

UNCLE PETER'S WAR

My uncle, Peter Milligan (1912-1986), never spoke about the War to anyone except me. It was a remarkable story. I was a history teacher about to emigrate to Canada in 1968 and would possibly never see my Uncle again. He never attended any memorials or any British Legion events. He had enough of war.

Peter was a Communist who enlisted before the War, realizing that Hitler would have to be fought. I told him that the pre-War Communists were allied with Russia and Germany. However, he insisted that the Glasgow Communists, Red Clydeside, did not take perspectives or ideas from the Russians; a very different analysis to the modern take on the situation.

A truck driver and mechanic in Glasgow, he was well prepared for his place in the British Armoured Division because in the 1930s comparatively few people could drive let alone fix automobiles. Being huge at six foot four inches or five inches tall, he complained that the seating in the armored cars was inadequate, based on the average size male of five foot eight. The 'silly' discipline also annoyed him. Cleaning floors with razor blades was not to his liking. Getting charged with desertion when he only wanted to continue fighting Hitler was absurd. And what was so wrong with helping himself to Dutch watches ripe for the picking in Antwerp or to some fabulous fabric from an Italian villa? Remember, he was from the Glasgow slums, the toughest in Europe.

Dunkirk's Cliffs 1940

The Armoured Division dug in along the cliffs above the beach. The fact that the approaching German Army had curiously stopped its advance was not realized by the British Command. The Armored Division was ordered to hold its position as long as possible and then to surrender. Meanwhile, the British Army was being evacuated from the beaches. It was chaos. According to Peter, guards on the Royal Naval ships were actually shooting those panicking soldiers who were jumping the lines to get aboard the ships. You won't find this bit of information in any movies or history books. The highly regarded movie Dunkirk completely ignored the existence of the cliffs and the surrender of the Armoured Division.

Surrendering was not an option to Peter so he climbed down the cliffs in the dark. At dawn, he swam, avoiding the naval ships so as to be picked up by the small civilian boats. Upon his return to Britain, he was then charged with desertion and faced the possibility of being shot. His defense was straightforward. He had enlisted to fight the Germans, not to surrender to them. As a consequence of so many being "shot at dawn" in WWI, shooting soldiers was severely frowned upon by WWII. He was then fined 100 pounds, I believe, for "abandoning his armored car without permission". My mother had confirmed this story long before Peter told me about it because all the family chipped in and paid the fine for him.

North Africa 1943

My mother was very proud that her brother was a "Desert Rat" in North Africa. She had given me a photo of Peter flanked by the Pyramids. Yet, official records I checked for his service are missing in British Army documents. It is probable that he was in the Long Range Desert Force. He was very reticent about those activities. However, the family received an official notice

saying that his unit had not returned to base and he was probably dead. They went into mourning. Weeks later, they received a postcard from him saying that they had taken some supplies from the enemy enabling them to stay out far longer than intended. During their years in the desert, he was ordered to cook for the unit. He told me that at one time his generous portions meant that the unit was well fed that day but hungry for several days afterwards. He was then charged for not measuring the food rations properly.

In North Africa, he said that they never actually took part in a face-to-face fight with the Germans as portrayed in books and movies. At the Battle of El Alamein, they were told exactly what the Germans would do. Neither Peter nor myself knew at the time about the “Ultra Secret” that revealed how, when, and where the Germans would attack. This in turn allowed the artillery and Royal Air Force to decimate the German lines. Consequently, this additional support enabled the British Armoured Division to push the German lines even further back.

Anzio Landings, Italy 1944

Peter did not say much about the Anzio Landings nor the losses they had suffered during their march through Sicily and up Italy. He spoke about taking the surrender of an Italian fascist leader at his magnificent villa. Upon meeting Peter’s Colonel, the fascist leader welcomed him and said, “My house is yours”. The Colonel replied, “You’re too late, it’s ours already”. The Armoured Division had already surrounded the villa. At the rear of the main house, Peter had driven his car inside through a large glass verandah. As the driver, he was the last one out of the car, and the others had already helped themselves to the treasures inside. In despair, he noticed the silk curtains. My mother and her sister were seamstresses.

Return to Britain, Customs

The story about the curtains does not end there. The Armoured Division sailed from Italy to Britain to prepare for the epic Normandy Landings. The Customs Officers at the port were searching the armoured cars and confiscating loot, rather a nasty welcome home for the soldiers. The curtains and other valuables were surreptitiously stowed in the armoured vehicle, and Peter wanted them to remain there.

