

Interviewer:

So this is Terry Ford on the 18th of November, 2023 for South Shields Local History Group and we're talking about Trevor Denham here and sorry Frank Denham about and the Trosh brothers as well. So if you just want to tell us a little bit about your father.

Trevor:

Well, my father was born in 1915. He was a miner, but he was in the Territory Army in the Northumberland Hussars. At the outbreak of war he was mobilised. The regiment went to Greece initially, I believe, where they saw fighting there. The Germans pushed them all the way through Greece and he was then evacuated onto Crete in 1941. The Germans invaded by paratroops, obviously it was a fierce battle, he didn't tell us a lot about it, he did tell us a few little things, but not a great deal. You didn't go into a great deal about it and it was at the time when sometimes you haven't got that interest that really you should have and it's often too late by the time you decide that, do you know what I mean? And anyway, he was on Crete and I think once the Germans had taken Maleme Airport, it could just get fly gliders in and basically they were pushed back. A lot of them were captured. My father was fortunate that he was evacuated to North Africa, into Libya, end up in Libya and while fighting in the desert, it was near a place called Knightsbridge that was surrounded by tanks and he was captured, he was then taken to Italy where he went into a transit camp and then onto another camp and unlike the officers, the soldiers had to work and he worked on a farm.

Then when the Italians basically packed in the war, give it up but obviously he was still on the run from Germans. He was lucky enough to have Italians who looked after him and basically give him shelter and food for a good few month. And then in 1944, so I think this was like September-ish, 43, he stayed with the Italians, but then in early 44 they moved him and he moved up he had to go up to Milan by train, bearing in mind he is still trying to dodge the Germans so he wasn't actually an escaper, he was basically just on the run.

And then he spent a couple of days with the partisans and he crossed a lake into Switzerland and from there he was repatriated back to England. Every escapee that went into a neutral country was interviewed by MI9. That was their job to interview to make sure you were who you said you were. And it was after my father's death when I was getting into sort of family history that I wrote off to see if I could get some information about his actual escape and well, obviously you can't see this, but I got stuff from the National Archives, which these are his actual interview, interview by MI9 when he arrived in Switzerland. So in it gives you basic details of him, the camps he was in and then it gives you the names of basically how he managed to get to Switzerland, the names of the people who assisted him. There was two in particular that are quoted in here the names are quoted in here. And basically that's it. It's just information about any escape routes or anything like that that might help somebody else. So I got them and I found them really interesting. But again, it was after me father had passed away because let's say I knew that the basic story that he'd got to Switzerland, but I'd never pursued it and asked more information.

Interviewer:

Yeah, that's always the case.

Trevor:

Yeah, if I had, yeah, and I found a photograph, a little photograph when he passed away and that's the photograph there that's just a copy of it and that's actually the guy, one of the two people that actually assisted him to get to Switzerland.

And that's basically his story as far as the war is concerned, like's I say he was in the Northumberland Hussars and they started off, I think on horseback, used to be on horseback and then they became part of the Royal Artillery.

Interviewer:

After he came back, was he then back doing anything or was it too late by the time he got back?

Trevor:

No, it was too late, too late, yeah, yeah, he didn't do anything after that.

This isn't to do with the war, but after the war in 48 (46) he was working on the North Shields Fish Quay and a lady and her two children fell in the river and he dived in, he was one of the rescuers and he got a parchment as well for and sort of when I looked at what he's done and he never said much about it at all. You think if I'd done all that, I'd be telling everybody they'd be bored sick hearing it. Well, you think you would anyway, but like I say that's, that's his wartime story

Interviewer:

And that document?

