

The World War 2 Life of Gerard Wood, My Father

Introduction

This family history project is about the World War 2 years of my father Gerard Wood (GW). The information/history presented is gathered from the shared stories of the family, internet searches and research. It is written according to Nancy Ketchen as some of the family stories are inconsistent and some of the internet archives are not as helpful as I had hoped. Well if the Romans can do it why not me.

Gerard Wood

My father was born in 1918, the youngest of 5 children who all lived at 8 Hatherley Street Seacombe. His Mother Alice and father James Stanley. His father, a stained glass artisan, was to witness during this coming war the loss of much of his work in churches through the bombing.

Gerard was educated in the fee paying school St Francis Xaviers SFX in Liverpool until he was 14 when his father's stained glass business closed down. This prompted him to leave school altogether as he could not adjust to state school life. In his late teens he became an apprentice in the navy, based on HMS Sheffield, Shiny Sheff. Photo 1 This apprenticeship gave GW vital experience in communications, a key part of HMS Sheffield's role in the navy, with all the latest technology of the time.

The war years begin

By the time of the 1939 census GW, 21 years old, was working as a sales assistant in his brother's Painter's and Plumber's shop. He was living then at 53 Brougham Road Seacombe, just round the corner from the home he was born in.

With his navy experience he joined in the rescue at Dunkirk in late May 1940. He probably rescued people he knew from the East Lancashire Regiment, some of the thousands escaping Europe at that time.

Photo 2. His soon to be wife Nancy Britton (my Mum) is pictured in her Land Army uniform, with my Dad in photo 3 on 29th June 1940 in his Army uniform. Surprisingly he enlisted with the army and not the navy and joined the Royal Signals, using his communications experience gained from the HMS Sheffield. This decision shaped the rest of his life.

Photo 4 puts GW at the Prestatyn Signal Corp training camp. Third from the left in the front Row. The holiday camp was requisitioned by the army. You can see the grand steps leading to the holiday camp entrance.

Photo 5 shows my mother Nancy Britton on one knee holding a saw. She enjoyed her time with the land army and shared many stories with the family over the years. This was unlike my father who only let little slips of his experiences of the war into the family's shared history.

The following photos 6, 7, and 8 show GW somewhere hot and following promotion to corporal. I believe they were taken in Gibraltar, Malta or even Africa. He served in all these places. The time period that they cover is unclear but it would have been from some time after training in Prestatyn 1940 to early 1943.

He did tell stories of how many soldiers collapsed while on march in Africa moving "a big gun".

He described how when he was in Gibraltar he kept watch for enemy aircraft over the Mediterranean and used his signals role for this. He was also aboard small boats doing this job. One time he had just left Mass when he heard the enemy coming and had to rush back to communicate this with a sore heart, going from prayer to sending people possibly to their death.

On the back of photo 8 there was a message to my Mum. "When you see this you will realise, N, the size of the Rock. Gerry Wood x"

He became a PT instructor whilst in the "Rock" so that he could lead the men in their daily exercise. They needed this as the conditions were very restrictive and keeping fit was an issue. I presume this was part of his promotion to Corporal.

The living conditions of many army bases and particularly in Gibraltar Rock were significant in playing their own role in the lives of the men. Meningitis was rife. My Dad caught meningitis at some point, probably in Gibraltar Rock, and was placed in an isolation hospital in England.

He did recover, he had a lot more to do, as you will see. He described to me his stay in the hospital, another story in it's self. He contracted Rheumatic Fever too, possibly during this time in Gibraltar. It was an illness that surely blighted his life just as much as an injury in battle. His later life was significantly affected and shortened because of it.

Well, he did get back home in May 1943 as he married my Mum on the 3rd. *Photos 9 and 10.*

They are all looking chipper standing outside my Mum's parent's home, Newel Road Egremont. The same house by which my Mum was standing in her Land Army uniform. The house still stands today. They went to live in Burnley with my Dad's sister and husband after they got married. This put GW near the East Lancashire Regiment's Base. He may have been attached to this regiment in his signals role. We know he was home in December 43 as my eldest sibling was conceived then. It would be hard to argue against that evidence. More about her shortly.

And off he goes again.

June 5th 1944 D-Day landings. My father fell into the sea during this operation and was thankfully rescued from drowning, but it had been a close thing. He was then part of the big march to Holland and none of us have any stories to tell of this time, he didn't talk at all about them. He did paint a picture of a townhouse that he saw on his journey. He liked the architecture of the region.

We do know he got there in one piece and was there for some time.

Big sister Judith was born in September 1944, but he was still away. When the news reached him he was asked what name was chosen. When he said Judith these people he was staying with were very concerned and surprised that a Jewish name had been chosen. He explained that he and his wife had prayed to Saint Jude, the patron saint for hopeless cases, for her....

GW was not to go home for some time yet, although the war in Europe ended 8th May 1945, there was still work to be done in Holland. As a signals man he was heavily involved with operations Faust (British) and Manna (Americans). A section of Holland was still in the hands of the Germans and the "Great Hunger Winter" was taking place. 22,000 civilians died. So American and British forces extended their stay to try and get supplies airlifted to the people of Holland.

Then he came home.

When he got home to his wife and daughter, Judith was asked to say hello to her Uncle Gerry. Photo 11. A mistake often laughed about through the years. My Mum had been so used to referring to him as Uncle Gerry through that long time of separation.

Once in civvy street he worked for a short time for his brother again and then retrained as a GPO engineer. The signals experience and skills coming up trumps again. He shared many stories of these days, living in a prefab and then on to the house I was born in, 91 Pasture Road, Moreton. I even remember his telephone number, GPO 3280.

Sadly he died at 55 years after being plagued with a bad heart all the years I knew him. He told me one day that he hadn't been poorly all his life; that at one time he was a PT instructor in Gibraltar Rock. He wanted to demonstrate how fit he had once been. So he lined up a row of chairs in the dining room and jumped right over the top of them. Wow. Mum came in after hearing all the noise and told him off. A memory I will always treasure.

My Dad. Photo 12 making mince pies in the pre-fab.

Nancy Ketchen