

## Harold Gwyn Davies 1939 – 2018

Royal Navy – Communications branch  
5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Light Infantry – Territorial Army

### Penrhyn-coch Ceredigion



### West Wales Veterans Archive

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### Description

“Gwyn” was born to a family with seven children. His mother Doris, and father Mark had survived World war two, living in a rural and isolated part of the Golden Valley near the Welsh border in Vowchurch, Herefordshire.

Both of his brothers would go on to complete national service in the Army. However, Gwyn was looking to expand his horizons a little further and decided the Royal Navy was his gateway to the world. Despite some reservations from his mother Doris, Gwyn got his wish and on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1954, aged 15 years, Gwyn arrived at the Royal Navy boy sailor training school, HMS Ganges, to begin a career in the Royal Navy.

It soon became apparent that Gwyn had chosen correctly. He threw himself into the daily routine of physical training, scrubbing floors, polishing brass and learning what it takes to become a sailor in the Royal Navy. He would go on to serve at shore bases throughout the United Kingdom and spend many years at the Royal Navy base on Malta in the Mediterranean Sea. Gwyn loved Malta and later in life he revisited the island to complete the Malta Marathon race. At HMS Ganges,



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Gwyn found he had a talent for Morse Code and Signals. This led him to join the Communications branch and reach the rank of Petty Officer.

Gwyn saw active service in the Suez War of 1956 and his ship HMS Decoy came under fire from Egyptian Tanks, which were dug in on the beach and firing at the flotilla of Royal Navy ships.

Following specialist training, Gwyn would later experience what life was like as a Submariner.

Over twelve years of service, he would serve on a variety of fighting ships and support vessels.

Not wishing to be separated for long period from his wife Patricia, in 1966 Gwyn decided to leave the Navy. With the addition of a baby son the family returned to Hereford. Gwyn began a career in the Post Office, followed by Portering at the BUPA hospital in Hereford. As the 2000's arrived Gwyn and Patricia, along with their grandson Shaun moved to Aberystwyth in West Wales. Gwyn began working as a Porter at Aberystwyth University. He was well known for his can-do attitude and soon became a regular feature on the local roads and country lanes where he could be seen enjoying his favourite past time of long distance running.

In later life, Gwyn bravely battled Parkinsons disease and Asbestosis, a condition he'd contracted due to exposure to Asbestos during his time aboard Royal Navy ships. Gwyn passed away at Plas Cwm, Clarach in 2018.

## **Early life**

Gwyn was born at the family home, a small cottage in the village of Dorstone, Herefordshire. He attended Fairfield high school, Peterchurch. His upbringing was typical of the time. A large rural family doing their best to get along on a limited income. Gwyn and his brothers were often sent out to hunt and catch meat for the dinner table. The boys would go out into the woodland and catch Rabbit, Squirrel and Pigeon. Any one of these animals would be accompanied by vegetables from his father's garden. Gwyn recounted his brothers and himself spending most of their time outdoors, foraging or getting up to mischief.

## **Early years in the Royal Navy**

HMS Ganges was the training establishment which trained boys for service in the Royal Navy. Gwyn spent the first 15 months of his career at HMS Ganges. He initially learnt the rudimentary of how to become a Seaman, before training to become a Telegraphist Communicator (TO or OT). There were in fact two sides of the trade, Telegraphist and Signaller. Gwyn would go on to become dual trained. The year 1954 was to become a year of controversy for HMS Ganges. More boys ran away from the school during those twelve months than at any other period in its history (176). Corporal punishment was widely used. The Sunday Newspaper, the News of the World obtained an admission from the Navy that 69 boys had been "caned" that year. However, Gwyn was not one of those unfortunate boys and his records confirm he performed consistently at a very good level.

Gwyn's first draft came on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1956. It was to prove a significant one. His first voyage was to be on board the Daring class destroyer HMS Decoy, captained by Captain PJ Hill-Norton (Later to become Admiral of the fleet).



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## **Active Service**

In late October 1956, the Suez canal was captured by Egyptian forces under General Nasser. The United Kingdom government responded by readying a military force and tasking Royal Navy ships to the area. HMS Daring was deployed alongside two other Daring class Destroyers, the Duchess and the Diamond. As the crisis turned to all our war, HMS Decoy lined up in the gun line supporting the allied landings of Royal Marines and soldiers from the Parachute Regiment. Operation Musketeer, the ill fated attempt by British and French forces to retake the Suez Canal zone, had begun.

Sometime early on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956, Gwyn, 18 years of age, remember being on the deck of the ship and looking out towards the beach. His crew mates were puzzled at large splashes that were landing in the water near to the ship. The Daring's Captain soon arrived on deck and took possession of some Binoculars from a Junior officer. Looking through the Lens, Gwyn clearly recalls the words that followed: "The Cheeky Buggers are firing at us. Right, we'll soon put a stop to this." At this, the Captain ordered the guns to action and the Decoy launched a salvo from her .45 and .40 guns, aiming at the small humps on the beaches. The splashes stopped in quick time and the crew cheered the captain's quick decision to engage a squadron of Egyptian T34 Tanks, dug in on the beach.

