

Unbreakable bonds in war and peace

As another wartime association fades away, **Steve Snelling** talks to two Norfolk veterans about the unbreakable bonds of friendship and loss.

It was, perhaps inevitably, a time for reflection and remembrance about lost youth and lost friends in what had been the greatest and most intense drama of their long lives.

Jack Dye needed no diaries nor faded photographs to stir the memories of a wartime odyssey only just drawing to a close. They remain vivid and vibrant, unsullied by the passage of time.

"When I go through all the names I can picture them immediately," he says. "We were a family, bonded together by a regiment and shared experiences."

Such a sentiment strikes a familiar chord with John Lincoln.

"It's hard to put into words," he admits, "but those few months in which we lived, fought and died together made a profound impression. It coloured my life and left me with a lasting affection and respect for the men of all ranks I served with, because I know what they did, what they went through..."

Together with their friend and former medical officer 'Pat' Bennett, these two ex-Royal Norfolk veterans were enjoying a last hurrah, a final reunion of the D-V Club, a 66-year-old association of officers from the regiment's 1st battalion who had served in and survived the hard-fought North-West Europe campaign from D-Day to VE-Day.

Of the 111 officers who experienced some of the most bitterly-contested actions of the second world war only eight remain and of those just three were fit enough to attend yesterday's concluding roll-call in the Norfolk Club.

Joined by an assemblage of guests and relatives, they trooped across to the regimental chapel in Norwich Cathedral for a service of remembrance and celebration of a remarkable fellowship that has endured seven decades of war and peace as personified by the small, elderly band of D-V survivors.

"It's terribly sad to have to call it a day but time marches on," says Jack. "We've lost two more of our members this year and I really didn't want to be the last one. But when you think how long we've been going we've not done too badly."

Indeed, they have not.

In fact, both Jack and John, president and secretary respectively, have much to be thankful for when they reflect on wartime experiences that not only gave rise to lifelong friendships but helped shape their futures.

Jack exchanged a career in banking for the life of a professional soldier, rising to command the 1st battalion of his regiment



Warime memories: Jack Dye.

before retiring as a major general.

"I found that soldiering was what I wanted to do in life," he says. "I can't believe how fortunate I was to find something that I've enjoyed all my life to the full."

John, on the other hand, returned to 'civvy street' where he enjoyed success in the shoe industry as sales director of a local company before going on to chronicle the services of his old unit.

"The Army gave me a sense of discipline and self-confidence," he says. "I learned about responsibility. My responsibility was to the 30 men in my platoon. You lived with them, you fought with them and you trusted them and they trusted you and that's a feeling that still exists with those few of us remaining."

In many ways, their survival to ripe old age is every bit as extraordinary as the D-V club's longevity. Both fought with distinction, gaining the Military Cross for bravery under fire, and both had their service interrupted by injuries sustained in combats in which all too many of their close friends and men under their command died.

"One remembers people who you were talking and laughing with in the morning and were dead in the afternoon," says Jack. "But the intensity of warfare was such that you had no time to mourn, no time for tears. Only later, in the quiet times, do you think, 'Oh God, so and so has gone'."

Even now, John can't help marvelling at his good fortune.

"When people ask me how I am, I say 'I'm very happy to wake up every morning'," he smiles. "In other circumstances, I might not have been able to."

Having joined the battalion after the heavy fighting in Normandy, where it was reduced to about 40pc of its original strength, John was wounded in Germany

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during the battle for Kervenheim that cost the 1st Royal Norfolks five officers and 37 men killed and 124 all ranks wounded.

Less than five weeks later Jack's war was brought to a premature end. He had already survived one serious wound since coming ashore on D-Day when he was felled by a burst of machine-gun fire in the midst of a fierce street battle. His life was saved by a company sergeant major who took a flame-throwing carrier through a storm of fire to shield him.

"But for him," says Jack, "I wouldn't be here. It's as simple as that."

Both then, and at Kervenheim, the battalion was led by Lt Col Peter Barclay, one of only two commanding officers during the unit's 11-month march from the beaches of Normandy to the north German port of Bremen. Much-decorated and much-admired by officers and men alike, the ebullient and charismatic Barclay was instigator and first president of the D-V Club. He remained its driving force and guiding spirit for the rest of his life.

