

Peacetime memories of the war in Groomsport

GROOMSPORT provided the backdrop for a remarkable reunion last Monday of three old friends who last met during World War Two whilst stationed at Groomsport House. Reporter Julie Speers talked to the soldiers who enjoyed some time to relive some memories and catch up on their news.

John Robilliard of Guernsey, Stanley Williams, West Hill, Groomsport and Arthur Moulson, Springwell Crescent, Groomsport, were all drafted to Northern Ireland in 1940 with the Royal Engineers Field Survey Company 515.

Their principal role was to produce ordnance survey maps of Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe in preparation for D-Day which took place on June 6, 1944. The work that the Royal Engineers carried out in Groomsport was to assist strategic operations both at home and abroad as maps were constantly being altered according to the photographs received, so that a clear image of the area could be mapped out before being used.

John, who travelled from Guernsey to the young man, providing the warm congenial company of a family unit at a distressing time in his life. Owing to the fact that Guernsey was occupied by the Germans shortly after John's departure from St Sampson, he lost contact with his family, and it was not until the Red Cross eventually managed to trace them eighteen months later that he knew they were still alive on the occupied island.

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WORRIES

However, John's worries were not totally dispelled by this news as many of the inhabitants of the Channel Islands were being deported to Germany, some to concentration camps. After the war John discovered his parents suffering from malnutrition, due to food shortages on the island during the war.

Towards the end of the fighting, Hitler had stepped up security on the Channel Islands, and the Germans who were stationed there were evidently given preference over the islanders for the limited supplies of food available.

During those troubled times, John pointed out, it was nice to know that there was someone he could turn to who would lend a sympathetic ear when it was needed. He spent much of his spare time with the Gray family, chatting and listening to the radio. Agnes's daughter Greta recalls the evenings that her father would run through the streets of Groomsport with John to leave him back to Groomsport House as the soldiers had to be in by a specified time. The sound of their feet would echo through the village announcing the arrival of yet another breathless soldier striving to get to the barracks on time.

Stanley Williams, originally from Deri near Bargoed, Wales, remembered an amusing incident which occurred when he was late. Starry-eyed from leaving his Northern Irish fiancée home, Stanley had lost track of the time. Arriving at his billet, he discovered that everything had been locked; consequently there was no other alternative but to scan the wall and jump over to the other side.

JUMPED

Much to his surprise Stanley jumped straight into the arms of the Sergeant who was on the look-out for just such an attempt, but fortunately the incident was overlooked, and Stanley was allowed to go unpunished. The young man eventually married his fiancée, Ellen, and settled down in Groomsport after the War.

Arthur also fell in love with Betty, another local girl, while he was stationed in the village. Theirs was a whirlwind romance as they met in August, became engaged in September and were married on December 1 as Arthur had a few days leave then.

Betty recalls that there was widespread fear throughout the small village community the day the Royal Engineers arrived in Groomsport, and many parents were less than delighted at the event. Few of them suspected that their future son-in-laws were amongst the young soldiers, and in time the Engineers managed to gain the approval of even the strictest of mothers, whose fears were soon allayed.

Long engagements were uncommon during the war explained Betty, as marriages had to be generally centered around whatever leave the soldiers managed to obtain. She pointed out that one of the difficulties a young bride had to face in those days was that of collecting enough coupons from friends and neighbours to purchase a dress for the big day (a veil was totally out of the question) which had to be selected carefully so that it could be used repeatedly in the future as nothing was allowed to be wasted. The community spirit ran deep in those days of make-do, and friends and neighbours could be counted on when someone was in need.



Last week saw a special occasion for Groomsport men Arthur Moulson and Stan Williamson when they were re-united after 41 years with their war-time friend John Robilliard, who now lives in Guernsey. The men, who served in the Royal Engineers, were based at Groomsport House between 1940-43 when it was vested by the army from the Maxwell family and used as by the Field Survey Company to print all the army maps. Specto:527/5-44

CHANGES

Mrs Sadie Murphy, of Springwell Gardens, Groomsport remarked on the changes to the big house since the days when it housed the Engineers. She explained that there was a guard-room where the gatehouse is located, the grass banks surrounding the house then came right up to the windows and there was grass where the car-park is now situated, and army lorries would be parked in the drive-way which led to the entrance.

In addition to Groomsport House, accommodation was provided at Slet Hill for the Royal Artillery, the airforce were stationed across the road from Nixon's farm and there was a Coast-Guard and Naval Detachment at Orlock. The Orange Hall on Springwell Road was turned into a canteen where the forces were able to buy snacks that were not always readily available at the mess. The Gray sisters Nan and Greta helped out there when they could along with Mrs Gaw, Miss Harris, Norah Cutler, and other Groomsport women.

The Parish Church at Springwell Gardens used to be Groomsport Public Elementary School as the school now standing on Springwell Drive dates from after the war.

Leaving Groomsport, Company 515 faced the blitz in London and subsequently landed in France on D-Day, June 6, 1944, advancing through to Belgium and Germany. Stanley was assigned a secret mission to carry some of the ordnance survey maps over to France and deliver them to the British troops in Normandy ready for combat in the final attack. When they arrived in Germany Stanley took photographs of Belsen Concentration Camp and some of its survivors as a reminder of the horrific atrocities that were committed during the war.

CHURCHILL

Drafted to Egypt on the same boat as Winston Churchill, en route to the Yalta Conference in May, 1945, Arthur said that he and his fellow comrades received VIP treatment on their trip out, in stark contrast to his return in an old French fishing boat, after his demob in December that year.

He only just made it back to Groomsport on the last boat for Christmas Eve where he met up once again with Stanley. John, who returned to Guernsey, married his wife Rhoda a year before V-E Day, and went back to St Sampson to start up a family business.

Since Hugh and his mother Agnes experienced their first trip to Guernsey in a Dakota airplane in the late 40s, the two families have, over the years, strengthened their close ties through regular visits and letters. Hugh's wife Margaret Gray described the magnificent array of colourful fresias that used to arrive on their doorstep from John and Rhoda announcing the arrival of Spring every year.

Having vowed to return to Northern Ireland for many years, the retired couple have now fulfilled their promise to take stroll down memory lane.