As the Customs Officer approached, Peter felt the need to sharpen some very large German knives. So, he stood all 6 foot 4 by his armoured car conspicuously sharpening them as the guard asked if they had anything to declare. Peter replied “Aye. We collect knives from the bodies of German officers we kill.” Peter had a strong Glasgow accent, and the customs officer almost certainly knew about Glasgow’s violent reputation. So, the Customs Officer hurriedly chalked a symbol on the armoured car indicating it had been searched.

I know the curtains reached their final destination untouched. After talking to Peter, I questioned my mother about the curtains. She said, “Yes. I made wonderful silk shirts for you when you were a little boy. People would stop us in the Glasgow Streets and ask me where I had obtained such beautiful cloth.”

The Liberation of Antwerp 1944 or Fall of Antwerp 1940?

This was a major event in Peter's War. Peter's ability to drive his armored car backwards at the same speed as forward enabled him to out run the German Panzers there. An abandoned jewellery store's glass doors were no match for his armored car either, and so waterproof watches transferred ownership. I do not remember if he was talking about the Occupation by the Germans in 1940 or the Liberation by the Allies in 1945. History books say that the British were not in Antwerp in 1940.

Normandy Landings

Peter took part in the Normandy Landings one of the great events in history. He had two nephews one in the Royal Navy the other in the merchant navy with soldiers and supplies. Curiously he had little to say about this event. He just said he drove his armoured car as fast as he could off that beach till he was "safely" well inland fighting the Germans there.

Belsen Concentration Camp

Peter referred to Bergen-Belsen as just "Belsen". The War was ending as their tanks and armoured cars drove through Europe to liberate a camp. The officers told the men that the Germans were turning Jews into soap. The Armoured Division considered this ridiculous propaganda to keep them motivated to fight. Peter told me it was obvious that the Germans had lost the War because the country was so destroyed by bombing. Consequently, they were in no rush to engage in hostilities to liberate the camp. Any resistance from any location resulted in a halt in the advance and a request for air power or artillery to flatten the area. In addition, the Division had arranged for a sort of minodge (Glasgow word for a voluntary collection of funds) to be paid out to the family of the last Scots Guardsman to be killed in the War. I mentioned this to a retired Guards officer who denied this and many other things Peter told me.

The camp towers came into view. Some of the unit surrounded the outside of the camp while some others would storm the gates and encircle the inside. Peter drove one of the cars chosen to encircle the camp from the inside. The horrific scene of emaciated "skeletons" cheering their arrival and blocking his way caused him to halt in disbelief. He and the men were physically sick at what they saw and forever regretted their slow pace to liberate these prisoners. Peter felt guilty that they did not drive as fast as they could to the Camp. Dead and dying, emaciated men, women, and children were everywhere. The soldiers did their best to help but then had orders to apprehend the guards who had left. Some ex-camp guards were identified after being found hiding in the roof of a village church.

Belsen Aftermath

Peter's Colonel confronted the Mayor of the local village where the guards were found and ordered him and his village to "clean up" Belsen. After the Mayor insisted that the village had "nothing to do with the camp, the Colonel threatened to shoot him and all the village inhabitants. "You don't shoot prisoners. You're the British Army", said the Mayor. The Colonel turned to his sergeant who immediately offered to shoot the Mayor on the spot. Needless to say, a clean up of the camp was soon organized. The soldiers were ordered to march the captured guards back to the camp and then shot them in the woods. The Mayor, realizing that the guards had been shot, confessed that only a few of those shot in that village were indeed prison guards. The rest were being hidden from the German Army because they were German deserters from

the Russian Front. Peter expressed no remorse for the shooting. He believed that the existence of such a camp as Belsen justified retaliation. Peter explained that the Germans had initiated this War and had expressed a fearsome inhumanity.

Peter's War

I asked Peter if there was anything good about the War. With no hesitation, he said it was the dropping of the atomic bomb. This action saved him from a future participation in the invasion of Japan. In fact, troops in Northern Germany were already training on the beaches for this very thing. In much the same way, George Orwell justified WW2 by saying we must defend the bad against the far worse Peter Milligan said something like this.

"I volunteered to defend Britain, and Britain has a moral responsibility to defend me as best they can. Those people who objected to Dresden, Hamburg, or Hiroshima forget that many more innocent British citizen would have been killed if those awful bombings had not happened."

Peter Milligan (1968) Info

B 1912-1986 M 1947 Barbara 108 Corbett St, Tollcross Glasgow. Son: Frank Milligan. I tried to trace my cousin Frank but was unable to do so.