

REG LITTLE, KINGSWEAR HISTORIAN – (1927 – 2016)

Reminiscences of a lifetime in Kingswear & Dartmouth



Reg Little in 1945

Reg Little – My Life and Times

Part 1. 1927 – 1945

I was born at Fairview Grove, Wantage in Berkshire (now Oxfordshire) on June 20th 1927. I was the youngest of three boys, Frank the eldest and Bert being two years older than me. I had a

lovely life as a child there, living opposite a farm owned by the Cotterell family. As a 3 and 4 year old I used to think I was doing the milking and hay making. I can also remember being called for one morning and taken on a four wheeled wagon to a water mill. The wheel turned in the race and all the belts and grinding stone went round, and the sacks of corn went up through the hatchway to the top floor, and when ground came out into sacks on the lower floor.



Jack, Bert & Reg - Grove, Wantage 1930

We had the very first wireless in the village. My father made it from a kit that was advertised in the newspaper.

I was probably the best dressed baby in the village, as my mother had been a nanny at Castle Howard for the Howard family, and I was dressed in their high -class cast-offs!



Reg, his Father & Brothers in Morris Car 1930

My fathers home town was Trowbridge in Wiltshire, and, although he was only a GWR bus driver when I was born, he had a car and on his free weekends we went to stay with my grandparents in Trowbridge, and had a lovely time with them. My father would often stop the car and grab me up and put me under the hedge, then drive a short distance along the road with my brothers screaming "Don't do it, Dad!" Sometimes he would stop by one of the many workhouses and tell them he was going to put me in one of them! We had trips to various places, Whipsnade Zoo and picnics at Uffington White Horse Hill, and many other places. We all had a wonderful time.



My Father, Frank Arthur Little born 1898 in his WW1 uniform

When I was about 4 my father bought us an ex-army bell tent, and on one Saturday everything except the kitchen sink was packed up in the car. After a couple of hours we arrived at a village called Chickwell near Weymouth where we spent an exciting week near the seaside.



My mother (Eleanor), Me, Bert and Jack – Portland 1930

One day we were taken to watch the Schneider Trophy Air Race on the Isle of Wight and got into the first traffic Jam in England. My father took Jack – as Frank was always called – up for a flight. Bert and I didn't go, as we were too young.

I started infant school at Grove, and can remember having trays of sand and writing on slates. I was only there a short time, when my father was transferred to Weymouth and we would be living by the seaside. The excitement over this partly made up for the loss of the extra pudding which was given to me each day by our excellent next door neighbours, Mrs Powell and family. Mrs Powell corresponded with my mother and visited her for the rest of her life, and will always be remembered.



My Mother and Grandmother at the Bungalow at Radipole (near Weymouth) 1931

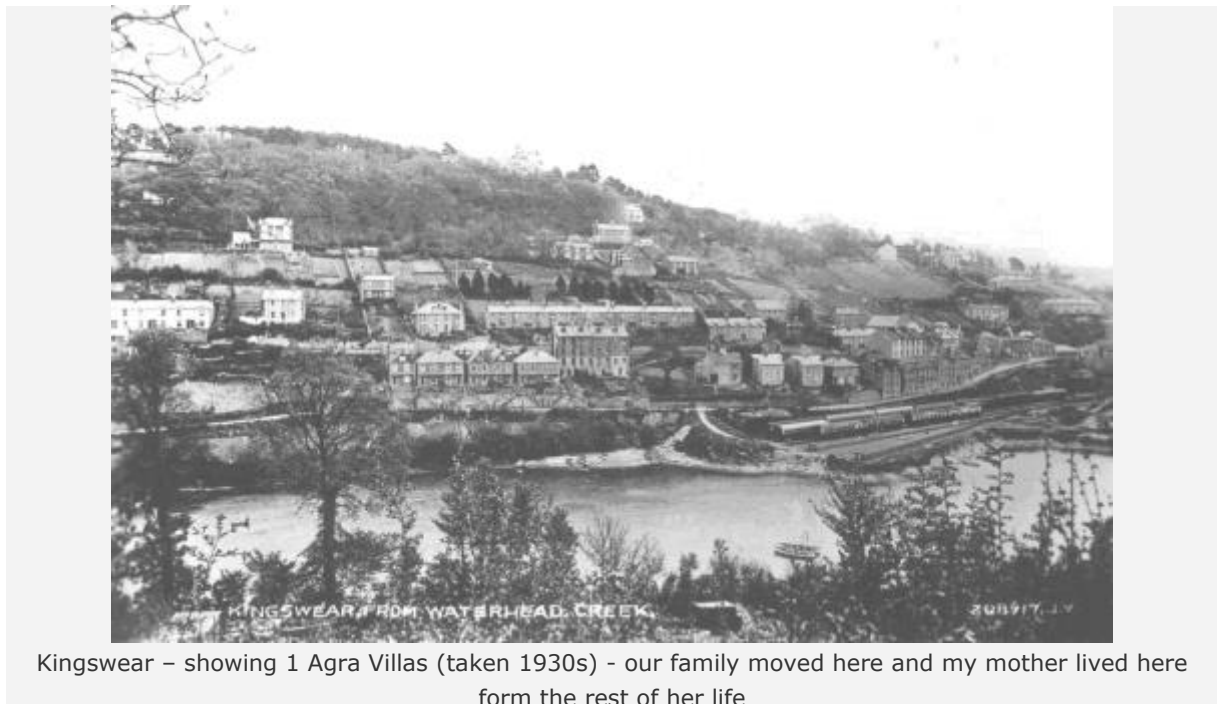
Weymouth

After we got to Radipole, at the back of Weymouth, we found my father had taken out a mortgage on a new bungalow on the hill over looking the lake and Weymouth. My mother set up a small shop and sold cigarettes etc. to the men working on the nearby building estate. My father had now given up the car, and now went to work on a motorbike, which broke in two one day near the school.

Various relations and some friends came to stay with us at the "Seaside". My fathers mother came to stay, she had trouble walking very far, and we borrowed a basketwork bath chair for her, in which we took her two miles to the beach. On the way back, there was a long hill, and as we were pushing her up (with difficulty!) along came the dustcart; the men gave us a rope and a tow up the hill. My grandmother remembered this with delight for the rest of her days.

