

Interview with Idwal Parry – 13th November 2008

School and early days

Idwal, can you tell me where and when you were born and a little about your family?

I was born in the village of the Cymau, near Wrexham in 1924. Our family, mother and father and at that time I had two brothers and one sister. I went to school in a little village called Abermorddu, which was about roughly a mile and a half down the road. I stayed there until I was about 12 and the family moved to Mold, and by this time the family had increased, there were six of us, there was four boys and two girls completely. I stayed at school in Abermorddu, no I beg your pardon, in Mold, I went to school in Mold and in 1937/8 my youngest sister caught diphtheria, very bad, there was a bad epidemic around and they couldn't get her into hospital, all the hospitals were full. So she had to stop home and they would not let us go to school, so my younger brother and myself could not go to school and that was from just before Christmas 1937. I was leaving school in the April of 1938 at 14, so I was only 13 and I never went back to school, with this diphtheria business. I could have gone back about 2 weeks before the finish but it wasn't worth going back to school for 2 weeks so I stopped home.

Early Working Days

Was school far away from where you lived?

No, in Mold, it was walking distance. I went to work in a bakers in Mold.

What was the name of the bakers?

Stanley Bakery in Mold. I worked there for a year and my wages at the time was 10 shillings a week. So after a year in there I thought to myself well I'm going to ask him for a rise. No he said I can't afford to give you a rise he said. So I said oh well in that case you'd better keep the job. I walked off, I went to work at a tin plate works down at the bottom of Mold on the way to Rhydymwyn.

What was the name of that company?

I can't remember, we just called it the tin plate works and I don't know the name of the firm at all. The factory area is still there, just on the way out of Mold on the right hand side, just before you go over the little railway line, I don't know if you know it as you go along there. I'd been working there about a week and of course the factory was very old, it had things been shut down since the first world war, and things weren't operating very well, so they said well there's no work for you now until this is repaired. So I was walking down the street in Mold and the man I used to work with at the bakers said I thought you'd gone down the tin plate to work, I said yes I did but it's shut down. He said why don't you come back with us then he said. I said yes but I'm not going back there for 10 shillings a week. So he said oh I'll have a word with the boss. So he had a word with Mr Roberts and he came back and said he'll give you 12 shillings a week, so I was only getting 14 shillings week at the tin plate and I thought well I suppose it's a better job than in the tin plate, so I went back. I stuck it for a year and then I said to him well I want a rise now like, you know, I'm 16 now. He said oh I can't give you a rise he said we have to pay stamps on you when you are 16. So I said in that case well I'll leave, so I left again. I came to Rhydymwyn for a job.

So when you left the bakery, was that before or after the start of the war?

The first year was before the war but the second year the war had started. The war was in 1939 wasn't it, let me think, the war definitely started when I was in the bakehouse, I do know that.

The war must have started because they didn't open Rhydymwyn until 1939.

In 1938 I was 14, so in 1940 I was 16. That is when I went to Rhydymwyn and I got a job in Rhydymwyn.

Can I take it back there, you were only 14 to 16 but were you aware of the moves that were going on overseas, where did you find that out, was there radio, there was no TV? So how did you find out things like current affairs?

Even when I was in the Cymau as a young boy we used to have the daily paper and I was very interested in the daily paper, even when the Italians invaded Abyssinia. Then the Spanish civil war. I was very interested in it and also we read a lot about

the movement in Germany with Hitler coming into power. Everybody thought he was a bit of a joke. When he paraded his tanks I can remember people saying ah they're only cardboard, you know these tanks going through the streets and all that. They were making jokes about it and about Mussolini as well, of course Mussolini was a joke but Hitler was a different kettle of fish.

But most of this information came from newspapers?

Yes, we had wireless, we had a wireless.

Was that 2 LO?

No there was a fair range on them, Home Service, if I can remember rightly and I know we used to listen to Radio Luxembourg more than anything, there was the modern bands and all that on Luxembourg until my dad came home and then he wouldn't allow that kind of thing you know. We had a lovely radio, and then we came to Mold and of course there was a radio there. The house we had in Mold had all the mod cons. Anyway I went to work in Rhydymwyn and when I went in there first I went on a gang laying the water mains.

Starting at Rhydymwyn

This is from the Birkenhead Water at the site?