Trevor:

These are to do with more that side really but he had a brother, well he had a few brothers, but one of these brothers, Robert, Robert Shirley, he was in the Merchant Navy. He was only 20 and he was on board the Hartlebury when it sailed on PQ 17. The ship was sunk and when the order was given from the admiralty for the Royal Navy ships to, well for the Royal Navy ships to leave the convoy to its fate really, because they thought the Tirpitz was going to come out. The Royal Navy left them basically unescorted and they were just picked off by U-boats and dive bombers. And unfortunately my Uncle Robert, who obviously I never ever met, died on that convoy. And I think if I remember rightly as well, it was round about the same time that my father was taken prisoner. So my grandmother would've been notified that she'd lost one son and the other son, well, he might have been posted as missing or whatever I don't know again, there wasn't a lot of conversation about that.

Interviewer:

Strangely enough, we had, there's Al our chairman, his father also was captured in Crete and his mother got the letter saying he was missing in the Middle East. But she got and then eventually the Red Cross did send a letter to the father, the mother, to say that he was alive so the story is almost exactly like this story.

Trevor:

One thing I do know about what my dad did tell us was when he did come home, he'd lied to one of his friend's mothers and I believe it was a man called Arthur Hymers. My dad lived in Albemarle Street, that's where they lived Albemarle Street and Arthur Hymers lived in Burrow Street, which is just the next street up next street. So they were close friends and he'd told the mother that he was killed outright, just killed outright. But then when I was looking into it, there was a book in the library about the Northumberland Hussars and it got died of wounds it wasn't sort of killed in action, it died of wounds. So he wasn't instantly killed he was wounded first, but I'm sure it was his mother that made me father lie to and just said, oh, he was killed outright he didn't know nothing about it just to be kind and to make it, to try and ease the pain.

Note Taker:

Almost done universally, I think.

Interviewer:

Yeah, he didn't know anything about it is the usual expression.

Trevor:

So that's sort of my side of the family. I've also brought along of photograph of five brothers who all served during the war. There was Louis Albert, Harry, Matthew, Norman Valentine, and Gren all served at some capacity during the Second World War.

Interviewer:

So the name is Trosh?

Trevor:

Yeah, the Trosh brother five of them.

Interviewer:

Were they from South Shields?

Trevor:

Yes, they were, they lived at 5 Dacre Street at Laygate. Harry was, well, I think Harry and Lou were both married and I think Harry lived at the time during the war in Newcastle, because I've got a clipping of Normandy was in Normandy and it was a written clip basically about, I don't think I've got it, about a part. Oh, there it is, "Mortar Men Do The Trick". It was basically about in Normandy, beside, I can't remember the name of the village ...

Interviewer:

Caen

Trevor:

Caen, yeah, where there was a fierce battle and Harry and this Scottish guy, they were having to ferry the ammunition up to keep them going and they are obviously mentioned in this sort of newspaper clip. So Louis, Lou was in North Africa, in the Middle East. Harry was, I believe in North Africa then he was in Normandy. Mattie was in the Royal Navy, but I'm not sure of where he actually served but he was in the Royal Navy. Norman was in the Coldstream Guards, but he'd previously been in the Home Guard. He lied about his age to get in the Home Guard as well. And Gren was in the Home guard as well and he too had lied about his age to get in, said he was a little bit older than he was. And that's as much as I know about the actual sort of, obviously I know Norman was killed in Belgium and I remember it did, Gren told us that it really hit him hard he was close to Norman because they were close in age, whereas others were a little bit older. But I mean, when I met Joanne, the only two I met, Lou had passed away and Harry died. It was only her Uncle Mattie that I knew and obviously Gren. But yeah, the five of them all sort of served during the war.

Interviewer:

So that was five brothers.

Trevor:

Five brothers.

Interviewer:

Brothers. That must be quite unusual. It's all Army, isn't it?

Note Taker:

One Navy.

Interviewer:

Four Army. One Navy

Trevor:

Navy. One Navy. Yeah.

Interviewer:

So that would be presumably all of the brothers, would it be all of the brothers

Trevor:

Was, yes, that was it. The full was the full family of brothers. They had sisters as well, but that was the five boys

Interviewer:

They the Trosh brothers. Yeah, that's a good story.

