



## FRONTLINE BRITAIN '94

As very selectively remembered by BUDGE ADAMS

**F**RONT-LINE BRITAIN '94 Week – an enormous and well thought out Old Boys' Reunion – old soldiers, old sailors, ladies from the war-time womens' services, ancient airmen and members of civil defence, all were there. As too were their younger counterparts from the modern services. They formed up, were dismissed and formed up again as Sunday's rehearsal ironed out the inevitable snags and many realised that their legs, perhaps not surprisingly, were protesting and were "not what they used to be".

The Parade on the Monday went off very well and what a blessing that the weather had changed from Sunday's dullness and slight drizzle to a glorious sunny day. The gods were kind! Maybe the marching was sometimes a little ragged but hardly anyone was less than seventy plus and they set about the march with enthusiasm and pride.

During the preceding week, as the whole well-organised event drew nearer I felt a sense of occasion and a frisson of excitement and anticipation that I would again be able to see and talk to comrades-in-arms, both men and women, who, mostly unknown to each other, had served in this particular area between 1939 and 1944. This ensured that at precisely 07.50 on Sunday, 23 September 1994 I presented myself on the steps of the Churchill in Waterloo Crescent to take breakfast, exactly ten minutes later, with my gunner brother-in-law, Joe McGowan, and his Ack-Ack friends.

Entirely unknown to Joe, his carefully laid plans were immediately compromised as I saw a sprightly figure wearing a regulation blazer, with a regulation tie and a regulation badged beret approaching from the other side of the road. His happy eyes were blue and sparkling and with no thought of checking his provenance I extended my hand and greeted him. His English was faultless though with a definite trace of Nordic intonation and I rightly guessed he was a Norwegian and a sailor and had served with the Norwegian M.T.B.'s operating from Dover. He also was staying at the Churchill and we went inside, discovered Joe and his friends and launched ourselves into a long session of recall and re-discovery, all recorded on pocket tape machines. We sat down to breakfast, an augmented party, at 09.15!

Finn Christian Mosgaard Stumoen was from Skarnes, a small town to the north east of Oslo and he was almost exactly twenty years old and at the Naval School of Navigation in Oslo when the Germans invaded Norway. Soon after the invasion he ski'ed for three nights to Stockholm, steering, as he said, by Arcturus, (as I recall it that was the name of the star he used) which he knew to "stand in the east". There, after a month of applying for visas and other documentation, he arranged with four others to fly, secretly, to England in the



The March past on the Sea Front

In the lower picture eight Norwegian sailors march behind their national flag

The centre picture is of the Czech Band

*Photos: Merril Lilley*



hope of joining up with the Norwegian Navy, then operating from this country. Imagine 161 their surprise when the aircraft landed at Tallinn!

From Tallinn to Dover his itinerary speaks for itself. Leningrad, Odessa, then in a Russian boat over the Black Sea to Varna in Bulgaria. Next, to Istanbul and then by train across Anatolia to Alexandretta (now Iskenderun) where they joined a small British tramp steamer bound for Port Said. Between Haifa and Port Said they were attacked by Vichy planes and hit in No. 1 hold and sank so low forward that the propeller was out of the water. They then flooded the after hold, regained an even keel and went hell bent for Port Said. They were again attacked but by sharp gunnery repulsed the aircraft, an Italian, who dropped his bombs 100 metres off target. They arrived at Port Said – the first ship to make port with a cargo of sea water! Then by train to Ismalia (not spelt that way now) where they became involved, with 150 other Norwegians, with the 8th Army and eventually on to Suez where they boarded a trooper bound for Durban. Then to Cape Town, Trinidad and New York. Finn was then posted to a Norwegian tanker bound for Williamstown, Trinidad, to load oil for Britain – for Leith, in fact. Then, serially, London, Troon, Weymouth, Poole and finally Dover where he served on M.L.'s until the war ended and in his 'spare time' married a Wren who was serving in H.M.S. Wasp and who came from Walsall. Much has been left out of this story – I have it all on tape – but the gist is there.

I met a gunner who was on the end of the Eastern Arm and counted the M.L.'s as they went out and again on their return and was thankful that the two numbers did not very often differ. His battery was ordered to shoot at anything that moved, without authority, through the Eastern Entrance. So they shot at wayward seagulls!