However, the eventual outcome of the Anglo-French operation was not to be a positive one and a week later, the war ended as fast as it had begun. The excitement for Gwyn and his crew mates was over but valuable experience had been gained. Gwyn was awarded the Suez campaign medal for his part in the war.

Another notable incident Gwyn experienced aboard HMS Decoy occurred nearer home, when it ran aground in Portland water. A malfunction in the steering gear was found to have caused the accident.

## **Further training**

Having received favourable reports during his time aboard HMS Decoy, Gwyn was selected for further training at the Naval Signals school, HMS Drake, Devonport. Here he cross trained and over the following 12 months qualified as a Telegraphic Operator TO2 and Signaller (A) and (B) grade.

## **Back to Sea**

On 30<sup>th</sup> September 1958, upon graduating from HMS Drake, Gwyn was posted to the Mediterranean fleet. He reported to the Bay class frigate HMS Surprise. This ship was docked at Valetta in Malta. So began Gwyn's love affair with this famous Island. HMS Surprise had been converted for use as a temporary royal yacht and as such, she benefitted from a specially fitted viewing deck at the stern. She was adopted as the Flag frigate and Gwyn was to spend the next 14 months serving as a junior Signaller. Gwyn and his crew mates made good use of their time off and would explore the Island on bicycles whenever they could.



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## **Back to training**

In February 1960 Gwyn left Malta to return to the UK for a period of five weeks at HMS Drake. This was quickly followed by a return to sea, with the home fleet. HMS Grafton was a Blackwood class frigate which provided Gwyn with an opportunity to gain some experience operating new equipment and using newly acquired skills learnt at HMS Drake.

In April 1960 Gwyn reported to the RN combined signals school at HMS Mercury, followed by familiarisation training with Wireless equipment and combined naval air operations at RAF Goldcrest in west Wales. The Goldcrest posting was an official limited time attachment LTO, which clearly increased Gwyn's expertise in maritime communications.

## **Return to Malta**

Having spent over a year shore and sea training in home waters, Gwyn returned to Valetta, Malta on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1961. He was now a qualified TO1 Telecommunications Operator First Class.

The eight months between July 1961 and March 1962, offered another interesting opportunity for Gwyn to expand his experience in maritime communications. Having qualified on Naval air communication practices at HMS Goldcrest, Gwyn found himself attached to RN depot ship HMS Narvick. This ship was originally designed as a landing ship (Tank) LST. It was a busy vessel. Throughout 1957 and 58, sailing from Malta it had joined the Royal Navy task force supporting the testing of Britain's nuclear deterrents at Christmas Island.

## **Supporting RN maritime operations**

On 29 May 1962, Gwyn transferred over to the flag ship of the Mediterranean flotilla HMS Ausonia. He was retained on the staff of the ships shore base, HMS Phoenicia. Here he was to support the fleets effort to ensure Her Majesty's Submarine fleet was adequately supplied, maintained and deployed to counter threats east of the Suez.

HMS Ausonia was a relic of the Second World War and had undergone several refits. The last refit occurred at Devonport, and she was recommissioned then sent to Malta to join the Mediterranean fleet. The extensive refitting of the ship caused quite a stir back in Whitehall, where it was revealed that more than 1.4 million pounds had been spent upgrading her. When Gwyn joined the ship, she was a busy heavy fleet repair ship, supporting the UK 5<sup>th</sup> Submarine division fleet. This involved undertaking repair tasks and offering accommodation for the Submariners, who had temporarily lost their berth.

This posting afforded Gwyn the opportunity to experience Submarine operations. Mixing with Submariners night and day, his work took him onto the boats. However, he was never totally convinced about long voyages in the oceans beneath the waves and didn't feel compelled to request a transfer to the Submarine service.

## **Farewell Malta**

The beginning of 1963 was to be the year Gwyn said goodbye to the island he had fallen in love with. He'd depart with many happy memories of voyages around the Mediterranean, visits to Sicily, Taranto and much further afield. However, it was the time he'd spent exploring Malta and meeting the locals that would lead to him returning with his wife Patricia, many years later.



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Gwyn began the familiar course of further training and qualifying to a higher grade at HMS Drake and Mercury, before a draft onto the crew of the Tiger class conventional Cruiser HMS Tiger.

### **Anti-Submarine operations**

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1963 he arrived on board HMS Tiger. By now he was a highly skilled Petty Officer in the Communications branch. The ship was designed to operate for up to two weeks in a nuclear environment, countering the threats in the deep oceans. The Tiger class cruisers were an effective deterrent to counter Soviet Submarine incursions into territorial waters and to protect HM ships operating in theatres east of the Suez Canal.

In 1963 the Royal Navy was experiencing great difficulty in crewing HMS Tiger with Sailors experienced enough to operate her advanced systems. With a 200- line automatic telephone exchange, no doubt Gwyn was welcomed aboard. Indeed, the Tiger class cruisers were all experiencing the problem of crewing up the anti-Submarine cruisers. This problem impacted upon Gwyn, as his contribution to solving the problem was to be two limited time (LTO) postings. Having learned to operate the new equipment and qualifying in anti-Submarine warfare, Gwyn sailed with HMS Tiger for 6 months. He gained practical experience of her advanced communications and undertook the training of junior operators to function effectively.

