



# The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

## Timely salute to generation who treated danger with contempt

A SHORT while ago, I attended the funeral of a gentleman who had seen so much of life.

Joseph Randall passed away in Teignmouth late last month at the incredible age of 102. He lived through five British monarchs and over 20 prime ministers but by far his greatest achievement in the eyes of so many military personnel was that he survived D-Day.

He had joined the RAF at the age of 17, much to his mother's disapproval, but he was determined and went on to serve in 5022 Airfield Construction Squadron, arriving in France with the task of building an airstrip from scratch in the fields to support the armies' advance in the early days of the liberation. As he said to me at a service at Exeter Cathedral, "The one small problem was that nobody told us the Germans were still occupying the area. There were a few bullets flying around but nothing too serious."

I went on to meet him at Portsmouth 80, the commemoration for the 1944 landings, and in Beer church hall where he had attended a similar but obviously much smaller marking of the turning point of the war. I had a long chat with him over a cuppa and he let out a few further memories, always playing down his part in the events of northern France.

Two things will always stick with me from our conversations, and both seem to sum up the humour and determination of the man to enjoy life. I asked him how close he got to the enemy and did he see action?

He replied with a smile: "You'll never suffer constipation when you have been shot at by a Messerschmitt."

I and his small audience collapsed into giggles. The other unfailing memory came from Portsmouth and was captured on television. Two national television crews had been searching for him as he was one of the honoured guests. Finally, he appeared on the main concourse behind his 'walker', beetling along at a fair pace.

One of the crews tried to stop him for an interview but he was late for his lunch with King Charles. The slightly breathless presenter held a brief conversation with him for about 30 yards. Then the other tele-

vision outfit gave chase, they fell by the wayside pretty quickly as Joe accelerated into the lunch area... he was only 101 at that time.

Back in 1985 I was tasked with making a documentary on the anniversary of the Devon and Dorset Regiment and so I set out to find the very last survivors from the Devons from the First World War. I am sorry to say that I have lost those interviews and worse still, I have forgotten the names of the three survivors that I uncovered. What I can remember was that one stole a bicycle and rode off to war at the age of 15. He saw the entire 1914-18 field of action but admitted he was constantly worried that he would be arrested for the cycle theft when he got home.

He told me of being blown up by a German trench mine and entombed in the mud of Flanders, which ironically possibly saved his life that day. His remaining trench comrades



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D-Day veteran Joseph Randall meeting the Royal Marines at Beer Church Hall

above ground died in a hail of bullets from the subsequent German attack. Another gentleman who was 102 at the time was living with his daughter in Kent. I spoke to her and asked if I might have a quick conversation with him.

The answer... "Not at the moment, I've just put him to bed," she said rather curtly. "He's fallen out of an apple tree."

I had so many questions but decided to leave that family argument well alone.

The final survivor lived in Exeter and was a real joy to talk to. He had been captured by the Germans whilst injured. I had a bizarre conversation about the finger on his right hand which the German doctors had operated on using pig skin as a temporary graft. He remembered the pigs in the ward and wondered why they were there... he found out... first hand!

The final story of age and a different time came from 1980. I was at a rather wine filled lunchtime bash in Torquay with a friend of my parents. The phone rang and the voice at the end announced he was a duty sergeant from a Cardiff police station. He inquired of our host if he was the next of kin for a William Trent Willcox (name changed to protect the innocent... or not).

"Yes, that's my uncle. Oh dear, has he been found?"

"Found...no... arrested, yes!"

There then followed a rather one sided conversation from a quite irate officer of the law describing how William Trent Willcox had decided to spend the afternoon in a pub, drinking heavily and holding the bar with tales of his military adventures. By kicking out time, he was a little inebriated and a little punchy. The police were called and one officer got thumped in the scuffle.

"Where was this?"

The sergeant named a central boozier in Cardiff.

"Impossible, he lives in Newport in a rest home... that's miles away."

The sergeant confirmed that the matron from the home in Newport was on her way to collect him.

"The main problem is, he won't give us his proper date of birth. He is not on our records. He keeps saying he was born on April 12th 1875."

"Yes, that's right... 1875!"

There was a long silence at the end of the phone.

"So, he is 105 and he did see action in the Boer War?"

"Yes, he was too old for the First World War but still joined up, just lied about his age."

There was another long silence followed by a muttered "we will not be pressing charges"... and the phone went dead. Later 'matron' phoned to say that William was now under house arrest... again.

Different times and different people. We should all learn a little from their experiences and salute them for passing them on. I consider myself very lucky to have met them.