JJ Smithies. After that she worked as a receptionist for the local doctor. Throughout the war, she would work for the Dexine Rubber and Ebonite Company, a major government supplier, particularly to the War Department, and deemed so important during the war that it was evacuated from London and relocated to an old cotton mill in Spotland Road. Sheila eventually rose to be in charge of the wages department. In her free time, she wrote that she went to the pictures and to dances, although most evenings she would be at home with her parents, knitting or listening to the radio. As well as her day job, Sheila was determined to do her bit for the war effort, joining the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) in the ambulance section. This involved spending one night sleeping on the station at Kingsway each week. As there were no air raids in

Rochdale, Sheila's time there was spent on first-aid lessons or playing darts or billiards.

On my first leave we met. After that things went smoothly and the courtship continued. I think that, although at first she'd seen me as pretty unappealing, once I'd been a soldier for a while I'd done a lot of growing up and become a man really, which she found to be an improvement—and I was damn good looking by then! Soft and gentle Sheila could come across as being a bit snobby—my mother thought she was terribly stuck up when she first met her—but it was really just that she was so shy, although she would become more confident as the years went by.

Sheila was an only child, so her parents must have had big expectations of me. On our first night out, I took her home and met her dad and mum, Tom and May, and I must have passed the test: we carried on seeing one another and would marry in June 1945, once the war was over.

The whole thing was a bit like a fairy tale. I don't know how many letters were exchanged, but I know that the number of hours we spent together were not considerable. On leave it was mainly in the evenings, and perhaps longer at weekends, but one thing is not in doubt: it was love at first sight—at least for me.

In June 1941 the Royal Marines moved to Anglesey. There we commenced serious training on the guns, which lasted for about four months and included a good few days' break on a practice shoot at sea, competing against the Royal Artillery (RA). During these exercises a plane would fly past pulling a sleeve, and we had to fire at the sleeve within a measured distance (for safety reasons). My battery managed to fire one more round than anyone else, for the record, but the RA got closer to the target than we did. At Anglesey, we also tried out a new radar-based system, which seemed to have a lot of potential. It was introduced over the following months and fairly quickly became the norm.

The Royal Marines have a reputation for toughness and arguably are recognised as the cream of the services. This can create a feeling of arrogance among the regular soldiers. The nucleus of the MNBDO

consisted of sergeants and upwards, who were all regulars. We, the conscripts, were the interlopers, unwanted but necessary. During the whole of the war, none of us conscripts would be promoted to sergeant, although in my view some deserved it. Perhaps I had a bee in my bonnet as eventually we seemed to be doing most of the work while some of the sergeants simply acted the part. Luckily, ours was a smashing fellow called Bennet. With him at the helm, we all developed a close bond and became a happy bunch.

Although I would never make it to the highest echelons of the Marines, I was promoted to lance corporal on 2 June 1941 and then corporal on 8 August 1941, so I was obviously doing something right. In 1941, though, it did seem to me—and others—that the operation was a bit Heath Robinson...

Powering everything, and with cables running all over the place, there was a large generator. There was also a height finder, which was a nine-inch cylinder (about six-feet long) sat on a pedestal: the operator stood looking through an eyepiece, and on each end of the cylinder was a sort of telescope. You had to focus the instrument on the plane by means of an open sight; eventually it registered the height, which was then transmitted to a predictor. This was a large box arrangement which calculated wind speed and so on and thus determined the fuse length to set on the shell. This setting was done by hand. Then the shell, which was four inches in diameter and heavy as lead, was loaded—no mean feat when the gun had a high elevation—and the gun was fired. On each side of the gun, a Marine read a dial, one to elevate/lower the gun and the other to swing it from side to side. Another Marine on a platform fired the gun and worked the breech, and there was a lance corporal responsible for the supply of ammunition to the loaders and who set the fuse time on the shells. A sergeant/corporal was in charge overall.