"He was an extraordinary man in action, quite extraordinary," recalls Jack with genuine affection. "He wasn't cut out for peacetime soldiering because the rules weren't made for him, but he had a tremendous personality. He could dominate a room full of people without even having to raise his voice. He had a certain aura and, of course, he had that great love for the regiment. He was forever telling us we were the bravest

and the best..." The inaugural reunion, attended by 28 former officers, was staged in October 1946 in Norwich's Royal Hotel, just a short walk from the scene of the club's closing chapter. Since then, it has been variously held in London, Felixstowe, Colchester and the officers' mess at the Territorial Army centre in Norwich.

Distinguished visitors have ranged from major generals to the commanding officer of the regiment's successor unit, the 1st Royal Anglians, but among the most notable guests of honour was Peggy Baker, wife of a former wartime company commander and a woman instrumental in fostering the ties that have endured long after so many of the club's former members have faded away.

"Peggy was marvellous," recalls Jack. "She wrote news bulletins, based on letters she received from other officers' wives and officers themselves, and every month throughout the campaign she sent them round to all of us. It ensured that everybody, those serving and those in hospital recovering from wounds, were kept in touch with each other and what was happening."

More than 60 years on, those newsletters survive as a testament to the friendships forged on the battlefield and sustained in the decades since. Gossipy in tone and relentlessly cheery, they are filled with a pride and poignancy that reflect better than many an historical record the intensity of shared experiences that conspired to forge so special a bond.



The way it was: The long march to victory, left, and, above, Royal Norfolk officers enjoying an alfresco break from the action in September 1944.

much for the ordinary Norfolk soldier!" Vernon Howe spoke of ecstatic crowds so dense that his "car could only crawl along". By the time he reached the centre of the town the place was "a teeming mob of people of all ages, crying, singing, shouting and cheering".

Among those correspondents quoted was a certain John Lincoln who "narrowly escaped being pulled out of the Jeep by the excited crowds". Eventually, he managed to make his way to a market place thick with people. "There I shook so many hands and wrote so many autographs that I had... writer's cramp!" he noted.

To many such scenes seemed to make all the sacrifices, all the blood, sweat and tears, worthwhile. As Freddie Crocker so aptly put it in a letter cited by Peggy: "Those who were killed before we got here really did achieve something."

By then, that ghostly roll call was already a long one. Included in it was Old Norvicensian Frederic Fitch whose death in action shortly after the landings was reported in one of the earliest newsletters and has left an abiding memory of friendship and loss that seems to lie at the heart of the D-V fellowship.

"Freddie was a great chum of mine," says Jack. "He'd been wounded and captured in 1940, escaped and returned to the battalion. He'd been action where I hadn't prior to D-Day and you're always worried beforehand how you will perform the first time. I remember Freddie saying, 'Just pretend they're not there, pretend it's not happening'... I thought that's not a bad idea and copied a great deal of what he did."

"And when he died, killed by a blast grenade that left him virtually unmarked, I remember standing at the end of his grave on a lovely summer's evening in June. A slight breeze had come in off the sea and as I stood there the blanket blew from his face and it was as though Freddie was asleep. I stepped forward and tucked it under his head. They're the sort of things that stay with you."

For some, reflections on remembrance began even as the wearying war drew to its close on the German coast. John has a lingering image of a concert lit by candles and hurricane lamps that was followed by a small gathering of company officers.

"We just sat there talking, primarily of people we had known and had lost," he recalls.

Such memories are unlikely to fade any more than the bonds born of the life-or-death intensity of shared combat experience are liable to be broken by the passing of one more wartime veterans' association. For as Jack succinctly put it: "When you join a regiment it's for life. It's not like any other profession. You are bound together forever. You remain friends and you never forget..."



Friends in war and peace: Above left, Jack Dye, third from the left, with fellow officers Ian MacGillivray, Eric Cooper-Key and Bobby Parfitt in June 1944. Left, an early D-V reunion at the Royal Hotel, Norwich, left to right, 'Wiggy' Wiggins, Harold Beeson, George Dicks, John Lincoln, Bryan Balsom with Trevor Harrison in foreground. Above right, John Lincoln in uniform during the second world war.

Typical of the myriad humorous vignettes is this extract from Bill Brinkley's letter: "We had a jolly good landing on 'D' Day, better than we had on any exercise. Quite a large number of us had dry feet, while nobody was wet above the calf... Humphrey Wilson is very fit, also Eric Cooper-Key. No matter what is going on, Eric's hair must have its daily application of hair oil! Apparently he has arranged for supplies to come into the beach-head on suitable dates!"

Another of Peggy's newsletters featured graphic descriptions of the liberation of Helmond in Holland, a high point in the battalion's advance to victory which has resulted in an enduring association between liberators and liberated.

"Our welcome was quite astonishing," wrote Hubert Holden, "in fact almost too