Well there was nothing, they were just laying the mains, I didn't know anything about where they were going to make the connections or anything, we were just laying the pipes down. My job at first was melting the lead for them to pour in the joints and we used to knock the joints up.

How big were the pipes?

About 12 inches I suppose if not more. Quite big pipes, about 12 inch, there were smaller off-pipes about 6 inches going off, but measurements I can't actually remember and then there was some very big ones as well. Roughly about 12 inches they were. I used to melt the lead and pour it, they had a band clip going around, we used to make a little cup of clay and pour the lead in. I did that for I don't know how

long, I can't actually remember how I finished up in the office with the civil engineers. I was given this job, what they called them then the jame boy???

When you went there working on the pipes, was that for J B Edwards?

Yes, J B Edwards, yes.

What were your wages then when you went there?

Well, this is another interesting thing, my dad worked there, my dad was a bricklayer, and he was working there and I don't know but very likely he got me the job in the first place. He had a car and he was waiting for me to come home on the pay day and I got in the car and he said did you get paid alright lad, and I said yes dad but I got more than I thought, I got 1 and 7 pence an hour, he said 1 and 7 pence an hour well that's not right he said you should have had about a shilling an hour I think it was for a normal boy at that time. He said give me the packet so I gave him the packet, he said I'll take it back in the morning. The next morning he went to the office and told them that I'd received this pay packet and he thought it was too much. They said oh yes Mr Parry we have given him a labourer's wages. You see there were so many people coming on the site that they couldn't keep check on them all so they gave him a labourer's wages until they found out exactly what you were. If you were a bricklayer and only given a labourer's wages well they made the wages up but if you would just like a boy like I was, they took the money off them. He said do you know what you are the only man that's come in and told us we paid them too much. So they gave me another tuppence an hour for that so honesty pays.

Did you get your wages and go home and give them to your mother?

Oh yes.

She gave you some back?

Oh yes she gave me some back that's exactly how it went on.

Was that not only you but all the kids and your dad?

Oh all did the same yes. That was a general rule.

Did they provide you with clothing, because a lot of people they did that?

No, nothing at all.

So you worked on the pipes for a bit. When you were putting the pipes in were there any buildings there at all, what buildings were they building?

I don't think there was any permanent buildings that I can remember, they were all just being built you know. I'm sure there was no permanent buildings there, those big concrete ones you went in they were working on them. I can remember that well enough but the small ones the other side of that fence, I cannot remember any of them being there.

I think they were built in 1941, so that would explain it.

The exact date that I left there I can't be too sure but it was definitely before 1941.

So in 1941 you would be 18?

18 yes. I know I was there definitely when I was 17 because I got my driving license when I was 17 and I was showing all the lads it. That was an event then.

So did you leave at 18 to go in the forces?

No, there was a man who used to come round to our house with bread and he knew I'd been in the bakehouse and he said did I want a job. I knew that the pipe laying in Rhydymwyn was coming to an end, or so I thought, and I thought well I'm going to be soon out of a job here, so when he said do you think you would like to come and work for me, so I can't remember if I went to see him or he came to see me. I said yes that's alright but how much are you going to pay me? I was earning about £3 10 shillings in Rhydymwyn if I remember rightly, a princely sum in those days, a lot of workmen weren't getting that kind of money. So for £3 10 shillings I went to work in the bakehouse in New Street in Mold. I stayed there until I was called up into the Marines.

So every job you got a bit more money?

Yes well it's all about money isn't it?

It's a great compliment that is.

If I'd have stopped in Rhydymwyn I don't know whether I would have been there much longer or not but the engineer, the civil engineer I was working with, his name was Mr Howarth. A very nice gentleman and he wanted me to go ('cos his part was coming to an end) back to London with him, he said well you come with me and I'll see that you will become a site foreman, so I was considering it and I said to him, I don't know I want to go in the Army, like all the boys then wanted to go in the Forces.

Was part of it that you didn't want to leave home?

Well it's possibly that, I can't remember, as all the young lads then, we all wanted to go in the Forces. So I said oh no I want to go in the Army. He said well you'll have a good job, but I didn't know what kind of digs or anything else I would have had in London, I've no idea but he wanted me to go down with him. So with this job I had in the bakehouse I was going round with a van delivering bread all over the district again, I stuck it until I was called up in the Marines in the beginning of 1943.