We went to church and to the church school at Radipole about a mile away. The school was a one roomed building divided by a screen so you could hear both teachers. When we went to and fro to school in a group, some of the children used to run across the road in front of a gypsy caravan, and one day a gypsy jumped off the van, snatched me up and kidnapped me! I was taken to their camp, and must have been there about an hour when my father and the police arrived. I was probably the only one who hadn't run across the road, being the youngest and the smallest! I'm not even sure they got the right one back!

We remember that the Prince of Wales' aeroplane, bright red, used to come to the airfield near Radipole, and we use to go and see it, as it was quite a rare event.



Kingswear 1933 – 1941

After what seemed a short time my father was transferred to Dartmouth and we moved to Kingswear. We took a month to pack up and prepare for the move.

We had a cat – Satan – named after the cat in W.W. Jacobs' story – a Canary, and three goldfish. I remember the ticket inspector on the train said, "why not let the cat eat the canary and the goldfish? It would save a lot of trouble!"

On arrival in Kingswear, as the train went across the Creek Bridge my mother thought the mud was sand and said we'd be able to have picnics and play there, needless to say we did play there in the mud!

On our arrival we found that we lived over looking the creek, and the railway sidings, where the carriage cleaners started work at 5:00am. You could go almost anywhere from Kingswear by rail without having to change – Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Rugby, York, London, Wales etc. We soon learnt that if you helped the engine drivers with the turntable, you would get a ride on the footplate, up over the creek bridge and down to the station, or up to the Torbay Express sidings. I have ridden on many a famous engine, one being the King George V (with the big brass bell) which was sent to the USA in the 1930s and broke their rail speed record.



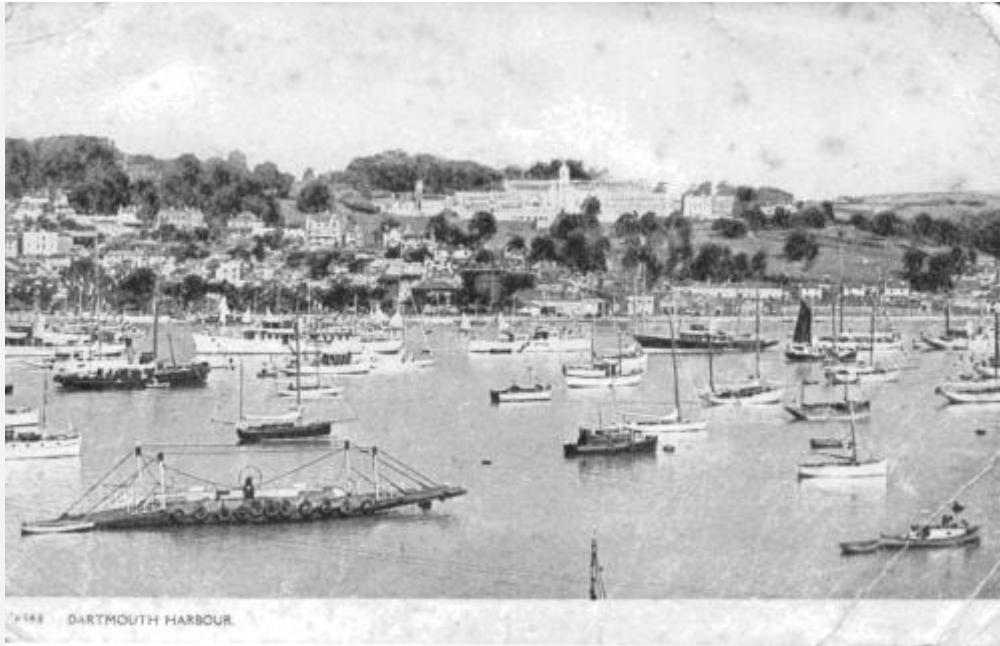
Reg Little & Sid Pope (who died in Noss bomb) with Trolley lighting a fire next to Kingswear Creek (where the car park now is) 1930s

As children a lot of our time in the holidays was spent in and out of the creek, we had toy boats or played in old abandoned boats, or rafts made of planks and 5 gallon oil drums. The creek and Hoodown Wood were our playgrounds.

We went to the village school there were about 80 children in three classes. Miss Laurie taught the infants, Miss Davies the 7 -8 and Miss Hayward the Head taught the 9 -11. Miss Haywood could lay on the cane, the others used rulers, but we were only punished when we deserved it. Miss Haywood taught us swimming at Light House Beach where we went some summer afternoons. She was a very good swimmer; she was also very knowledgeable about Nature Study. She was, in fact, a very good all round teacher.

Once a year the Scripture Inspector would come round and check our knowledge and allow us to go early in the afternoon. Every day started in the hall with hymns and prayers, and we were taught the meaning of the words we sang. On Ascension Day the whole school would troop down to the church service.

The Vicar of Kingswear when we arrived was the Rev. Burt, but he soon left and was replaced by Rev. Keyworth. He did a lot of good for the church and had the organ rebuilt and the bells re cast and re hung. He was a composer of many hymns and a musician. Many of his hymns were relevant to Kingswear. When the organ rebuild was completed some of his hymns were played and Thurston Dart, a famous musician whose parents lived in Kingswear, gave a recital. One of Rev. Keyworth's hymns was about the Kingswear bells, and this tune could be played on the bells.



Dartmouth (1930s Post Card) showing my Dad's boat (bottom right)

At Regatta time before the war, we boys would go to Dartmouth and wait at the quayside steps for yachtsmen to come ashore in their dinghies. We'd offer to look after them while they were ashore, and you always got a good tip – between two shillings and five shillings (10p – 25p!).



The new Kingswear Scout Headquarters, 1937

When I was seven I joined the Cubs and we met in the new Scout headquarters which had been built where Mount Pleasant flats now stand. Our HQ was the best in Devon and perhaps in the whole of the West Country. It was given with a great deal of publicity by Col. Davis who lived at the Redoubt (now Kingswear Park timeshare apartments). The HQ had a long hall and two smaller rooms at each end. There was a full size collapsible boxing ring, complete with all the equipment,

parallel bars, wall bars, climbing ropes, fencing swords and lots of toy tanks and field guns with spring – loaded cartridges, and about 14 sets of roller-skates. There was also camping gear, a trek cart and a sailing dinghy. 1st Kingswear Scouts did very well having Cubs, Scouts and Rover Scouts. The talk was that Col. Davis was hoping for some honour or knighthood, which never materialised. In 1940 when all the Scouters were in the forces the HQ & equipment were taken back and we were left with a few old tents and Bill Kelland was left to run the Scouts. Bill never camped as he had bad asthma.



