

LAWRIE WILSON remembers his father Thomas Wilson's experiences in the First World War, and his own experiences growing up in Dumbarton in the Second World War

Thomas Wilson

I have drawn these notes together based mainly on the limited conversations I had with my Father (Thomas Wilson) regarding his service in the Royal Flying Corps during World War I.

During the 2nd World War my father (who was in the age group liable for service in both World Wars) was unfit for military service but was required to register as a fire fighter. Perhaps 3 nights per week he would be required to patrol on gantries built over factory roofs, to spot any fire hazard before it could take serious hold. During this period there were frequent morale boosting parades, including fire fighters. All participants were encouraged to wear their service ribbons. In a shop one day (I would have been about 10 years of age) were new medal ribbons for sale. My Father indicated that he was entitled to wear a particular ribbon and purchased it. He never wore it nor did he participate in any public parade. I never thought any more about this until one day, having crossed the old Erskine Ferry my father pointed out a large area of land and indicated that this was the site of a large army establishment (now demolished) called Georgetown from which most Scottish soldiers were demobilised. He then stated that there had been "some trouble" there as a rumour had swept through the camp that instead of demobilisation the men were to be sent to Russia to fight the Bolsheviks.



My Father never elaborated on this but although he was honourably discharged in 1919, I have never found any Medal among his papers. Some years ago I wrote to the relevant authority regarding his medal and got rather a brusque reply to the effect that any medals which should have been issued had already been distributed.

When my Father was "called up", although he was working in Dumbarton, he joined up with his pals from the Mauchline/Kilmarnock area as that was where he had been born and spent most of his short working life. Sadly all these friends were killed at Gallipoli and his life was probably saved as a result of him volunteering for the Royal Flying Corps. In the immediate post second world war years my Father would take me (during a time of petrol rationing) in his old 1938 Ford 8 to Kilmarnock to support the football team. In addition he would visit three ladies, about his age, who lived together in the village of Hurlford. As I got older I asked him who these ladies were. He explained that they were the girl friends/fiancées of his friends who had been killed at Gallipoli. We continued these visits until stopped by my father's ill health.

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He told me of an incident which I assume occurred during training. An enormous amount of spoil had to be moved several miles and dumped over the top of a very high worked out quarry. This task was to be carried out using spade and wheel barrow. The whole establishment was paraded and from several hundred men about 80 were picked out. In order that the process would be seen to be fair, the men selected were to be picked by the Padre. This was duly done. However the Padre was Church of England and the men picked out all belonged to various non-conformist churches. Most men partly stripped off but my father opted to keep his tunic on. When he reached the top of the quarry he dumped both the load and the barrow over the edge and then he "disappeared".

This story bears out my own experience in National Service. No one would object to dirty and unpleasant tasks provided they were allocated on a fair basis. Where this was not the case, if an opportunity presented itself, "squaddies" would try to "lean back" on the authorities even if the "leaning back" caused more effort than the original task.



My Father flew in Bristol Fighters as the gunner \ mechanic. These planes had a forward facing machine gun, the bullets being timed to pass between the propeller blades and a swivel machine gun for the gunner in the rear seat. The mechanic was responsible for all engineering matters on his plane and he flew in the plane he serviced. The exception was the fixing and adjustment of ailerons (known nowadays as 'flaps'). This was done by riggers. On one flight when the riggers had made an error, the plane took off satisfactorily but flew with its nose pointed towards the ground. After some considerable difficulty the plane was landed at a strange airfield where sand bags were placed at the rear of my Father's cockpit. However, after taking off for the home base the sandbags could not be prevented from sliding forward making the situation worse, so they were tossed over board. Back at their own airstrip, it took many attempts to land but eventually the pilot was successful.

At intervals aircrew were given a 'rest'. During these periods one of their duties was to collect crashed air craft. My Father spoke very little of this but clearly had a particular distaste for this task. I suspect that, on occasion, the crashed aircrew had not been removed from their craft when the ground crew were sent to effect a collection. No mention was ever made to me regarding parachutes but from research (Ralph Barker - the Royal Flying Corps in World War 1) it is clear that parachutes were, quite disgracefully withheld from air crew because it was felt they might be encouraged to abandon their machines prematurely rather than struggle back to base. It is interesting that in the pocket of his flying suit my father carried a text from the Padre referring to the 'Everlasting Arms' beneath him.

Fire was a great fear among aviators. Some Bristol Fighters had Sunbeam engines and some were fitted with Rolls Royce units. I cannot remember which but one of them had a bad reputation for catching fire.

Growing up in Dumbarton

My mother died a few days after I was born, and so I was brought up by my aunts, her two elder sisters and their husbands who also lived in Dumbarton. I sometimes stayed with my father at his flat. I remember hearing war declared over my father's old Kolster radio and then going to see my aunts that Sunday afternoon; the sky was so overcast one of my aunts decribed it as 'black as Egypt's night' and a sign of judgment.

I remember helpng in the building of our air raid shelter in the garden and my father fitting a wooden door to it, and a coke stove; coke was easily available from the nearby gas works. After we were issued with gas masks I remember wearing them as we walked in line round the school playground.

School boys collected and exchanged shrapnel from our anti-aircraft guns. ^[1] On the nights Clydebank or Greenock were bombed the glow in the sky from burning buildings could be seen from Dumbarton.

In the days following the attacks on Clydebank there was an almost continuous procession of trucks full of the 'bombed out' going somewhere West.

Everyone had a plentiful supply of bags filled with sand. When incendiary bombs were dropped everyone (except me - I was too young) ran about throwing sandbags on top of them. The "Dig for victory" campaign meant that almost every square inch of garden ground was cultivated. I can remember clearly my uncle shouting at the people trying to extinguish the fires to "mind my cabbages". A house nearby took a direct hit from an incendiary bomb.

I remember my Father coming to my aunt's house after he was bombed out of his flat to check that I and the others were safe. During raids my cousin, who had volunteered for the Merchant Navy but was rejected, stood at the shelter door giving a running commentary. For the first time I saw his mouth move but no words came out. He had spotted my Father, in his old, leather, motor cycling coat approaching our shelter and thought that it was a 'downed' enemy airman. I saw the same thing happen to my cousin the following night. In the clear moonlight he saw a landmine with a parachute getting closer and closer to the Gasometer about a quarter of a mile away from us. When the explosion came, although our shelter had no windows, it filled with a blinding light and we all felt pain in our ears.

A few days after the Dunkirk evacuation, barriers were erected in chest high concrete. Traffic had to zigzag; and huge concrete pipes were nearby, ready to block off the roadway completely. What struck me as an 8-year-old was that all the men manning the barriers were in civilian clothing with arm bands showing the letters L.D.V. (Local Defence Volunteer) the forerunner of the Home Guard. Only one had a firearm, the others having pick axe handles.

My primary school windows were bricked up to a substantial degree, with the remaining glass area crisscrossed with a sticky tape. Buses had windows half blacked out with black paint, the remaining clear sections being covered with blinds after dark. Vehicles had very restricted head lights (apart from the Americans who were allowed full lighting), and if left unattended, had to be immobilised by removing the rotor arm from the distributor. Due to his failing health, my Father had a pass to use his old car but only between his place of work and residence along with a nearby filling station where petrol coupons were required. The only time he broke this restriction was to take me as near as possible to the bombed Clydebank. I can well remember the utter devastation.

August 2018