So you were nearly 20 before you got called up?

I was just 19. I'd had my 19th birthday a couple of weeks before I was called up.

To backtrack to Rhydymwyn, you started off laying the pipes, how long did that go on for?

I reckon about a year and then I went with the civil engineer and I reckon I did a year with him.

What was the civil engineer's name – that's if you can remember?

Mr Howarth – I'm pretty sure his name was Mr Howarth.

And what did you do with him at work on the site – what type of work?

Well civil engineers have theodolites and dumpy levels as we used to call them and we used to go round taking levels for how far deep they had to go with the pipes and all this kind of thing and making straight lines. I don't know what they were, pegs, we used to pegs in every so often and make sure they were in a dead straight line. We used to set up the dumpy levels and the theodolites, we used to set all them up for them. Then he would just come and take the measurements.

Did you see the river before it was filled in and then when it was filled in?

Now this is what puzzled me, I think it must have been filled in before I went there, because the canal was there when I was there as I explained to you, the canal was there. I told Mr Howarth as I was walking along there, yes it is a very nice canal but this is not going to contain all the water when the snow melts. Oh yes he said it has all been calculated for and I just shook my head and I said no it won't you know. And of course, that spring time the whole site was flooded out wasn't it and his comment to me when he saw me next was – we should have listened to the locals shouldn't we. So I said yes you should have done but it was a bit late anyway. So that was that and as I said I spent a year with him and I quite enjoyed it with him he

was a very nice man and we got a lot of information from him and he used to let us do the levels, all these dumpy levels. He would check it afterwards but he used to let me do it, it was quite interesting. You'd read things upside down and at first it would take some getting used to.

You must have been involved, if you were involved with the civil engineers, with the levelling of the site. They must have had dips in there which they had to level out – do you know anything about that?

Well, not really, his main concern was working out where the trenches went for the pipes, because they used to dig a trench, his main concern was getting the lines straight and the depth.

It was into limestone as well?

Well I didn't see any of that, nothing serious anyway.

So the stuff you dug and put the pipes in was just normal soil to you?

Normal soil yes, not marshy like we saw yesterday – no it was quite dry.

With pipes, how deep did you go down roughly?

About a metre I reckon.

So the main water pipes went down about a metre.

It could have been a metre and a half perhaps but I would say a metre and a half.

Can you tell me about the floods? How you experienced it and so on and so forth?

The next morning I came in and the whole place was like a lake.

Right at the top, all the way down the valley?

Yes, we used to come in, not through the main entrance where you came in, we used to come in through the Antelope. Walked down there, and the railway track was there, we used to walk along the railway track because it was easier to walk along the railway then walk down the road, because the road was churned up with lorries and dumpers, we used to have a lot of dumpers flying around there and it could be all churned up so we used to walk along the railway track.

So you just turned up one morning and that was it?

That was it, there was no railway track to be seen. It was amazing how quick it went down though, when you said 9 weeks you know.

I thought they lost production for 9 weeks?

Ah, lost production for 9 weeks, yes but there was no production there then was there?

There was some, I understand they were bringing stuff down from Randall, taking it to the Antelope field and taking it out of the tanks in the Antelope field and loading shells there.

Well I certainly didn't see any of that.

And that was definitely before 1941 and they had some machines for making shells actually on Antelope but I mean they didn't use them.

I can't remember anything except the building contractors you know.

You started off at 1 and 7 an hour and tuppence for the honesty bonus?

I think it was either a shilling or 1 and a penny an hour – it dropped down to that but I got the extra tuppence. So I finished up with about 1 and thruppence an hour something like that and the other boys were getting about 10 pence an hour because they had to be deducted tuppence until they paid back what they owed them.

Did that improve, - your money in the two years you were there?

Oh yes, it kept on that tuppence extra all the time I was there.

So you finished up earning how much an hour?

Well, sometimes we were doing overtime and that kind of thing, I can remember coming home one week with £7 which was fantastic money. I can remember working all night, when they wanted to get something done quickly.

So you lived in Mold and you used to have to go to work each day, did you go by bicycle or bus or?

No I don't think there was any bus service at all. There was a train but I found it was just as easy to go on a bike. By the time you had walked from our house and to the station you're half way to Rhydymwyn on a bike.

So this is along the main road and into the Antelope entrance?