Scout Christmas Party – 1936-37

The first camp I went to I arranged myself. We still had a boat, so we loaded it and camped opposite Noss in a bell tent, there were about 8 of us.



Scout Camp (me at the back in the middle & my Father on right) – 1944

When war became imminent. As I was a Scout, aged 13, I offered my services to the Civil Defence as a messenger. This would give me the National Service Badge. On September 3rd war broke out and evacuees from Eltham arrived in the village. We scouts had to assist in taking them to the people they were billeted with.

During this period on Saturdays and in the holidays I went out crabbing with Billy Peters in DH 80 (fishing boat number). We went as far as Mansands and down to Strete Gate, and it earned me pocket money. One afternoon I was down at the pontoon in my boat and a man asked me to take him, his wife and son to Dartmouth for 5/- (25p). I told him to sit in the boat at the stern with his son, and his wife in the bow. But he didn't do that! He and his wife sat at the stern and the boy at the bow. As there were leaks at the stern the boat gradually began to sink, even though we were bailing. It sank three quarters of the way across the river and we all had to swim for it. The man was very worried about me, but I had swam to a mooring buoy and was picked up by a Naval Picket Boat. All were safe!

After Dunkirk my cousins Ernie & Yvonne and their mother Auntie Pruie were evacuated with us. My Uncle Ernie was staying in Folkestone as he was in the National Fire Service. We were very overcrowded and after a few months they moved to the Waterhead and then again to what are now houses in Brixham Road, opposite the cattle pens. Following Dunkirk the river was full of Belgium trawlers, and clogs were floating everywhere. The trawlers were taken over by Polish sailors and used to go out chasing submarines and picking up survivors.

By this time Motor Torpedo Boats (M.T.Bs) were based at the Yacht Hotel in South Town, Dartmouth, and the embankment hotels were taken over by the Navy. The Women's Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S) were in Devonian, (big house) Broadstone House in Dartmouth and the Beacon

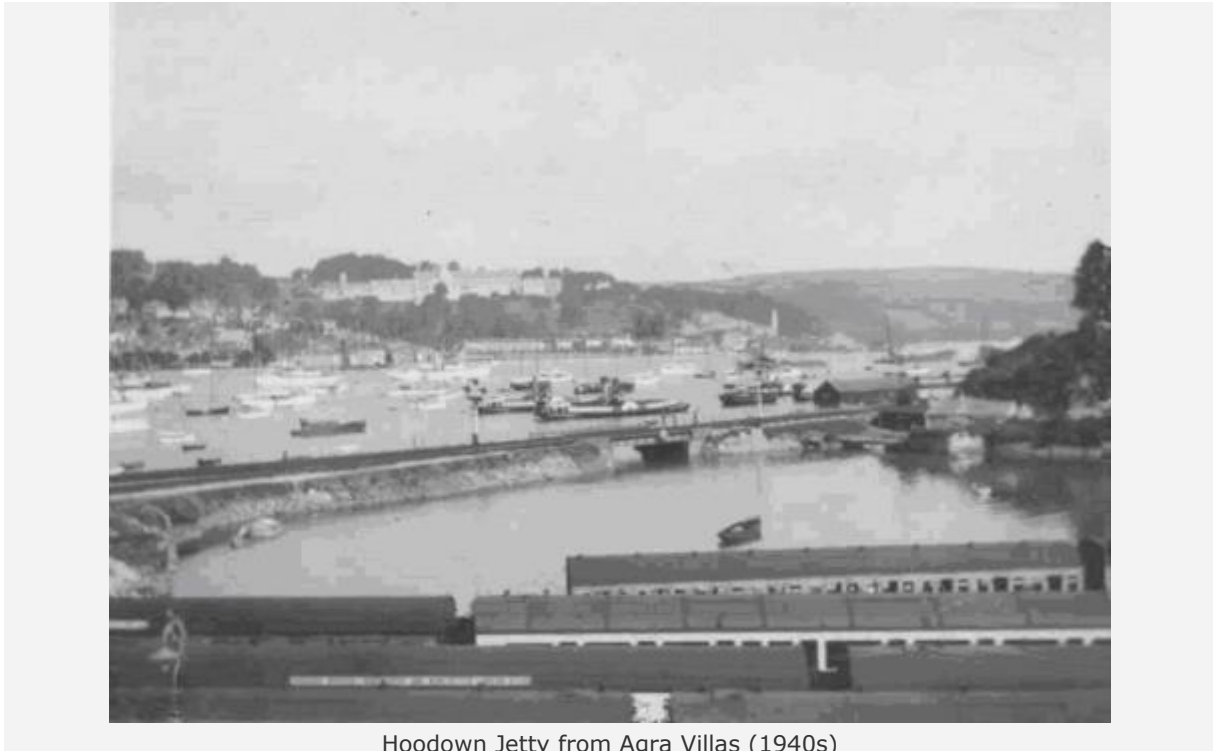
and Inverdart in Kingswear. Soon after this a bomb hit the high wall of the Yacht Hotel (South Town – now flats) causing damage to the hotel and the boathouse below, so the M.T.B's were moved to Kingswear Jetty where a shore power supply was connected from a substation in The Priory. The Royal Dart Hotel became a "ship" for the duration, HMS Cicala with the exception of the lower bar, which remained under civilian control. Polish sailors arrived in the village, one married a Kingswear girl, and their son Paul Raimond became one of our sons' school friends.

Air raid shelters were built under the arch at the square, below the school and near the entrance to Ridley Gardens. Static Water tanks were below Spittis Park opposite Alta Vista, and a very big one where the Scout Hall use to be. The kids used to swim in it; the tanks were all fed by and linked by 6" pipes from the river laid in the gutters. There were roadblocks and demolition traps in the road by the Dairy, also tank traps. A Pillbox is still over near Hoodown Railway crossing, there was also one at Mansands, and all the beaches were blocked by barbed wire.

