



A CELEBRATION OF WAR

the drummers drum
 let war commence
 tumpity-tump tumpity-tump
 persons die
 persons cry
 tumpity-tump tumpity-tump
 this, said the leader, is their finest hour?
 their finest hour? their finest hour?
 their finest hour?



THE PAST REVISITED

Sometimes going back is a mistake ? I know that now.

After 54 years I returned last month to the German port of Wilhelmshaven, to the U-boat barracks that surrendered to a Royal Naval detachment in May 1945, the day the war ended in Europe. I went back expecting to relive the triumph and excitement of history being made as I had experienced it through the eager eyes of a young sailor. However, as an older and wiser man, what I saw and felt seemed strangely different.

Royal Naval Party 1735, attached to the Polish army, comprised 130 sailors dressed in uniforms of khaki and navy blue. Toting unfamiliar rifles and bayonets, we set out on the long trek through Belgium and Holland and eventually reached our objective, the German naval barracks in Wilhelmshaven. From here the searching U-boats had harried Atlantic convoys for five long years of war ? but not any more. After hours of bitter fighting the garrison surrendered and were given ten minutes to gather together what they could carry before being marched off to prison camp.

History doesn't tell of the looting done by members of victorious armies of the West, but they loot nonetheless. Apart from what the garrison had been forced to abandon, U-boat crews, still at sea, had left their personal belongings packed in their quarters.

We looted the barracks; we kept what was valuable and we contemptuously destroyed everything else. Months afterwards, tired dispirited sailors, discharged from the German Navy, returned hopefully, walking and thumbing the long miles to Wilhelmshaven, anxious to gain possession of any pitiful bits of their property, the letters from loved ones, many now dead, the treasured photographs, the clothes, the jewellery, the personal belongings left behind for safety, and they were turned away from the gates. Victory was total and surrender was unconditional.

In the Mess that night in May ?45 we drank many a toast to our great victory. A Polish officer, a university lecturer in Warsaw before the war, made a stirring speech in which he thanked us for the part we played in the liberation of his country. ?Thank you, my brave friends,? he toasted, ?you have liberated my beautiful Poland. Today we have finally weeded out everything that was evil in Europe and now its people can live for ever as free men and women.? We cheered and refilled our glasses. ? Long live Peace!? we toasted. ?Long live peace in Europe!?

I thought of that Polish officer again last month when I stood there alone in the empty Mess. Since that great night long ago, allies have become enemies and enemies have become allies and I wondered if, wherever he was, he'd been happy to watch his beautiful Poland being handed over to a merciless Russian regime when the victorious Allies carved up the spoils of war. Was that what we fought for?

And as I walked the empty roads that once throbbed with the flush of marching boots, all now eerily silent, small doubts troubled my mind. These gaunt deserted buildings, had they really been a highly important military objective? But of course they were, I reassured myself, they must have been. I had helped bury three of my mates: Jock and Bob and Peter, as well as seven other comrades, in shallow graves beside the long road that stretched from Antwerp to Wilhelmshaven. Had they all died for nothing?

We had marched hard and fought hard and died hard to get there in 1945. And hadn't we weeded out everything that was evil in Europe? So of course it was all worthwhile! But as I looked around the empty barracks, I felt somehow... cheated... unsure.

Where was the peace in Europe that we bought with blood and toasted with champagne? In Bosnia? Kosova? Cechnya? Or even Northern Ireland? And suddenly I was no longer sure ? not really sure. However, there is one thing I now know for certain! Going back was a mistake. Sometimes the past is best left in the past.



Submitted by Tony Brehony who served in the Royal Navy.

Top of Page