Yes.

Did you work shiftwork or was it just normal working hours?

No just normal hours unless they wanted overtime.

The Social Life

So in those wild and woolly years, 1939 to 1941 and you being a mature person of 16-18 what was your social life like, what did you do socially?

The chief interest was down in the snooker hall or the billiard hall as we used to call them in them days. Cinema, we used to go to the cinema, we were there on Saturday night. There was the dance at the Assembly Hall.

So did you get a lot of people there to the dance? Was it packed?

Oh yes, all youngsters you know.

So did people come in from around Mold?

They'd come from the little villages around on a Saturday night. It was quite a big night out.

So what about the pubs or didn't you go out to the pubs?

No I didn't go to pubs, no.

So did your dad have some input on that about you shouldn't drink?

Well they wouldn't have had you in the pub, you had to be 18 and they wouldn't let you in so we didn't go. Anyway if we'd have gone in the pub and my dad was there, because he used to go and have a drink, it wouldn't have gone down very well I can assure you.

What about clothes and things like that? Was there just shops in Mold and you went and bought clothes there?

Mold had quite a nice little shop. But if you wanted a new suit you'd go to Chester or Wrexham. Wrexham chiefly.

By train or bus?

Bus to Wrexham. Train to Chester, there's no line from here to Chester now but there was in them days.

Can you remember the blackout and how it affected you?

Yes I remember when it first started, about a week before the war started. They had us put blackouts up and the cars all had to blacken the lights and only leave a bit on. Then they brought out these masks, tin masks that went over, they were made by Hartley the jam people, because the name was the same sign as you see on the jam jars.

So you had a gas mask?

Oh yes we all had gas masks.

So did everybody have them and taken them around with them or did they pay lip service to it?

Well, they were supposed to have them when they went into Rhydymwyn but most people kept their sandwiches in them. Silly thing to do but that's how people were. We thought we'd never want gas masks you know and there we were going into a factory that was going to make gas. I think on the whole most people very likely did have them.

Did you smoke?

Yes, most people smoked.

What did most of them smoke because there was the popular brands around, its quite interesting?

Terrific load of brands of cigarettes around in those days. Of course they were cheap.

Most people would smoke things like Woodbines and Players?

The young lads would be smoking Woodbines yes. The men could afford better ones and were buying Players.

And the managers smoked Players?

Yes, the range of cigarettes was terrific and better cigarettes than today I think so.

Joining Up

So you are 18, you are living at home, you are reasonably well paid and your mum is generous to you, and you are enjoying your job, you must have been because it's your first job and all of a sudden right out of the blue you are in the Army. Just tell me about the way that happened, about the way you called up.

Well, normal call up, you got notification of call up about two years before the war started. When you were 16 or 17 you had to do some kind of Home Guard or Fire

Brigade, APS we used to call it air raid precaution, you had to do some of these things. I joined the Home Guard and I was in the Home Guard for 2 years.

You were directed to do that were you?

Well you could pick which one you wanted, there was the Air Force one the Air Cadets, you could have gone in the Air Cadets, but I fancied going in the Home Guard. It was a very good Home Guard in Mold, a very good one.

Did you have a uniform?

Oh yes.

And a rifle?

Oh yes.

The officers, were they local businessmen or professional soldiers?

There was always a professional Sergeant there. Our units were the Royal Welch Fusiliers and there was always a Sergeant there but the officers there I think were local ones, there was one from Mold that I knew, one from Loggerheads, only 2 or 3 there were you know. It was a very good company.

So how many times did you meet a week?

Twice I think, you had so many hours to do, I can't remember how many. You had to do these hours, they'd tot them up and if you slipped up they'd be onto you.

Did you find that an enjoyable experience to be in the Home Guard? Was it happy.?

Very much so we enjoyed it.

People get an idea about the Home Guard, that it was pompous, pushing people around?

No, no, it was happy go lucky crowd. Very well disciplined actually, very well disciplined. Oh no there was no bossiness whatsoever. Everything was quite professional in its way.

Did you have to do guards on things and fire watching and things like that?

No we didn't do fire watching, we did guards.

Guards on what?

Only on the drill hall, there was a lot of stuff in there, the machine guns and anti-tank guns. Then we'd go on manoeuvres every Sunday, you'd have to go out and we'd be out all morning on a Sunday. We'd go up the mountains somewhere.