The first commandos were billeted in Kingswear, and trained on the cliffs and moors. They also went to the Channel Isles on a raid and several lives were lost. German radio at about this time claimed that H.M.S. Cicala (The Dart Hotel) had been sunk!

On my way back to school at Dartmouth one lunchtime I sheltered in the Dart Hotel when a "Jerry" reconnaissance plane fought a duel with a Spitfire. Sadly the Spitfire got in the range of the belly turret and was shot down. The pilot was brought in by a naval picket boat and lived to tell the tale. The engine was found by a fishing boat a few years ago and brought in. France had fallen, and about this time two tugs, The Aube and The Isere came in and spent the rest of the war here. Thus the village was introduced to Captain Leon Coquerel who married a Dartmouth lady – returning to France after the war. He regularly visited the village over the next 50 years. On his death, he left his medals to the village and requested that his ashes be cast into the river, which he loved dearly.

I left school at 14 and started work at the Urban Electric Supply in Dartmouth, as an apprentice electrician. By now the RAF had a barrage balloon dept, where the Co-op now stands in Dartmouth, where they serviced balloons in the district, and those of the ships in the harbour. One afternoon when it was very windy we had to go to Kingswear and, with the Air Force, release a barrage balloon which had wrapped its wire round and round the overhead cables which supplied the Air Force – Air Ministry Experimental (AME) radar station which was, of course, very important.



Hoodown Jetty from Agra Villas (1940s)

At Hoodown, a jetty was constructed to refuel the M.T.B.s, M.Ls etc. in the harbour. A pipeline was laid from 4 fuel tanks that were installed below Hoodown Ferry lane. During this operation a tank rolled down into the creek and had to be floated out & brought back. The brick bases are still visible in the lane. A large Nissan hut and brick buildings were built on the riverside, and on the land side, was a long red brick building. These buildings were manned by French & British sailors and were the sheds where the torpedoes were serviced and armed.

There were 80 Free French sailors stationed at Brookhill and about 15 Officers at Longford (near the ferry). One of them was Philippe de Gaulle, General de Gaulle's son. There is a photograph of five of the sub-lieutenants and midshipmen standing outside Longford and all became Admirals. Various Kingswear men used to go out to Brookhill for a glass of red wine, which must have come from Portugal.

After the war at one of the Anglo-French reunions my wife who had a deaf aunt and was able to do deaf and dumb language was put in charge of a deaf and dumb French man whose wife was also deaf and dumb. He had been in the French Navy and could understand English (!) He had been one of their best torpedo mechanics. I don't think we had anyone who was deaf and dumb in our forces.

In 1942 the shipyard at Noss was bombed with the loss of about 20 lives, one of which, sadly, was my middle brother, Bert aged 17. Three Focke – Wulf 109s came down through the valley from Hillhead, dropped bombs on Noss, sunk ships in the harbour, etc. and damaged several more. My

brother's funeral was the biggest Kingswear had ever seen. His coffin was transported to the church on the Fire Engine and representatives of civilian and armed services were all in attendance.

Interview with local people including Frank (Jack) Little (standing on left) and Reg Little (standing on right) in a documentary about Philip & Son Shipyard at Noss, Kingswear

Sometime around this time we took a transformer from Kingswear goods station to Brownstone Battery which was for the coastal guns to guard the river entrance. There was a cable through the trees, which ran from the control tower at Kingswear Castle to the leading light near Kingswear Castle. It went on to the Kingswear lighthouse, so that the light could be switched on if a convoy was coming in or out. In this case the boom, which closed the entrance just outside the castle, would be opened or closed. I remember one tanker, which came from the gulf and came in for the night, was sunk off Mansands and the bow could be seen for several days.



By now I had reached the age of 15 and was in the first Aid Party, having passed my Red Cross Exams. One Saturday morning I was in Lower Contour Road and heard planes. I saw bombs

dropping on Duke Street and the Town Arms pub (now council flats next to what was Dartmouth Primary School) in Higher Street. I went across to Dartmouth with our attachment. I was involved in digging work in Duke Street where the bomb had hit the bank, causing major damage. I was picking up coins and notes, which we put in buckets and passing drinks to the people who were trapped in the wreckage of Rudd Pryn Haberdashers.

The first bodies were found after an hour or so, so we stayed till about 7pm and returned next day (Sunday). At 8am that morning part of the roof of the Butterwalk fell off and just missed us. The previous Friday we had just finished work on the Merry Monarch Cafe (Elizabethan in origin.) It was closed earlier in the year and been redecorated and refitted as an Officers Club by a very posh lady and her daughter called Colthurst. It was due to be reopened the following week, and was now badly damaged and uninhabitable. Some few weeks after this Mrs Colthurst took over the Dartmouth Chronicle shop in Fairfax Place – it is now Cranfords. We had to transfer the salvaged electrical equipment from the club and there it continued till the end of the war.

Around this time a ship came in to refuel from the fleet tanker "Berta" which was moored above the Higher Ferry. She dropped her anchor to turn round and when she pulled it up, she pulled up the cable supplying all electricity to Kingswear and the Radar Station. This of course was an emergency and we had to drop everything and with extra men from Cornwall worked the whole day to repair the cable by lifting it on to a barge. It was also decided to lay a reserve cable across which involved a tug towing a barge with a cable drum in it about 7 ft, high, laying it and jointing it on each side of the river.



Kingswear Fire Service (1940s) - taken from the location in Kingswear where I now live - Marina View!

One evening the air raid siren sounded and explosions were heard. A plane flew down the river dropping bombs. One just missed the "Berta", one fell in the mud off the (railway) footbridge and one on the jetty, fairly near the moored M.T.B.s. Another fell in the "Chalet" garden and one on the garage destroying Mr Nichol's car. This was less than 50 yards from where a 16 year old school girl who was very interesting to me lived. She and her mum had to take cover under the bed, a good job her father wasn't there as well! It would have been a squeeze! The last bomb just missed the Free French billets at Brookhill. I think it was the night following this raid that lord Haw-Haw (William Joyce, traitor, hanged after the war) gave out on the English language German propaganda station that Dartmouth Harbour had been raided, and HMS Cicala had been sunk in the river. HMS Cicala was the wartime name for the Royal Dart Hotel, which stands next to Kingswear station. The fleet tanker "Berta" had many near misses, and during the Noss raid, a near miss split her tank bulkhead causing petrol and diesel to mix, but, thank goodness, she survived.