Note Taker:

He said he was the baby of the family he was the baby, he did used to talk about the lad you lost in Belgium.

Trevor:

Yeah, I mean we still got still a sort of photograph of Norman and that

Note Taker:

He used to put the anniversary in every year.

Interviewer:

So you knew this person?

Note Taker:

Oh yeah he was my next door neighbour for many years.

Interviewer:

Alright, that's good.

Note Taker:

I know, his missus

Interviewer:

That's South Shields for you!

Trevor:

What is it David, did you say? I'll mention it to her, yeah, yeah and that's basically the family. But I like getting into the local history of, I mean, it seems to be that there's been South Shields residents involved in really well-known things like

Note Taker:

What you don't know about

Trevor:

The one thing I look, there's a guy, the Graf Spee remember the Graf Spee and they scuttled it, where prior to that it was a film as well and the merchantmen that was sunk was taken on onboard the Graf Spee and there was two from Shields there was two captains, two captains of two ships from Shields who were on the Graf Spee.

Note Taker:

I didn't know that bit, oh yes, you reminded me of the story.

Trevor:

Yeah, there was two of them, one still lived in Shields, one had moved and lived elsewhere, but they were both from Shields and that's a photograph of Robison, the captain of the Newton Beech, because they got taken off the Graf Spee and went to Montevideo, they were taken off there and put onto, I think it was the Altmark actually, but then they were sort of repatriated.

Note Taker:

The Altmark was the German tanker, yeah and supply ship for Graf Spee. But that left long before the battle and

Trevor:

Oh, right, right.

Note Taker:

The fella, yes, you just clicked a memory and the story I heard was that he lived on it for the rest of his life he'd tell anybody the story.

Trevor:

Oh, right. He lived in King George Road.

Note Taker:

Anyway, don't mention the war.

Interviewer:

That's great, that's excellent.

Trevor:

There was another one just quickly mention there I didn't know about, but there was a film that was, it's an old film called San Demetrio London and there was four guys from Shields on the San Demetrio!

Interviewer:

My uncle was on one of the ships alongside the San Demetrio, he was on, I forget the name of it now, but I've written a (short) story about the San Demetrio.

Trevor:

San Demetrio and some of them were the ones that actually sort went back on board. I think God wherever you go you find someone from Shields.

Note Taker:

Eagle Oil, tanker, Eagle Oil was the company, they also had the Ohio, which is the one that they got into the Malta on Pedestal, and my father-in-law worked for them and they had the history of Eagle Oil and I lent the book to somebody, never returned, never returned, they kept that but yes.

Trevor:

I mean during the war as well, just as an aside, I think it was 1943, I think their father, the Trosh's father, Harry was working in the shipyard and he fell in one of the tanks and basically killed him. So he died. So Gren, who was obviously still a very young man, he was a very, very church going sort of lad Sunday school and all that sort of stuff. And he got letters from the lady who used to run the Sunday school saying sympathising and all that and saying, well done for keep going and still going to church and now it's up to you to look after your mother while these are ways, just he was the only one still at home. But yeah, so there was a couple of tragedies. Let's say the father died in an accident and as I say Norman was killed.

Interviewer:

Lovely, well thank you very much.

Note Taker:

Absolutely fabulous

Interviewer:

So if you want, and then just show the lady across there, just a selection of a few of the bits that you showed us.

Note Taker:

What was the battle in North Africa? That's one of your dad was in

Trevor:

I'm not sure well he was captured near Knightsbridge, Knightsbridge, because you say you were captured at Knightsbridge, sounds like you are saying was he a deserter or something.

Note Taker:

Rommel was back and forth and Knightsbridge was an attack, a bit like El Alamein, but before that and they got the tanks, they just got annihilated completely. They had to leg it back to Egypt because of the Germans after them and he would've been left behind there because everybody just run that was it.

Interviewer:

Yeah, so that's great, yeah.