

Interviewer:

This is Terry Ford interviewing Peter Brenen for South Shields Local History Group on the 22nd of February, 2024, about his father Davison Brenen. So if you just want to tell us some things there, Peter.

Peter:

Okay. My father's military service. My dad Davison Brenen was born in Harton Hospital, South Shields on the 24th of February, 1920. Age 15 he was working at Whitburn Colliery as a datal worker down the pit. At this time he said the wage was so poor that he could not afford boots, clothes and to feed himself properly. He lived with his mother and stepfather in St Cuthbert's Avenue, Horsley Hill, South Shields. So he decided to change his lot and join the army. By this time, he had turned 16, too young to join up, we'll have to tell some fibs. He said he went to the infantry recruiting office, but they guessed his age and turned him down. He then went to the artillery recruiting office, maybe in Durham, told them he was 18-year-old and they signed him up on the 22nd of June, 1936, age 16 and four months. So now in the Royal Regiment of Artillery. Journeys down to Woolwich Arsenal, where he did his training on 12 pound Howitzers.

When he turned 18 and two months, he was sent overseas on a troop ship to serve in Egypt on the 30/04/1938. He had a busy three years in Egypt. Then it got exciting. The Italians invaded Lower Egypt. My father was off the war in 1941 to fight in Eritrea against the Italian army. He said the infantry were Indian troops, so he was attached to the Indian army in the Sixth Indian Artillery Division. His first observations were travelling south with the army was that he could see picket fences in the desert. It turned out to be a cemetery of white wooden crosses from a different angle. Arriving in the war zone in Eritrea, he said it was pretty hairy under fire and that the Italians had snipers deployed, "So you keep your head down son." He said the Italians had fortified hill positions and when the assaulting infantry advanced up the slope, the Italians would roll hand grenades down the slope, dirty tricks!

So my father and his team were employed, lobbing Howitzer shells on the Italians while the infantry took the fortified positions. This had to be done time and time again as along the valley the Italians had loads of fortified hill forts. But as everyone should know, Eritrea was liberated and Italian army, surrendered in Eritrea.

Now my dad was posted to the Libyan warfront, given new 25 pounder field guns pulled by Austin Quadrant, four by four vehicles with ammunition limbers also in tow. He said the British army looked like Bostock and Wombwell's Circus, whoever they may be!

He said they cooked their rations on a Benghazi cooker, ie a petrol tin cut in half with sand in a bottom and petrol poured into, which they set light to. His rations being tinned corned beef, streaky bacon, hard tack biscuits, jam and anything else they could add to the meal when they were away from the cook house on manoeuvres.

They had to dig in their 25 pound Howitzers in position when getting ready for action. He said the shells they fired from the 25 pounder were high explosive, shrapnel and armour piercing. They had quite a long range.

He said in one action, maybe the Battle of Sidi Rezegh (?). He said his gun team were hit bad and overrun by Italian troops and they were taken prisoner. He was posted missing in action and spent some time a prisoner in an Italian prisoner of war camp. But during an air raid over the Italian prisoner of war camp, the fences were blown down and my dad escaped captivity and made his way back to friendly lines. He was lucky man to escape a long time eating spaghetti.

On returning to Egypt he was given a driving job as a General's driver, which he quite enjoyed for a time, cushy number, as they say after a close shave in a war zone.

My dad made a lot of observations while posted in Egypt on active service. He found you could get a tattoo for as little as a shilling, so this seemed to be his new pastime. He had 57 tattoos when he came home in 1944. On leaving, the last two were King Farouk and Queen May (Farida) on his back, a strange choice. He said, if you climbed the pyramid called Khafre, you could sign a book and join the Strange Khafre Club. He said he liked to trick the local Egyptians and vice versa. When a Dhobi Waller came to collect the washing, the lads put his donkey in the barrack room and back in its harness attached to the cart, poor man was a bit confused. When he came back another time my dad was asked if he wanted to buy some new cheap razor blades from a local? He paid for them and on returning to the barracks to have a shave he found he had five old blades repacked. For a bit of off duty fun, soldiers would tie a piece of twine to a piece of gristle with a sheet of newspaper attached, throw it in the air and a kite hawk would catch and swallow it and go flying off with a piece of paper attached quite a hoot they thought but the sergeant was not impressed. Another time my dad was asked if he wanted to buy some titillating postcards shown by some Egyptian. On passing money over was told the police had spotted them, he quickly took the postcards and returned to base he found he had bought pictures of the pyramids and sphinx, et cetera. He said on a night out one could go to an Australian run club or maybe a New Zealand Kiwi club, but you had to buy six quarts of beer, a single bottle would be bought from someone at a drinks table.

When my dad's stint as a general's driver was over in Egypt, he joined the Palestinian Police in 1942, still part of the army he had peace keeping duties. He never told me much, but said Arabs were friendly. He did about six months in Palestine. In 1943 he was posted to Cyprus, maybe retraining, he was there for about five months. Then he was posted to Syria in June, 1943 for about eight months, the country had been under occupation by Vichy French government, he did not tell me much about his time in Syria. I don't know what he got up to. In February, 1944, he was sent back to the UK. He married my mother Francis when he returned home I think they were childhood sweethearts. He did two years and 262 days at home and he was de-mobbed on November, 1946. He got a job at Whitburn Colliery worked there until it closed in June, 1968. Davison, Brenen was granted four medals for his service in World War Two, the 1939-1945 Star, the Africa Star, the Defence medal and the 1939-1945 General Service Medal.

Interviewer:

Lovely, just one question, you said he escaped, where was he when he escaped, do you know?

Peter:

The prisoner of war camp was still in Libya, yeah. He hadn't been sort of sent over to Italy, Italy itself, or Germany. So he was still in Libya. It was still on the fighting ground where he was.

Interviewer:

So how did he get out?

Peter

He said the air raid by the British blew the fence down. As the bombs were dropped over the area and they just scarpered through the holes in the fence. I think it was more than my father. I think there were several men escaped together and just because the lines were no more than 20 miles away, they just legged it home.

Interviewer:

Lovely, thanks very much Peter.