Frank (Jack) & Reg Little 1943

Around this time the whole of Coronation Park was laid out as a US Navy base, the grass was covered with concrete paving slabs and a big winch was fitted to pull the landing craft in from the slipway next to the ferry slip. Other slipways and jetties were built opposite Avenue Gardens, and hundreds of lorries put loads of concrete down to make the ground safe for the tanks. This is when I saw the little old hump backed bridge that led to the island as various cables were routed under it.

When I was about 16, a Morris Commercial Lorry which was fitted out as a rescue vehicle with shearlegs, block & tackle, levers and 10 ton jacks, picks and shovels, arrived and was kept at Mr Fairweather's garage. I was drafted into the rescue squad. Charles Bovey was in charge, with Charles Burrows, Fred Budge and Lewis Heal. Every Sunday morning we practiced at Roberts' Saw Mills, Dragon House, Coleton Barton or Nethway House, which was a home for evacuee children from Plymouth. There we lowered children from the first floor, and used smoke masks in the cellars. At this time Kingswear had a fire service which consisted of a towing car and a trailer pump, which was kept in the lock up garages next to the shops. There was a Nissen hut above the garages where nights on duty were spent. Both my brothers were involved in the Fire Service. They used to be called out to fires in Noss woods caused by sparks from the railway engines, and return covered in soot.



Sheila Willing (who was to become my wife) at Goodrington (1943)

I began courting my girlfriend (who became my wife) when I was 16 and she was nearly 16. Sheila lived at the top of Church Hill at Alta Vista, and went to school in Totnes. One lunch time I was told to deliver a Hoover vacuum cleaner to Alta Vista. I was told to leave at 10 minutes to one – "early". This meant I caught the same ferry but lost part of my lunch hour. I went in the Post Office and forgot the Hoover – leaving it in the shop. Three weeks later I was asked what I had done with it, and was told to pick it up and take it where it belonged. Sheila came to the door and gave me 6d as a tip, and thus we were introduced.

She caught the 8.05am train from Kingswear to Paignton, bus to Totnes, and returned about 5pm. One day the Luftwaffe flew up the river to Totnes and machine gunned her school –

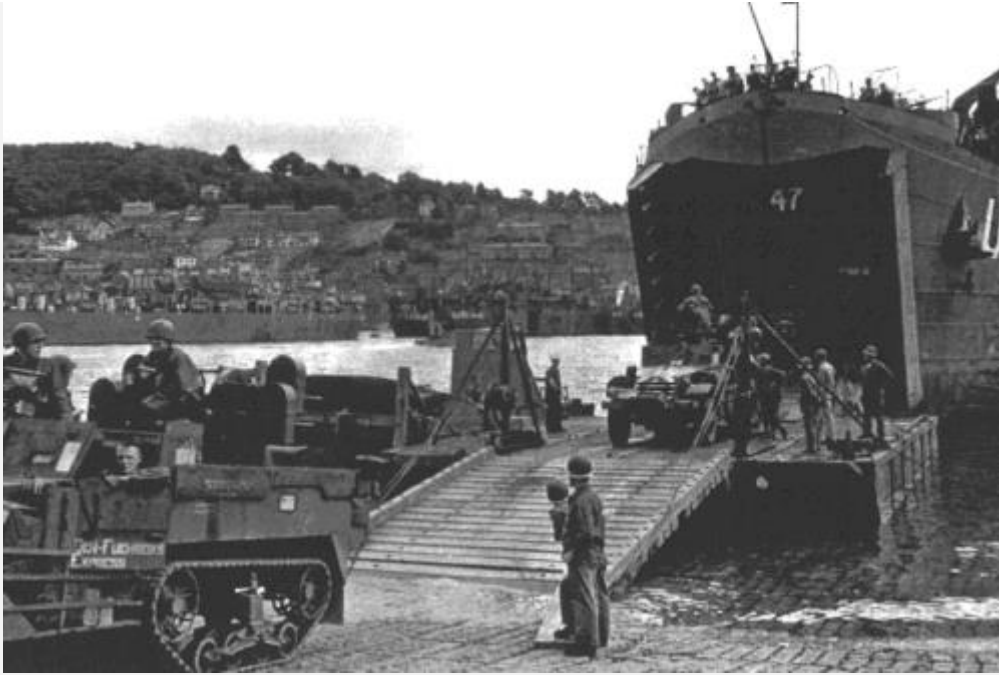
probably thinking it was a barracks. No one was injured. Although the area was full of members of the forces, no one felt safe in the blackout in those days.

We saw landing craft going in and out of the river and knew about the practice landing ground at Slapton. I was coming back from South Town one afternoon and saw a badly damaged landing craft come in. This had happened when German E-boats had got among the practice that was going on, and 600 or more US troops were killed that night. All we heard were rumours. People kept still tongues in those days.

At this time I was made Assistant Scout Master in charge of a senior sea scout section, and we camped about one weekend a month at Galmpton. The odd thing was that you weren't allowed to camp within a mile of an AA Gun, but when Plymouth was bombed the planes went over us with shrapnel coming down near us.

We were camping at Galmpton the Sunday that a direct hit was taken on St Marychurch Sunday School in Torquay. Many children were killed, and we had heard the explosion. We used to store the tents on a farm and either cycle or go to Galmpton by boat. The boat however, was stolen by sailors and crushed between the Belfort (French freighter made into Depot ship) and the HMS Aberdonian which were moored off the railway pontoon. The Scouts I remember from this time were Brian Bovey, Bruce Escott, Douglas Roper, Reg Riggs, Terry Satchell, Ernie Little and Desmond Kelland.

We knew there was an old paddle steamer off Hoodown with MTBs alongside her, but until the 1970's we never knew anything about the Secret Fleet with which these boats were associated. The SOE agents were taken to France and airmen who had been shot down and rescued by The marquis, were picked up and brought back to Dartmouth. I worked with an ex-crewman of the SOE for 10 years and knew nothing about his role.



