

# INTERVIEW

with

Byron Frederick Davies

# Introduction

Frederick Byron Davies is my great great Uncle and my mummy's great uncle.

He is 91 years old. He will be 92 in July.

He lives in Epsom, Surrey near the racecourse and is not allowed to leave his house at the moment because of Coronavirus and we cannot visit him either.

He lived through the Second World War and has lots of stories to tell and so I spoke to him over the telephone and asked him these questions. I enjoyed our chat and I think he did too.

# 1. How old were you when the War started?

When the War started in 1939, I was 11 years old.

It was a very sad time as just before the War started, my mother had just died. My father had died earlier so my brother and sisters were orphans.

# 2. Where did you live?

I lived in South Wales but went to boarding school in Canterbury, Kent. The school was called St Edmunds School, Canterbury and I went there as a clergy orphan because my father was a vicar.

### 3. Where did you go during the War?

I was at my boarding school, St Edmunds. The War had been on for about a year and a half and the Germans had beaten the British and French at Dunkirk. One night when we were all in the school's air raid shelter the Headmaster appeared and told us we were all going home tomorrow morning for three weeks but after that, we were all going down to Cornwall.

I went home and had a three week holiday with my family (I stayed with my aunt and uncle) and then I was put on a train and went down to the south coast of Cornwall with other school children from my school. We stayed in two hotels down there for term time. When term started, we stayed down in Cornwall and there were no exeat or half terms. We were able to go home during the holidays and I then used to go to South Wales.

I remember the train journeys very well as travelling from Cornwall to my home used to take a whole day. I had to take a train to Bristol, then change stations twice, then a train from Bristol under the River Severn to Cardiff and then another train from Cardiff further west.

## 4. Did you like it and what was it like?

I did not like the food as it was awful! We had rations and so we were limited to one small chocolate bar a week and we had to eat powdered egg which the Americans gave us. I think you added water to it and then it just became solid into one mass.

I did not like the gas masks we had to carry around with us when we travelled anywhere. I remember being fitted for my gas mask and once fitted, we had to go into a van. They locked the door and turned on the gas and we were left there to see if our masks worked! I don't know what the gas was.

I also cannot say that I liked the War as there were many things you could not do. We could not go on the beaches as barbed wire had been laid down and I remember our first term at the School, the Junior School master, who was an ex-soldier, blew up the paths leading from the beach up to the school as there was a real worry about invasion.

However where we were, it was very interesting. When we first came down to Cornwall we were surrounded by Indian troops and they lived in tents down in Cornwall. Then some British troops appeared and finally the American troops.

The Americans were mainly in the South West of the country and this was in preparation for the invasion of France. The Americans were in the South West as they would attack the western most beaches of France and the British were mainly in Kent as they would attack the most easterly beaches.

I remember my friends and I used to watch the Americans practice in their lorries called 'Ducks' that could drive on land as well as go into the sea.

When I started at the School, I was 11 but once you turned 14, we had to get ready because when we turned 18, we had to join either the army, navy or airforce to fight. So, one day a week, you were dressed in uniform. We had rifles and machine guns and we used to practice firing the machine guns from the top of the cliffs down onto the beach.

## 5. Could you go home?

We went home on holidays and it was really exciting as we would not be home for nearly three months at a time.

We were put on trains and it would take me all day to get home. I would have to take a train from Cornwall to Bristol. Then change stations twice in Bristol, then go from Bristol to Cardiff under the River Severn and then from Cardiff, further west. There were sometimes a lot of delays and I spent a lot of hours just standing on railway platforms.

The rail journeys were interesting. As we left Cornwall we would pass a bridge near the Naval Port and we could see all the battleships. The trains from Cornwall would also be very full of soldiers as Cornwall had one of the biggest ports in the War and was 40 miles from Plymouth. If you got a seat in a carriage, which could seat 8 people, you could listen to the grown-ups talk.

## 6. Did you make friends?

I made lifelong friends. I was in the Junior school till I was 14 and several of the boys from the Junior School came from South Wales as well, so I was friends with them.

When I was 14, I became great friends with a boy from Leicestershire and we shared a room together. We both were sporty and loved our sports and were best friends. He was a very lucky boy as he was not a clergy orphan like a lot of the boys at the School. He had a rich godmother who used to send him money and a mother who used to send him tins full of homemade cakes and treacle tarts.

He used to share his cakes and treacle tarts with me and I tell him that this really saw me through school. He is still a great friend of mine and we still visit each other. He now lives in Yorkshire.

# 7. What did your brother and sisters do in the War?

My brother, your great grandfather, Ieuan, was 7 years older than me. He was 18 when the War started and had already left my school. As our mother had died, he went to school for a year in Swansea to pass his exams to become a doctor. He then went to University in London (Kings) for medical training. He was not called up to fight as he had to look after the rest of us because we were orphans. He did join the Home Guard in London. After the War, he joined the Royal Air Force.

My elder sister, Gwyneth, was at a college in North London to become a teacher but was in hospital and then had to return to Wales to recover. One foggy day in London, an American lorry knocked her down and damaged her face and legs. After she recovered, she returned to London to continue her training.

My younger sisters, Aldwyth and Beth, were at school in North London called St Margarets School in Bushey. They were not evacuated and were there throughout the war.

## 8. What did you do on VE Day?

I was at school and on VE Day we were given the day off and we went to the Cinema. This was a real treat as normally we weren't allowed to go to the Cinema. We were very excited to see a film and I still remember the film. It was called Bathing Beauty. I think we saw it twice as in those days we could just stay in the cinema.

Everyone was happy as it meant the end of the War and rather than think we had to fight when we turned 18, we could think of our futures as we hadn't really thought about it much till then. There was a real sense of relief all round.

## 8. What message would you give a young person like me?

All I can say is, the experience of war did not allow you to do what you wanted and we were limited in many aspects. There were limits on travel, food and freedom. You get a lot of challenges and things come up that you do not expect. However stand up to the challenge and conquer them. Face any problem and tackle it. Be resilient and get on with life and face it.