



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

The Friends of Gibraltar Oral History Project (1930 to 1970)

Transcript - Interview of Norman Jones by Jerry Robinson

Track 1

Norman Jones was born in 1940 in Gillingham, Kent, where he lived for most of the war until 1947 when he and his parents moved with his grandparents to Ramsgate. He subsequently moved from Ramsgate to Maidstone. Eventually in 1958, he got fed up with school, where he was doing his 'A' levels, so tried five times to enlist in the RAF as aircrew but failed the tests. Instead Norman enlisted in the Army, and entered the Royal Engineers. He undertook his training at Farnborough in August 1958, and then underwent training as a surveyor at Chatham, specialising in military railways. Instead of working on the large military transport terminals in UK or Germany, he was posted to Gibraltar to work on the tunnels. He was posted to Gibraltar in 1960, aged 19 years old.

JR: Work on the tunnels in Gibraltar:

Norman explains how he was the only surveyor on the Rock. On his arrival, his unit was just about to commence work on the Keightley Way Tunnel and his responsibility was to do all the survey work on it – **he recalls a tale about how his OC instructed him to mark a red spot on the rock face where the tunnel would come out, which fortunately it did within 9 inches.** The purpose of the tunnel was to provide access to the Nutfield Swimming Pool and Recreational Centre. He also did the survey work on the Dudley Ward Way Tunnel, which runs from Europa down to Monkeys Cave and Calata Palace, near Catalan Bay. He was involved in the first 200 foot of the tunnelling before being posted to Germany.

Norman describes tunnelling in Gibraltar. He stated that it was relatively easy being stable limestone with little movement. However, he comments how he encountered a problem when attempting a tunnel to Rosia car park. **He explains that the Rock of Gibraltar actually comprises two pieces of stone with a seam of clay in between which proved**

near impossible to cut through. They tried using high powered water hoses borrowed from the local fire brigade, but the seam kept collapsing and they had to back fill when they reached the foundations of a military married quarter.

JR: Knowledge of the tunnels in Gibraltar:

Norman explains how being the only surveyor he had full security clearance to go all the Rock, and consequently three years unlimited access to all the tunnels. He states that there are various estimates as to the amount of tunnels within the Rock but personally believes that there are near 30 miles of them, covering the original siege tunnels of 1772, the Second World War tunnels and those constructed since the war. He tells a tale how about 8 years ago there had been a fall of rock in the Dudley Ward Way which killed a couple of people in a car. He stated that since the withdrawal of the REs from Gibraltar there had not been any regular inspections of the tunnels, whereas in Norman's day he used to do a full inspection of the whole tunnel system once a month. Norman talks about the REME chambers, which was one of the largest unsupported caves in Europe. He stated that it had all the required facilities and could even rebuild vehicles in there. He stated that the main hospital chamber was located in what is now St Michael's Cave. One of the first jobs he had was to clear out old wartime Nissan huts in the caves in preparation for the Offices' Mess Summer Ball of 1960 and put in the first of the concrete structure (steps) which are in use today. He talks about how the military had been stripping out the hospital chambers for some time, but in his day there were still beds, wards, operating theatres there and how in its time it was fully functional, with its own generator, although it was never used.

JR: What other interesting chambers were there?

Norman talks about Lower St Michael Caves and how he became a guide. He stated that it was found in 1944 by a group of Canadian tunnellers, who were driving through another entrance to the hospitals, when a skip fell through the floor into the undiscovered caves. It was then used by cavers for some time before they discovered how interesting it was – he also mentions how there was a small lake in the caves with a six inch walkway to one side.

JR: Knowledge of the 'Stay Behind' Chambers:

Norman describes how he had seen one of the 'Stay Behind' chambers – it was at the South Face which looks out across the Straits. They wondered what it was at first. He never managed to get in it, but had located the spy hole but couldn't find the entrance as it has clearly been bricked up and well concealed.

JR: Subsequent postings to Gibraltar:

Norman returned towards the end of his service in 1978-80, when servicing as a SMI (senior instructor) with the TA. Whilst with them he return twice to Gibraltar, where on one occasion he undertook a survey of the Monkey Caves Water Distillery. There had been local labour problems and there was a risk that the civilian distillery staff might go on strike. As a contingency to bring in the military, so he was asked to produce an operating manual for the distilleries. He was told to make his work very obvious in order to deter the locals from taking industrial action. [- a copy of the plan is included as supporting material]. The strike never happened and the military were not required to stand in. He explains that the distillery was near the water catchment areas near Catalan Palace, Catalan Bay and the Dudley Ward Way tunnel. It pumped in sea water which was distilled. Norman then talks about water rationing and how ships were used to bring in fresh water. He talks about how in the late 1960s the military were responsible for all the facilities and essential services, such as water and electricity.

Track 2

JR: Recollections of first going to Gibraltar in 1960:

Norman reflects how at the age of 19, he his first posting was to Gibraltar. He went out by troop ship, the 'Bewara' , which took four days to get there It was April-May so was very pleasant arriving there and how he immediately fell in love with the place. It comments how he had a great three years on the Rock. It was his first real experience of the working part of the Army (rather than training) and that the work as the surveyor was complicated and interesting. He cites how the Keightley Way tunnel was a £2m project, so they had to get it right.