Did you ever go up to Cilcain- to the decoy site there?

Not that I can remember we didn't, I can't remember going to Cilcain.

So you were there before the large numbers started to fly in there to populate it, because there was 2200 in 1943?

After I left there, I can't remember when, but I'm pretty sure it was 1941, I don't think it was 1942, I never had anything to do with the ????????????, I never gave it much

thought to be honest with you, it was, I'd left there and as far as we young lads were concerned, I was out of it, so Doris would know more about it than me.

When you were called up, you were given a warning beforehand, you were graded beforehand?

Two years beforehand you had to go and register and I never got called up for a while. The next thing we had to do was go for a medical. I went for a medical in Wrexham and they passed you A1, A2, C1 whatever, A1 was the top and I was A1 so I thought I won't be long before they have me but they didn't. One of my friends he worked at Broughton aircraft factory and if you were in there you had a job to get out of it. But he was called he went in the Navy, he said I'm going in the Navy next week. I said, you work in Broughton, yes he said I got out, I said how did you do that? He said he wrote to a place in Queen Street in Cardiff, he wrote there and got called up. So I said oh give me the address. So he gave me the address and I wrote off there, within a week I'd got my call up papers.

You were just told to report somewhere and sent a train pass or something?

Yes, I went to Deal, that was the Marines Headquarters in Deal.

That must have been a heck of a journey with the trains in those days?

It was quite a journey yes.

You'd go what Chester?

Chester to Euston, then across by underground to London Bridge or something like that I think we went to, I can't remember now but I finished up in Deal, did my training there.

So you finish up at Deal, so you went in your civvies you were just 18, and nice chaps came out and said welcome to the Marines did they?

That's quite correct.

And the first thing was they gave you a lot of kit did they?

Yes, they didn't dump everything on you at once kind of thing, you went round one morning and they'd give you part of it and another day, then you went in this big hall where all the uniforms were and they'd just look you up and down and give you a pair of trousers and throw it at you and the jacket, they'd throw everything, what size shoes do you take and a pair of boots would come flying at you. It was that kind of, well they had so many they couldn't fuss around too much, there was so many joining up at the time.

So all the people that went with you must have come from a lot of different backgrounds?

Oh yes, all over the country, different backgrounds all over the country, Scots lads we had, Yorkshire lads.

Were people distressed by going away from home and joining up or were they all gung ho – we're going to fight the Fuhrer?

Well, everything was taken a matter of fact, you just did it and there was no humming and haahhing about it or I don't want to come here, no it was all just taken normally, but they were very good I can't complain.

Did you find it hard?

Yes at first, but we'd done general training with the Home Guard, so it came easy really and as I told you the Sergeant who was from the Royal Welch Fusiliers, well

believe me that was a blimmin good infantry battalion and they were very good with training and so when I went there, I found it quite easy kind of thing, and we'd fired all the guns, I'd fired rifles and machine guns and everything before I went in there, so it came quite easy for me.

So you must have had an advantage over the other people?

Well we did, yes.

You'd done square bashing, which is a physical effort for a lot of people?

They didn't even know how to march, it was comical to see some of them. But they coped when they got round to it very quickly. Well you had to get round to it quickly.

How long was your training roughly?

10 weeks something like that?

So what happened after 10 weeks?

We went to Portsmouth, the main barracks in Portsmouth, Eastleigh in Portsmouth, that was like a staging post, everybody was posted from Portsmouth, you went here, there and everywhere. I went down to South Wales, a place called Dale in South Wales, near Haverfordwest. I spent about 15 months there I think.

Doing what?

On a Fleet Air Arm station and I was on a transport section and we used to fuel up the aircraft, go around the different places where they'd want them and go out to town and get stuff to bring in and all that kind of thing. Yes, very interesting, very good yes.

You weren't at Dieppe and places like that, that sort of Marine then?

Well I could have been.

You were pleased to miss that one I would have thought?

Yes but that was one I did miss. Actually funny you mention that, the first thing I was supposed to have was to go the south coast on the top of the hills with the radio van. They used to take radio messages from across the water, but I don't know what happened, I was told that was where I was going but then I didn't I finished up in Dale. Well we had a good time in Dale. That's where I met my wife down there. She was in the WRENS down there and that's how we met.