In November 1963 he transferred across to sister ship HMS Lion and began a similar role aboard the cruiser. His service on board HMS Lion was destined to become an interesting and varied deployment. Gwyn joined the ship, after it had returned from around the world voyage to Australia. Having replenished in early 1964, she set off to join major NATO exercises. This deployment, working in a fleet alongside vessels from over 8 NATO nations, allowed the Royal Navy to test naval teamwork at sea, effect shipping protection and undertake humanitarian operations. HMS Lion was deployed to counter the enemy Submarine threat and was a major player in Operation Teamwork. Gwyn enjoyed managing his team of Telegraphists and Signallers operating aboard a class leading cruiser on the biggest NATO maritime exercise since 1952.

Two notable events occurred later that year.

On 4<sup>th</sup> September, HMS Lion attended the opening of the Forth road bridge, spanning the Firth of Forth estuary in Scotland. This was a major event, with HM Queen Elizabeth Second opening the bridge and millions of viewers watching on television. An estimated crowd of 50,000 to 100,000 people lined the roads and banks to get a view of this massive bridge. However, a thick mist shrouded the estuary on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the bridge was hardly visible. Just as the Queen began making her speech the sun began to shine through the gloom and slowly but surely the bridge appeared. Sitting proud underneath her span, with pennants flying, the shape of a 12000-tonne cruiser, gradually began to emerge. This was HMS Lion and Petty Officer Gwyn Davies was on board, dressed in best uniform. It turned out to be a day Gwyn would remember well and not just for all the pomp and ceremony. With the bridge declared open and people on their way, ships began passing under the bridge. However, the fog proved to be a stubborn enemy and began to thicken again. A RN frigate, HMS Lowestoft moved to pass under the bridge, but unfortunately in the mist, failed to see the Lion dead ahead and broadsided her. The Frigate's bows collided with the Lion's hull, causing extensive damage to the Lowestoft. Although, both ships suffered damage the Lowestoft would require several months of repairs at nearby Rosyth dockyard. No doubt Gwyn was as surprised as the rest of the Lion's crew to be rammed by one of Her Majesty's Frigates but probably not as perturbed as Admiral Twiss who was flying his flag on the Lion when rammed by a fellow RN warship!



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Having undergone repair HMS Lion set sail for Malta and Gwyn was pleased to briefly return to the island for the independence celebrations which took place on 21<sup>st</sup> September. Gwyn was to remain on the cruiser until October, whereupon another spell ashore at HMS Goldcrest beckoned.

### **Northern Ireland**

In February 1965 Gwyn was posted out to HMS Sea Eagle, a shore base on the west coast of Northern Ireland at Londonderry, now known as Derry. The base formed part of Ebrington barracks and was home to several Army units, as well as branches of the RN and RAF. Ostensibly the Navy's activities centred around anti-Submarine warfare and schooling naval personnel in this area of operations. This posting re acquainted Gwyn with his earlier experiences of HM Submarines. As a CY(A) senior Signal man, with extensive experience of anti-Submarine warfare operations. He was able to contribute greatly in the training of younger and less experienced Sailors assigned to Maritime Communications.

### **Marriage and discharge**

Whilst on home leave, Gwyn met 16 year old Patricia, a country girl living with her brothers, sisters and Mother in the Golden Valley, Herefordshire. The couple quickly fell in love and married. Patricia moved to married quarters on the base and in August 1965 Patricia gave birth to their first son, Andrew. This heralded decision time, as Gwyn was nearing completion of his initial 12-year term of engagement. The couple decided to move back to Hereford and Gwyn's time in the RN came to an end.

### **Territorial Army**

After leaving the Royal Navy, Gwyn found employment with the Royal Mail and began a career delivering the country's letters and parcels throughout the county. However, his time in the military didn't end altogether. Gwyn made many friends in the Royal Mail and in the early 1970's along with a group of pals, joined the local Territorial Army regiment, the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Light Infantry, based in Hereford.

The connection to the Light Infantry had been established by Gwyn's older brother Roy, known as Denzil. Denzil had completed two years national service with the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry, serving in Cyprus, as the EOK, Turkish and Greek people fought for control over the island. A brother-in-law, Lesley, was also serving with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Light Infantry.

Gwyn enjoyed the annual training camps, learning weapons handling, patrolling techniques and ambush skills. One annual camp he recalled was on the Isle of Man, where despite it being summer, inclement weather made for a challenging and rather damp fortnight under canvas.

A growing family, financial pressures and becoming a Special Constable led to Gwyn no longer being able to commit the time to attend the weekly training evenings. He decided to leave the Territorials in the mid 1970's.

Gwyn went on to have three children, with his son Andrew going on to serve 22 years with the Light Infantry and his youngest son Neil joining the Royal Air Force, serving for 6 years.

Gwyn remained married to Patricia until he passed away with his wife by his side in July 2018.



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He remained proud of his service in the Royal Navy, became a member of several service related associations. He attended remembrance services every November, latterly with his son Neil.

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