Lunchtime at the Duke of York's School for almost 2000 service men and women was fantastic. I have purposely said "lunch time", lunch itself being almost a secondary consideration – it was just necessary to re-fuel. One could not walk more than a few paces before striking up a conversation with someone or other and invariably each knew each other's unit or was engaged in a variation of the same job. I met an NCO who was posted to 191 Sqdn (in India, at Korangi Creek!) a week after I was granted my warrant and was therefore posted from 225 (Flying) Group to 226 (Maintenance) Group to fill a suitable establishment vacancy. He was an armourer and worked in a temporary armoury (it was uncanny to hear him describe it) that I built from aircraft transit cases obtained from Drighh Road, near Karachi. This was an enormous RAF "factory" engaged in the assembly of new aircraft and the re-building of those damaged ones that could be saved. The "factory" worked 168 hours a week on a four-shift basis, i.e. it never stopped working.

I met comrades from 500 (County of Kent) Squadron who were there when I joined in 1935. Our aircraft, Avro 504K's and Vickers Virginias, both had a maximum speed of 80 mph in still air and we could, though not often did, get out on to the wings in flight. Until 1942 the squadron flew Ansons (unsophisticated feeder line aircraft converted for service use) over the Channel, searching, not entirely fruitlessly, for submarines. They flew in pairs, one at 250 feet, the other at 500. The upper aircraft swept the sea with a powerful Leigh Light and the lower one was armed with a 37mm cannon with a recoil that practically stopped all forward movement, but was actually intended for "pooping off" at enemy submarines.

At the Duke of York's School I met a chap who served with me at Sullom Voe on Sunderlands. When I was posted to 200 Sqdn in the Shetlands I quickly realised that the

Engineer Officer was of an old Dover family and that I knew his sister. He had joined the RAF as a boy apprentice many years before and his basic trade was carpenter-boatbuilder! – how times had changed! But had they really? I recall that Air Marshall Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferte, C. in C. Coastal Command at that time, held an Extra Master's Certificate in Sail! He joined the RNAS from the Merchant Navy in 1914.

There were happily reminiscent conversations with Belgian seamen, with Canadian airmen and radar mechanics, six months out of high school and with cheeks that had never felt a razor, more Norwegians and, of course and essentially, many Brits.

I dined in the Keep at the Castle with men who were in the Observer Corps before it became “Royal” and we talked of the time when the Dover Post, Dog 2 (the present International Phonetic Alphabet had by then not been invented) was established in the SW turret (if that is the right name for it) on the roof of the Keep.

On the Tuesday, in Dover Town Hall, with my gunner brother-in-law, I attended the Artillery Re-union in the Town Hall. There were gunners of all shapes and sizes, Light Ack-Ack, Heavy Ack-Ack, Coastal, Railway, Field, Heavy Field, Fortress and others with similar precisely distinctive appellations. What a range under the umbrella of “Artillery-man”! In the afternoon, in a shelter on the Prince of Wales Pier, I had a spirited conversation, in scraps of German and French and some sign language, with two of the Czech colour party. A few moments after they left me to rejoin their coach to Shorncliffe one of them breathlessly returned and putting his head around the corner of the shelter, said, with a wide smile, “It was goood”, then disappeared. On such little things international friendships might be founded.

Before my Lancashire gunner friends returned to the North we toured the gun sites and I could see, as they moved around, that they were walking on – to them – hallowed ground. They frequently recalled that the sea front and the beach were almost completely cocooned in coils of barbed wire, they remembered, with a sparkle in their eyes, the girls they met and the hospitality of the Dover people, and, oh yes, the pubs they frequented, though they were a little mystified that so many of them were no more.

I frequently saw Mrs Daphne Foster, one of our members, who had some involvement here during the war, moving around with her camera and skilfully placing herself in position for a good shot. I have seen her photographs and they clearly and vividly recall a very wonderful weekend.

There is much, much more that could be told, but there would not be enough space in the Newsletter (and I should know!) to retail it all. This is just a sample but the time I spent in easy friendship with men and women to whom all others were friends, is something I will never forget.

P.S. I am aware that much of this piece is of the “How I won the war genre”, but it was part and parcel of most of our conversations. It is interesting to recall that this corner of England has always, since the time of the Romans and probably much before, stood to arms to defend the country.

I learn today, 14 November, that Finn Christian Stumoen is the very man who, for the last five years has brought the Norwegian Christmas Tree to Dover and that on 28th November he will be here again, fully laden.

Perhaps in 1995, 50 years after the cessation of hostilities, the Society could, in some way, mark the friendliness and generosity of the Norwegians who served with the M.L.'s here.