US Landing Craft - Dartmouth (1943)

In 1944 the area was full of Yanks soldiers, sailors and landing craft. Soldiers were camping in the woods at Hill Head and tanks and lorries were everywhere. You could have walked across the river on the landing craft. On June 4th the river was suddenly empty, and on the news we heard the reason why D-day had arrived.

Some of the craft came back to be repaired, but not many. There was one on the slipway at Britannia Halt with part of its bottom blown away. During the next few months things calmed down and returned to normal.

I received the Defence Medal for my service in the Civil Defence, the civilian qualifying time was 3 years. I qualified before I was 18 years old.

War Time Organisations in Kingswear

Kingswear Home Guard

The last time I saw Col. Davies of Scout HQ he was in home guard uniform. The first Officer in Kingswear was Stanley Hamilton scoutmaster and TA member. He joined the Army after a short time and Aymer Vallence, who worked at Noss and whose father was a Commander (ex-Navy), next arrived with Sam Browne etc. After a very short time Aymer was demoted to private. He was a direct descendant of William the Conquerors brother, the Duke of Valence, his ancestor's tomb being the most famous one in Westminster Abbey. I have checked with John Isaacs who taught the Home Guard how to strip down a Tommy gun (when he was aged about ten!). He had been taught by 2 commandos who were billeted with his parents.

The following names come to mind:

- * George Haylock
- * Dick Harris
- * George Bridge
- * Hector Harvey
- * Aubrey Widdicombe
- * Mr Escott and....
- * Mr Jones, an American millionaire (Father of H Jones later the Falklands VC)

Mr Jones had a car and petrol coupons, and provided the transport. As an American citizen he sent to the US and imported two "22" rifles which the Home Guard used for target practice.

The Home Guard met in a house in the square which was occupied after the war by my future in-laws and Sheila (above the Teddy Bear shop) After my in laws died I found a 12" bayonet hidden in a cupboard.

The Red Cross Detachment

Mrs Melville was in charge with Mrs Tabb the village midwife. Mrs Newton, Miss Ivey, Miss Symonds and Mrs Wood were also members.

Special Police

Inspector Melville, Sid Hall, Dick Chapman and Mr Wallace.

Auxiliary Fire Service

The Nissan Hut above the lock up garages (between what was the Co-op and the Dairy) next to the shop was their HQ (where the flats now stand). Mr King (Riversea Hotel), Mr Hunt, Frank (Jack) and Bert Little my brothers, Ted Burrows, Ken Allen, Jack Eveleigh, Les and Leo Radford were all members of the Auxilliary Fire Service.

As most of these were under age, special permission was obtained from the Home Office.

Kingswear's Defences

- * 2 Coastal guns and searchlight at Brownstone.
- * 2 Torpedo tubes at Kingswear Court.
- * Barrage balloons on Marina Car Park and on the river.
- * BOFORS gun in field hedge above Dick Parkes' house and at Noss entrance.
- * Machine Guns on the rail embankment near Britannia Halt.
- * Pill-boxes at Hoodown and Mansands.

* Road blocks and barricades by the ferry, village shop and up by Britannia Halt. Also included, provision to blow up the road.

Static Water Tanks

There was a massive tank where Mount Pleasant flats now stand. One in Ridley Hill, one opposite Alta Vista and one below the school. All were fed from the river by 6" mains from Collins' Quay.

Air Raid Shelters

- * On Ridley Hill
- * Under the arch by the ferry slip
- * Below the school and of course...
- * In the village houses taken over by the Admiralty.

Torpedo Quay

At Hoodown with stores, workshops and refueling tanks for M.T.Bs.

Shore Electric Supply

Substation in the grounds of the Priory, with cables to the jetty and onwards to the Belfort and Aserdonian in the middle of the river.

Radar

One of the main UK chain of radar stations was at Coleton Fishaere, guarded by the RAF regiment, sometimes with armoured cars.

NAAFI Stores

..... in the Priory supplied the ships with victualling – fresh food, bread, etc

Forces Canteen

The first forces canteen was in the garage of "Little Ravenswell" in Lighthouse Road, and was run by the W.V.S (Women's Voluntary Services) When that closed it moved to the ground floor of Mrs Lipscombe's Colton House.

Kingswear Laundry

Very important – did the laundry for British, French and American forces in the area. It employed about 35 girls who arrived about 7:30 in the morning and worked 6 days a week, till late evening.

Part 2 – Joining The Army



Reg Little Venice 1946

In June 1945 I went for my medical and was sent to a training depot at Colchester, where I spent six weeks in Primary training. About the 4th weekend we were put on extra duty on the Saturday afternoon our section had to fill in trenches. The corporal in charge was always calling us "bastards", and in fun (!) I said "isn't Old brookey a B***?" He marched me to the guard room and I was locked in the cells for 2 days. I went before the officer and was given 10 days C.B. (confined to barracks). The Sergeant in the guard room told me I should have called witnesses & would have got off.

After I'd been at Colchester for about 4 weeks the Sergeant came in quietly one morning to wake us up instead of bawling to wake us up. He told us we were to go back to sleep for another hour, and told us we could have the day off as the war was over. We had a service later on the Parade Ground & were told later that the 2nd atomic bomb had been dropped. We later came to the conclusion that although these bombs has killed thousands, the fanatical Japs could have fought on for another 2 years and we could have been among the thousands of Allied troops who could have died there.

After completing training I was drafted to Longmoor in the Royal Engineers which was the transportation training centre.

The first lecture on joining the Royal Engineers was given in the RE (Royal Engineers) railway cutting by a Lance Corporal who had been in the latter part of the Great War. It was on how to update an out of date railway ticket! You had to split the back off the ticket with a razor blade, get an updated ticket from Liss to Liphook, the next station, for about 5 new pence, take the back off it and stick it on the front of the other ticket, and iron in any pieces that had been punched! This lecture should have been about how to sabotage railway lines!

On the last Sunday at Longmoor you weren't able to get a weekend pass; you had to perform station guard duty at Liss Station (Southern Railway). The sergeant in charge said "you are supposed to see that nobody without tickets climbs out over the railings, but in reality it is more important to help them over and see that they don't injure themselves" The ones who didn't climb over used to give the ticket collector 6d (2¹/₂p).