JR: What was life like?

Life as a serviceman in Gibraltar was good. The unit was very good and there wasn't that much regimental routine. They worked shifts so were either working on shift or off duty, enjoying oneself. He recalls how it was a fun place to be. The border was open and visiting Spain was enjoyable.

JR: Where did you visit in Spain:

Norman recalls how one could cross the border into Spain once every 24 hours. Initially, he used to visit La Linea because you could walk into town. It recalls how it was very poor and poverty stricken area – it was the first time he had seen such poverty where people living in packing cases on the beach and how bars were made of draft wood and packing cases. However, they started during his time to build bars and start the tourist trade. Norman had a car, so used to go up the coast, which unlike nowadays, comprised just small fishing villages. He recalls how they used to camp on the beach and swim and get cooked fish and bread very cheaply.

JR: What was it like crossing the Border:

It was alright and the Spanish were quite reasonable. He comments how one used to leave a carton of cigarettes on the rear seat which after checking disappeared. He recalls how the ferry 'Mons Calpe' used to go across the bay to Algeciras.

JR: What was the social life like in Gibraltar?

Norman stated that there was always plenty to do with a Corporal's Club, Families Club, Rugby Club in addition to the NAAFI. He was friends with people who worked at the military hospital and was also the projectionist at the local cinema. As a result, Norman, got to know a lot of people. Norman found the local people generally friendly, but on one period, recalls how there was a lot of anti-British feeling. He believed that had Franco not closed the border the British Government might have allowed the Spanish access to the Rock in exchange for access to the naval base at Cadiz. Norman describes how in 1960 there were still Gibraltarians living in Nissan Huts and that a lot of building was going to construct more housing. He recalls how there were about 20,000 military personal based on the Rock: two RE units, an infantry battalion, several large Royal Navy components and the RAF North Front with Shackletons.

Track 3

JR: What happened when fleets arrived?

They used to come into Gibraltar in groups. It was agreed that the American and British Fleets would avoid coming in at the same time and that the British Mediterranean Fleet would only come in half at a time, to reduce the strain on the local population. He recalls the Trocadera and Trafalgar Bar being very popular and remained open until midnight. It was however worse when the Americans came ashore as there would be conflicts with the British. Norman talks about knowing when the Americans would arrive as shortly beforehand Russian Whalers would come into the bay and moor up – they were clearly spying on the American Fleet. He recalls the presence of the Spanish pre-1940 destroyer (*Smoky Joe*).

JR: Army Accommodation:

Norman recalls that to begin with, in 1960, his unit was accommodated in South Barracks in six men rooms on three floors, but they were subsequently to Bona Vista Barracks, where they were in huts. However, due to being the Surveyor, he was housed in a bungalow at Little Bay along with security guards, so was right alongside the Nutfield Pool. Norman liked swimming, sailing, canoeing and playing Rugby. He did not participate in the Ceremony of the Keys, but recalls how other Royal Engineers did.

Returning to Gibraltar in 1976 attached to a RE TA Squadron. Norman recalls how he was struck by how the former garrison had reduced in size. There was no longer an Infantry Battalion stationed there. Instead the Royal Gibraltar Regiment was considerably larger than before and located at Bona Vista Barracks. He recalls how reducing the UK military presence in Gibraltar, while increasing the local force had begun was back in the mid-1970s. Norman stated that the biggest difference he noticed was in 2013 – he recalls how the Rock had since the 1970s become rather dirty and tatty. He recalls how the Spanish workers used to clean and take the rubbish back to Spain but on the closure of the border this stopped. Instead, Moroccans were brought in to do the labour and themselves caused further problems. He recalls how the areas around the airport terminal, Catalan Bay and the town centre were all rather dusty and dirty. However, Norman pleasantly recalls how on visiting Gibraltar in 2013 he was pleased to see how Gibraltar had total changed and was much smarter. How comments at how the Gibraltar Government was obviously

spending a lot of money to smarten up the place and at how enormous change was taking place in the area of the harbour. He talks about the transformation of the harbour as a military facility to civilian and commercial had been difficult to achieve.

JR: And Catalan Bay:

Norman recalls how during his time, Catalan Bay was still a fishing village and boasted one of the best fish restaurants in Gibraltar. He recalls how the opening of the Caleta Palace in 1963 whilst he working on the tunnel on Dudley Ward Way.

Concluding, Norman reminisces how the recent change has been for the better. He believes that Gibraltarians didn't want Gibraltar to become another extension of the Costa del Sol so shied away from cheap tourism. He recalls fondly the modern developments and facilities and how they have created quality sightseeing and refurbished the historic sites. He speaks about the thriving economic and its development as a yachting marina.

In closing, Norman states how during his life he had travelled widely around many parts of the World and that the only other place he would live would be Gibraltar.

Compiled: December 2013
Copyright Reserved