All of this, obviously, depended entirely on spotting the enemy planes, which in turn depended on the cloud cover. Planes then did not fly as fast as now, but nonetheless more often than not the plane had passed over before a gun was fired. When one was spotted, in most cases it was prudent to dispense with all the above procedures

and simply point the gun where you thought the plane was and fire; usually all guns fired at once, creating a barrage, and we hoped for the best. At least it put the fear of God in the pilot flying the plane. Later, the loading of shells became partially mechanised, and you could fire about ten rounds a minute on a good day, but even in the earlier days the MNBDO, with some 24 heavy guns and numerous light batteries with searchlights, could put up a considerable barrage.

Our first move was to Torpoint with a gunfight at Carkeel, overlooking the Plymouth oil depot. We also guarded the Brunel bridge (which crossed from Torpoint to Plymouth) at night, when it was closed to traffic, which was a lucrative job. Many cigarettes and so on changed hands as soldiers and sailors tried to get back to their units over the bridge having missed the last ferry.

Numerous air raids were made on Plymouth, and we saw plenty of action. On one occasion, the Germans decided to concentrate on the oil depot, dropping a bomb directly on to an oil drum, which then exploded and caused a chain reaction. Balls of burning oil rained down, a lot of them on our gun site, and we abandoned the guns. Any burning oil could have exploded our ammunition, and who wanted to be blown up? In the end, no one was seriously hurt apart from a few minor burns, and after things had quietened down, we somewhat sheepishly returned back to duty. Next day on parade there were vitriolic remarks by the officer about deserting our posts, but surprisingly things were hushed up and there were no punishments. Everyone, including the officers, had demonstrated common sense by temporarily leaving the guns, after all.

There was another memorable incident during this period. In some port areas, friendly planes were barred from flying over unless they identified who they were by dropping flares, which were colour-coded on a daily basis. (The Germans had captured some English planes and thus new security measures were required.) But one day a plane flew over and dropped the wrong coloured flares.

The guns opened up and gave it quite a roasting, though in the end it managed to get away. The next day the pilot came round to the camp and gave our commanding officer a telling off, but after



being told the reason for the barrage, he apologised and praised the accuracy of the firing.

There's a coda to this story, which goes to show how small a world it is. A few months after the end of the war, Sheila and I were with some friends in a pub in Rochdale when I was speaking of the experience at Torpoint. Suddenly there was a tap on my shoulder and a voice with an accent said, "Excuse me, I heard the tale."

"Oh, yes," I said.

"Well, I was the pilot." It was true. He was Polish and had been an officer in the war.

The mobility part of our name now came into play. We could pack up and move within one hour, and spent some weeks travelling back and forth along the South Coast. We found it uncanny that at nearly every place we moved to, we engaged enemy planes. It wasn't until many years later that I discovered that the people in command by then knew what the Germans were doing because our boffins had broken the Enigma code.

Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) had to learn to ride motorbikes. At first we rode round and round a field, and then it was off on the road towards Falmouth through Newlyn. The town had a strong Belgian contingent, who would put barriers across the road when any troop vehicles tried to pass through. We knew this but, as we arrived, decided to carry on towards the barrier. But one of our bikers drove right into one of the side supports, the one nearest the sea. You guessed it—he knocked the barrier down and his motorcycle finished in the drink. He was lucky he didn't follow it.

Another memorable episode occurred at Newlyn a few weeks later. Since we were to be combat troops, it was decided that we should undertake a beach landing from the sea, so off we sailed on a landing craft with our faces and hands blackened. The plan was to land on the jetty, while an aircraft would drop flour bombs to increase the realism and some of our troops would act as the enemy.

It was just turning dusk when we tried to land—only to find that there was no enemy apart from the Belgians. The plane flew over and in the gloaming could not make out friend from foe, so

simply unloaded the bombs, covering everything. What a sight. What a shambles.

During this stay on the South Coast we lived under canvas, which was generally the way during this whole period in the UK. One evening in woods near Falmouth, a gale came up that was so strong our tents were blown away, leaving a mess that took three weeks to sort out with most of us having to be at least partially re-kitted. It was particularly unpleasant as, during that period, we were often undertaking marches of 15 to 20 miles in the cold and rain.