To pass out as a Sapper you did demolition, explosives, Bailey bridging and other constructions, knotting & rope work. As I had been in the Scouts & Civil Defence I knew all the knots and lashings, and quick ways of doing them. A lance corporal was reproaching me for showing the others how to tie a bowline behind my back, and an officer asked what the problem was. The officer said it was perfectly all right how to tie the knot in any correct way. I ended up having to tell the others to tie the knots behind their backs.



My first weekend at Longmoor coincided with Sheila's first weekend at Salisbury; a teacher training college. Each weekend after that I had a 36 hour pass which I spent at Salisbury in the Salvation Army Hotel. Bed and Breakfast 1/6d (7¹/₂p). While spending one night there, a mouse chewed a hole through my battle dress pocket and ate half of my bar of chocolate, I didn't realise this until I'd almost eaten the rest!

Miss Wordsworth who lived at Kingswear and was a descendant of the poet and known to us, was a great friend of Miss Oakly Hill the college Bursar, and had written a letter about Sheila and myself. The principal Miss Maxwell, called me in to see her, and told me I could wait for Sheila in the Common Room – the only soldier allowed in the college!

I passed the Sappers course and was posted to Hull on a Leightermans course where we did 6 weeks in school and 3 weeks on barges up and down the river Trent to Newark and Lincoln and also up the Ouse to Goole and the up the Ayr & Calder canal to Castleford. Then there was a weeks testing to pass the course.

Then I went back to Bordon in the depot camp. That is where the Sergeant Major saw a chap called Phillips wandering on the Pay Parade looking for his initial group and told him to go and fall in with the "Fs"! He asked another chap what he was doing with Civilian spectacles and when told his Army issue were broken told him to report to the Optimist! One night on reading part 1 orders I saw that 10 men were wanted for a Deep Sea Diving Course with the Navy at Portsmouth, so I put my name down. A few days later I had to go with some others to the military hospital at Aldershot (where our eldest grand daughter was born many years later) for X-rays. After a few days more working in the depot loading & unloading coal wagons, laying railway track & helping to build bridges at the bridge school, I was told to pack my kit for Portsmouth. We arrived in Portsmouth and were assigned civilian billets. I was in St George's Road with two others, one named Black. Next day we went to the Diving school at Whale Island, H.M.S. Excellent. Each day we had lunch at the Leading Hands mess and it was very good. We left about 4:30 and had the evening meal at our billet. We were then free for the evening, but as I was only paid 18/- (80p) a week and spent most of this on the weekend at Salisbury I had only 1/6 (7½p) left for the week.

During the Diving Course we did deep-sea diving (with the old copper helmet) frogman's and shallow with oxygen replacement and lung; we also cleared ropes etc. I have walked along the propeller shaft of a destroyer, through the A brackets to the propellers. It is possible to set yourself to the correct buoyancy required. We carried out various tasks, cutting wood (which is completely different underwater), angle iron and steel plate with an oxyacetylene cutter. We fired the underwater gun used to repair ships by firing threaded bolts into the hull, and air bolts into damaged submarines.

One test was timed – we had to untie knots in a chain, signal on the rope when finished, then slip your weights and float to the surface. First you make yourself heavy and then hit the knots on the solid part of your boots. They come undone easily. The trouble was that by making myself heavy I sank deeply into the mud, and when I slipped the weights they wouldn't come off, the air was cut off and I should have had enough air for 8 minutes, but I had lost some in the struggle to free myself. I signaled for more air several times and when they did start pumping again it didn't free me, and I had to be pulled out of the mud nearly suffocated. At this point the diving (Royal Naval) officer came alongside and played hell, as this test should not have been carried out in the mud, only on a firm bottom. We all got on well together, one member was a RSM who was going to dive in civilian life. We all passed the final exams.



Edwin Willing with Sheila & Reg 1946

We returned to Borden, but I found all my old mates Bill Higgs, Bob Nelson and Skip Wheeler who had been at Hull with me were all gone. I was given embarkation leave and on return went to Barton Stacey near Andover. We were on parade for the Brigadier's inspection, he came down the ranks and stopped 2 away from me and said to the next sapper "A very good pair of boots, my man!" When he came to me he said "An equally bloody rotten pair, take that man's name and number." At the end of the parade the names that were taken had to remain in place, and were each asked what was wrong. As all the ones with dirty boots etc. were not going to be allowed a weekend pass, I said he had told me to exchange my trousers, and I got away with it! I caught the train to Kingswear at 12:30 and got there about 5:00pm and spent my last weekend with Sheila before going abroad.

Our draft was RJHGV, which told us nothing at all. We got on a special train at Andover, changed at Clapham junction and proceeded to Dover. We were put in a transit camp and were allowed out in the evening. I went to Folkestone to my Uncle George's where I was given a meal. He took me for a ride in his car, and dropped me back outside the camp. In the morning we went down a spiral staircase in the cliff and marched down to the jetty where we boarded a boat for Calais. On arrival we went into a big transit camp where we had a meal and were given vouchers for chocolate and cigarettes, and about 11pm we left by train, still not knowing our destination. We travelled through France and at about 7am the train stopped in a siding where we washed and were given a breakfast in a railside camp, near Nancy, where you stood at the table to eat. As far as I can remember it was quite good. We were given a packed meal for lunch. Tea was made on big coppers on the train and distributed a bucket to each coach several times a day.

At times the train ran very slowly and gave way to other trains. We soon found that we had entered the American sector of Germany. We found that when the train stopped, people were lining the sides of the tracks and you could buy anything for chocolate or cigarettes such as medals, cigarette lighters, watches etc. Later in the day, we arrived at what we discovered to be

Munich. We crossed the station tracks and were taken to a hotel. Here we had a cooked meal and were entertained by a string orchestra.



Reg – Venice NAAFI 1946

We returned to the train again and went down a long hill, through a valley and arrived in Villach in Austria where we went into a tented part of a transit camp. I found later that Les Radford who I went to school with from Kingswear, was the manager of the NAAFI bakery there, and had married a local girl. After a day or two in Villach my name and number came over the Tannoy that I was to entrain at a given time. I went to Treviso and then on to Venice joining 991 Port Operating Company where our camp was in a school near St Mark's Square. We worked (well, watched the Italians work!) at Venice docks where all the military stores came into Northern Italy. We also ran the ferry service from Piazza-Roma to the lido.

