

LIVING MEMORIES

of Len Kilvington documented on 4 April 2005

Interviewed by DGW and MJ

So you were born in 1920?

Yes.

And you told us about your struggles and your family that died – your parents died leaving the family behind.

Yes and now I am the last one, the only one that is left.

They have all died?

Yes, mind you it should be that way shouldn't it? I was the last one to be born and the last one to go. They were terrible conditions when I was a child.

What did your father do?

He used to work for British Railway and he used to walk to work from Wadworth to Doncaster. There was no transport in those days. My brothers had to collect horse manure before they went to school, from in the garden. They had a rough time of it my brothers. I never knew my mother. My brothers said they buried my dad to her. I never knew my dad mostly. Life goes on.

How old were you when they died?

About two for one of them and four for the other. I have no recollection of the early days.

Who looked after you when your mother died?

My sister – she was thirteen, she was marvellous. She did wonderfully well with us. One in a million, she was absolutely marvellous. There was nothing she couldn't do. I often saw her black-leading the fireplace, sweat running down her face. She had a terrible start in life. She left school at thirteen and didn't have a

full education. The other one was the opposite, my sister who was the next one down. We survived. Another brother died at twenty-one at Ilkley Moor. He died of TB. My dad died of TB. It was very common in those days. I only once went to see my brother on a railway line but I thought it was marvellous. I had to try one day, he was dead the next. My next brother died at fifty-nine, all four of us went to war and all four of us came back so we didn't do bad. I found one in Cairo, I had to chase around Cairo in a Brigadiers car till I found him. Another one, I was in Ghent in Belgium making my way back to my battalion in the Eastern Front. There were little holes in a pathway at the side of the road; like a pathway and I was up and down that and I found another brother. He was the opposite side. So I saw two but I didn't see the other one.

What regiment were you in?

Yorkshire and Lancashire Regiment for five years. We first went to Dreux in 1939 then we went down to the front of the Maginot Line near Rheims. Then we came back and went all the way to Scapa Flow and then on a destroyer into Norway. We were in Norway for four days and we never had a bite to eat or anything. We were lined up on a bit of flat land in Norway and five Stukers came down the valley so everybody scattered. There were three of us out of two hundred that were left and the others went into Sweden. One hundred and eighty-six went into Sweden and were there for over a year.

I didn't know these three lads I was with, they were complete strangers and they had no idea what to do. I said we can't sit here; we needed to make our way back to the coast. We went up the mountainside and came to this beautiful house. We went in, there was nobody there. I said two should sleep and two should watch but they didn't want to do that. So I said 'alright please yourself, each take a window and see what we can see'. We saw three men walking down a railway line, just like matchsticks – that was the size of them as they were that far away. I said they had got to be ours, they wouldn't be Germans, it took us two hours to catch them up. One of them, an old Major, stuttered a lot, he were in the First World War. We made our way to where we started from. We got nearly there, they had bombed the village and destroyed it, all the houses were on fire. They were all in the hedge bottoms, head to toe. Then the Destroyer pulled in, the

gangplank went down and we had to run for it, I fell fast asleep and I slept for about twenty-four hours and then I got let through to a destroyer and went back to England. It was wonderful.

We finished up in Scotland, near Perth, Galashiels and then we went to Northern Ireland. Spent a long time in Northern Ireland, we used to go round the outside and didn't have to shave for a week. We used to put the wind up the south saying they were going to invade them and we used to bet once a month. I spent a year in Northern Ireland and then we came back to Blackburn and spent a few weeks in Blackburn. Then we went down towards the coast, near London and then about three weeks later we were on a boat for somewhere else. We were lucky; there were twenty of us on a New Zealand Refrigerator ship with first class cabins. We stopped at Capetown and had three days in Capetown and then we went down to India. We went right across India, from Bombay to Calcutta. About three months later we came back and went up the Persian Gulf to Basra and Baghdad. We had two days there and then we went up the mountain pass, which was 20,000 feet out of Baghdad into Iraq, it was fantastic, it was absolutely marvellous. We then were about three miles from the Russian border and lived on goat's meat and rice, there was no meat on goats, there was only bones. We had a tent, oh, and it was cold. You used to get a cup of tea and go back to your tent and there was ice on top by the time you got back. The conditions were terrible. We had a tent where you dug a hole 6 feet deep and there were ten of us to a tent.

What were the military reasons for being there?

The Russian oil wells. The Germans were getting quite close, they were two more miles nearer and then the Russians drove them back. We came out of there and we came down another pass, the Shar Pass, that was 8,000 feet, it took us into Jordan, then into Egypt. From Egypt we went into Syria and then went into Palestine, we stopped there for a while. I have swam in the Sea of Galloli, been down the Jordan Valley. Been across the Sinai Desert twice from Beersheba to the Bitter lakes. We have been up in the deserts about thirty miles from Cairo, we all had our coloured ships, black, white and yellow and we all went from different ports of Scilly. We had a yankee boat and they took us. First it was Syracuse/Palermo. For three days we never saw a boat of any description, on the fourth day they came from all

angles, there were thousands. They were airborne, there were bombers going over, anti aircraft batteries. That night things quietened down and I parked my lorry in front of a big building. About two o'clock in the morning a German plane was flying around. All at once it came down on this house, I've never been so terrified in all my life. It hit the gable end at the front, it had hit my gable end that would have been my end, it was absolute hell. I had some narrow escapes.

So you were in Scilly for three days before the invasion?

No we went in. We had all our vehicles waterproofed so that we could go through three feet of water. The exhaust pipe were three feet above the water, it took weeks and weeks to do it. We went there first but Mount Etna was quite a way away but we could see it but it was thirty miles away. It was the first thing we saw when we got there and dawn broke. Then we finished with Mount Etna, Scilly and with the invasion of Italy and went up the toe.

You went right the way up into Italy did you?

Yes, we went up the toe. They had bombed every bridge. We even had to get winched with ropes on and get pulled up one at a time, it took us weeks to go about two miles. There were no food either. We had to wait for supplies to come. Then we went up the South coast, the Adriatic and then all of a sudden they switched us to the Mediterranean side, we thought we were coming home. We were looking forward to coming home. Then we did a river crossing – the Gagliano. My battalion had fifty-two prisoners and I was looking after them. We came under fire from German guns, fifty-two jerries and me - they could have shot me fifty times over. War Graves Commission soldiers came and took them away.

The next thing we did was we went to Anzio, Capri to Anzio Beaches. They gave so many men two days holiday, from front line. So we went down but it was a waste of time – going there was murder with the shells going over you. We lost 2,000 men. The Germans pulled out and we went to Rome. We only stopped in Rome one night and then went back to Israel.

You had an eventful war.

Oh yes and that's only some of it. We finished in Eastern Germany, finished meeting the Russians. They were looting bicycles. They were going mad for bikes – jumping onto bikes, just like big kids, half of them were from Mongolia. I called them slant eyed Mongolians. Then it came to an end. We got a motorbike and sidecar and officer took us to Denmark and enjoyed it. Spent about a hundred pound – came back with ham, booze and an East German house did it all for us. We lived in an East German house, despite the fact they were all prisoners.

You have been through it?

There is no fun in wars.