

Biography

John Philip Gelly ISO

5TH January 1914 – 24th December 1980



2nd Lieutenant J P Gelly (1940)

Father was born at Boscombe, Hampshire, now in the County of Dorset; the younger of two children. His father, also a John (a tradition since 1850), was a Master Tailor and served in the First World War as a Lieutenant until 1922, when he was discharged. Father's Mother, Sarah, was a housewife and died of Osteoporosis when he was 21, which had a great effect on him for the rest of his life.

Father was admitted to Boscombe Council School on the 4th April 1921 and left in June 1928 at the age of 14years 6 months with the following Head teacher's, Mr E Povah's testimonial of "*An Intelligent boy of more than average ability and one in whom I have every confidence*".

During October 1928, father became a Temporary Boy Messenger with the Post Office, then part of the Civil Service. In August 1930 he accepted the position of Temporary Postman-Messenger, then became a Postman at Southampton on 15th January 1933 with a weekly pay of 21/6d equivalent to £2.07¹/₂ in today's terms. Having studied at night school, he applied for and was successful in obtaining the position of Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist in September 1933, relocating to Weymouth until October 1935 when he was transferred to Woking. In February 1936 he was relocated to Harrow and finally in May of that year to Wembley, where he rented a room from a Mr & Mrs Kingdom.

In June 1937, father applied to the Home Office for the position of Clerical Officer and was successful. At about this time he joined the Territorial Army and was assigned to the 358/90th Field Regiment RA, London, and attained the rank of Sergeant. He was called up for active service two days before war was declared. Later, father was sent to 121st Officer Cadet Training Unit where he passed out as a 2nd Lieutenant in August 1940.

Between the years of 1940 to 1942, father was assigned to various Field Regiments namely, 2nd Reserve, 96th, 915th Defence Battery and eventually from the 6th Field Regiment to the 4th Defence Regiment RA., a coastal defence regiment at Hastings where he met his wife Lillian, who was a Corporal in the Women's Royal Air Force.

In September 1942 the 172nd Field Regiment RA (Territorial Regiment) was formed from Coastal Defence Units (3rd, 4th and 5th). The Regiment consisted of 153, 154 and 155 Field Batteries, each armed with eight 25 pounder field guns. Now a 1st Lieutenant, father was assigned to 'E' Troop of the 155th Battery.

In January 1943 the Battery left Liverpool for North Africa on the SS Jean Jadot, which was torpedoed some two weeks later by German submarine U-453, commanded by Freiherr von Schlippenbach. Father, together with some 390 men, spent several hours in the Mediterranean before being picked up by HMS Verity which disembarked the survivors at Algiers.

After some weeks, replacement guns, ammunition and other essential items were received and the convoy made their way overland to Bone (now Annaba), to join with the remainder of the Regiment, which then proceeded to Beja and on to Hunt's Gap, Tunisia. Eventually the 155 Battery was ordered forward to an outpost some 12 miles North of Hunt's Gap, a place called Sidi Nsir, where they together with the 5th Hampshires were told to hold the position.

As 'E' Troop's Gun Position Officer, father ensured that each of the four gun pits were correctly positioned and slit trenches dug. His Command Post was some 50 yards to the rear from which he would direct the guns fire. After the battle he was transported to a Prisoner of War Camp at Fontanellato in Northern Italy. Following the British and Italian Armistice, in September 1943, he with 500 other prisoners made their escape, the greatest of the war, as the Germans were re-capturing escaped British POW's and transporting them to camps in Germany. Father and five brother Officers made their way south and eventually split into two groups of three. After some 430 miles and 34 days of evading German forces, with luck and the help of local Italians, the party took shelter in a cave from the cold and driving snow near the village of Roccamorice, in the Apennines Mountains, where they were saved from certain death by a blind Italian Farmer, his wife and sons.

When father returned to England he was attached to the 4th Field Training Regiment, then attended the 123rd OCTU, passed out as a Captain, and sent to GHQ 2nd Echelon BAOR in Belgium, eventually, he was discharged from military service in January 1946 and returned to the Civil Service.

During his career in the Home Office, he gained experience in the Explosives, Naturalisations, Police and Civil Defence Divisions and eventually became the Director of the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKWMO) – a Senior Civil Servant (Home Office) position, which carried an equivalent RAF rank of Air Commodore due to the department's involvement with the Royal Observer Corps - until his retirement in January 1975. In January 1974 (New Years Honours List) he was invested with 'The Companion of the Imperial Service Order' (ISO) which limits holders within the United Kingdom to 750 members at any one time.

In 1952, a national newspaper, "The News Chronicle" ran a competition entitled "Let's Go Back"; father was one of two people to win a trip back to Italy. His story told of the bravery of an Italian

Farmer, Michele Conte, his wife, Maria and their sons in saving him together with Ken Heck and Dennis Brett from the snow covered mountains and the German Patrols near Roccamorice.

Troop photograph - E Troop, 155th Battery,



**E TROOP R/172nd FIELD REGIMENT R.A
SEPTEMBER, 1942**

Back row: Gnrs. Wright, Fullbrook, Gething, A. L., Derbyshire, J., Hale, Chapman, Pte. Raynor, Gnrs. Melsom, S. J., Tanner, Coombs, Hardy, J., Cox, E. J. M., Penfold, Bracken, R.; *Second row:* Gnrs. Cook, J., Breadon, Wiffen, Johnston, J., Floyd, Burton, A. V., Breadon, A. L., Walder, Berrett, S. P., Hughes, H. F., Shepherd, A., Read, Thompson, A.; *Third row:* Gnrs. Jenner, Jones, A., Webb, Lockwood, Bennett, Woods, Cottrell, L/Bdr. McDowell, L/Bdr. Borles, L/Bdr. Jones, F. L., Gnrs. Hughes, H. A., Miles, Judd, Cheeseman, Tullett; *Front row:* Bdr. Robinson, L/Sgt. Yates, L/Sgt. Lucas, Sgt. Noon, F., 2/Lt. G. S. Stavert, Lt. J. P. Gelly, Capt. S. T. Bormond, 2/Lt. P. G. King, B.S.M. Green, S.T., Sgt. Pearson, Sgt. Poulter, R., Sgt. Armstrong, Bdr. Jennings.

Father's Medals and Orders:



1939 - 45 Star



Africa Star



France and Germany Star



Defence Medal



War Medal
1939 - 45



Territorial Efficiency Medal



The Imperial Service Order
1st January 1974