In Mousehole we had a much better experience. It's a lovely village south of Falmouth. Upon arriving there we'd just got the guns in place when we heard the sirens and the sound of planes flying quite low. There wasn't much time, so we were ordered to fire blind and—would you believe it—hit a German plane, which promptly crashed into a cliff and blew up. Shooting at planes seemed like a game back then. It was exhilarating in a way; I even enjoyed it. I didn't see the horror of dead bodies then as I would later in the war. We were defending our country, and if we could stop the enemy by shooting its aircraft down then so be it. On this occasion, we became local heroes, receiving free drinks in the village's two pubs and tea and buns from the villagers wherever we went. Regretfully, we only stayed there for three days.

Sheila and me and our children were in this area years after the war and decided to see if we could find a trace of my time there—in particular, a permanent gun site that my unit had built at Land's End. After much searching, we managed to find the site: the spots where each gun had once sat were visible despite all the concrete being gone. Standing there I felt like part of history—pretty disconcerting to say the least.

There were two incidents in the period after this—one in the area around Bristol and the other in Leigh-on-Sea—that weren't the finest moments in my military career.

The first involved a Christmas Eve party that locals had organised for us at the pub. Unfortunately, the day before the party we were told all leave was cancelled and we were all issued with white camouflage

uniforms, which was both ominous and disappointing. But because of the disappointment, and because we didn't want to let the villagers down, most of us decided to ignore the ban and attend the party anyway. Then, at around 8.30, an officer appeared and informed the crowd that anyone who returned to camp immediately would suffer no consequences. Otherwise it would be curtains. Even then, about 40 men—including Harry and me—decided to ignore the orders. The following day on parade we received our comeuppance: all who'd ignored the order were told to march forward. When we did, we NCOs were each duly stripped of our rank and transferred to our sister unit. It would be a year before I became a corporal again. After the war it came to light that the issue of white uniforms was likely for a raid on Norway, which turned out to be a disaster. So it may have been quite a close call, though none of us knew it at the time.

Years later, on a family holiday, we went to the village again and found the pub and the village green, though of course both had changed considerably. The new publican was a young fellow and, after I had explained the reason for being there, he said that it was likely it was his dad, now deceased, who'd been the landlord at the time. But there was an elderly man sitting in the bar who suddenly said, "Hello, corporal! Stand at ease." He had been one of the local Home Guard. Drinks all round.

The second incident took place when we were attached to the 21st Army Group. There were lots of rumours and reports in the papers about a possible invasion of the continent, and from the exercises we were doing, it was clear something was afoot. I wrote a letter to my cousin Irene, and in it I mentioned these exercises. The letter was censored, and I was court-martialled for revealing information that could be useful to the enemy—which I still think was stupid since it was in all the papers.

The officer representing me said that the powers that be had to set an example and it was likely that I would be sentenced. Could I give him a good reason to minimise the punishment? Suddenly it came to me—I had a carbuncle on the back of my neck which was pretty bad. I was excused duties the day before the hearing, being

dispatched to the sick bay with instructions to “dress it up”. I left the sickbay looking in a really bad way.

The officer chairing the hearing was the commanding officer of the MNBDO, a red-haired ex-naval boxing champion and sports fanatic called Major Muir, who was responsible for organising the unit’s football team of which I was the star centre forward and thus well known to him. This was good for me. My representative said I was extremely sorry and should have known better, and he explained the bandages and injury quite professionally. They went into a huddle, and in the end I was sentenced to the minimum punishment they could inflict—three days. Surprisingly, they added that because of my injury I would not be sent to the naval prison. Instead, a suitable attic room in the area would be found to serve as a prison cell.

I was guarded by my mates and fed well and each morning and evening was marched along the promenade to the sickbay with an armed escort of a corporal and four Marines. I became quite a celebrity and even received the odd cheer from the public as I passed. The downside was that the authorities stopped sending money to my mother, and I lost my good conduct payment of 3d per day. But funnily enough I remained a corporal. I think they realised that my mistake was pretty harmless. I still have the scar from the carbuncle, so in any case it wasn’t entirely a bluff.

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