We worked on quite a number of cargo ships, the The Empire Air and The Colorado Spring Victory. A Victory ship was a standard ship built in the USA in the war to replace ships sunk in convoys – all standardised and built in a very short time – the record for building was as little as one week I think! They brought a load of German POW's back from the Afrika Corps who were sent to a camp in Mestre, Italy, before being sent home. Among the ships came one from Northern Ireland with a load of potatoes (We only had fresh potatoes 2 days a week, the rest being tinned or dried, and one day dry biscuits). We arranged with the officers and Military Police (MP) to take 20 bags, which were divided between the officers mess, the MP's mess, and our company mess. I remember having corn beef fritters and chips that night, instead of sardines or herrings.

Lunch	Sup
<u>21th. SEPT. 1946</u>	
ST. GERMAIN SOUP	VENETIAN SOUP
*_*_*	*_*_*
MILANESSE SCALLOPS	ROAST BEEF
SAUTE POTATOS	MASHED POTATOS
BEST ROOT	CREAMED CARROTS
*_*_*	*_*_*
MIXED SWEET WITH CREAM	PLUM CAKE
*_*_*	*_*_*
B E E R	B E E R
BEER 38 LIRE PER BOTTLE	BEER 38 LIRE PER BOTTLE
LUNCH 67 LIRE	SUPPER 67 LIRE

Menu Venice 1946

Our cook house was run by ex Jewish prisoners from Belsen who had their tattooed numbers on their arms and German prisoners, and there didn't seem to be any trouble between them. Every Sunday the Germans were taken to a big camp at Mestre for the day, where they could go to a film and go to church. There were thousands in that camp.

After a short time I went across to San Giorgio and joined the IWT (Inland Water Transport) detachment that ran the ferry service. The only ones I can remember are a Scotsman called Galbraith, Lofty Leadbetter who was 6'9" with size 13 boots, Wally Craig who was CSM and Major Ackford and an Italian called Mike Macaroni who made a frame for Sheila's photograph.

I had a Christmas in Venice and can just remember it. I went to Midnight Mass in St George's Anglican Church with a lot of Americans from a destroyer alongside the quay.



Reg Little - Trieste 1946

After a time I went to Trieste on detachment with about 30 others as a lot of stores and transport was being sent to Haifa in Palestine (as it still was). The movement control company lost 2 lorries and Northern Italy was searched for them. About two weeks later a signal came that they had gone to Haifa by mistake. The stuff that was being sent to Haifa had come from Africa, fought its way all up through Italy and was full of contraband stuff that had been stolen from all over the countries en-route.

While in Trieste I used to collect the mail from the town every day and who should I bump into but Les Radford who was now the NAAFI Bakery manager. His mate was the brewery manager and I was very glad!

I went home on leave in February 1947 after having walked on the ice in Venice harbour! All the way back was thick snow perhaps 8 feet deep, but the trains still ran – not like nowadays! I stayed a few days in Salisbury and arrived in Kingswear to see about a foot of snow on the station (trains still running!). After 19 days leave I had to go back.



Duffel Coats

After the invasion had taken place in 1944, a large number of beautiful woollen duffel coats remained unclaimed in Kingswear laundry, and in 1946 – 47 these began to appear in the village. They even got as far as Salisbury Diocesan Training College where the coldest winter in the 20th century was being endured by the students. Some of the students still treasure them! My father-in-law and friends were involved in this relief work. I have since been told many where blood stained when they arrived at the laundry.

In August 1947 I had another 19 day leave and went back to Venice again. A few days later I was sent to Bielefeld in Germany and then Hamburg. A week later I was sent to Stranraer in Scotland. When I arrived there I found all my records had been lost and they thought I had had no leave since January, so after a month away I was back in Kingswear.

Bob Nelson was on a Army tug at Stranraer, and we had good times together. He told his grandchildren about the time I had collected our rations and managed to filch a tray of trifle and took it down to the tug and we all dug in with our spoons till it was gone. We were lucky enough to see Bob when we took our eldest grandson Leigh to London in 1996; Leigh was impressed as

Bob's son Gary played football for Charlton and wrote a book "Left Foot Forward" It was good that we saw Bob then as in 2000 he sadly died.

I went back off leave with Harry Richardson an RAF WO. He was on loan from the RAF to BOAC, flying Sunderlands and re establishing the route to India, that was the last time I saw Harry. He emigrated and joined the New Zealand Air Force and died in the mid 90's. His family were from Kingswear.

At Stranraer four others and myself lived on a ¾ mile long jetty, and checked the craft alongside every 4 hours. The craft alongside were weather ships who went to sea about 4am to check the weather before ammunition dumping craft put to sea at 7am to dump ammunition, mustard gas, flares etc. These were loaded by German POWs who had been the crews of submarines (which surrendered there at the end of the war and were still in there 1948!) and by the Pioneer Corps. It was dumped off Northern Ireland. I wonder how far out they went when it was a bit rough. There has since been trouble with all this dumped material, when a gas pipe was being laid in 1999 – 2000.

We also had to take all the Naval messages for the two ships HMS Ripon and Seafox that took stores to Ireland. In May 1948 I was demobbed at York and went home to Kingswear and back to my work as an electrician.

In 1950 Sheila and I were married (more of this later). In 1951 I was recalled for Reserve Training due to the Korean War. I went to Marchwood a Military port near Southampton and there had been a lot of bad publicity about Reserves who were supposed to be training, wasting time! One morning the diving section was sent to Southampton swimming pool where Reuter's news Agency took photographs of us in diving gear with a girl model. Mine came out the best and the following morning on catching the train to school on Kingswear station everyone was waving papers at Sheila.



My photo taken with a Model which appeared in the newspaper !

There was a picture of me on the front pages (Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Titbits, and Daily Sketch. Newspapers from Australia even were sent to my mother by relatives there!). I enjoyed my time at Marchwood I was taught to use radio communications and went out on a tug (TID) to Yarmouth (Isle of Wight) for 2 days. I met Bill Higgs again, and several old friends. After 2 weeks I packed up my kit and left the Army. I managed to hand in all the old socks and shirts and keep the new ones.

Reg Little 2011

Kingswear History Remembered

