



## **Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity**

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

### **Interview with Steve Kilvert – by Jerry Robinson**

#### **Track 1**

Steve Kilvert was born in Manchester in 1937. The family house was bombed during the war so the family was evacuated to Fleetwood. Like most families, his father was conscripted and served in the Sappers (Royal Engineers). His father was wounded during the war but after the war returned to serve in the Army. The family accompanied him on posting to Malaysia but he ended up in Korea. However, they finished up being posted to Hong Kong, returning to UK, when Steve was aged 15. On his father being posted to Chatham, Steve joined the Merchant Navy, but ended up in 1954 doing National Service in the Royal Engineers and was posted to Christmas Island. Afterwards, he returned to UK for a short time and was due to join the Ghurkhas but ended up being posted to Gibraltar in 1960 for three years.

Steve begins by outlining his time in Gibraltar. He joined 1<sup>st</sup> Fortress Squadron where he worked as an electrician on maintenance duties at Calpe Hill Power Station. He also worked at Windmill Hill Power Station. He recalls how at the time they were demolishing the old Army Prison at Mill Hill. He finished up back at Calpe Hill where they provided power to the Military Dockyard and to the local Council.

*JR: On marriage and being accompanied:*

During his posting to Gibraltar, Steve married and his new wife accompanied him back to Gibraltar. They had married quarters at Europa Point in a converted stable. Their kitchen also served as a bathroom where they used salt water. Their son was born out there at the time. Steve remarks how they had a wonderful social life. The only down side was having to work shift work, but it provided breaks during which they could travel. They went frequently to La Linea, and up the coast of Costa del Sol. At the time they got on well with the Spanish and also had a Spanish maid.

*JR: Description of working in the Power Stations:*

Steve believes that the generators dated back to the Second World War. He describes them as ships engines along with a gas turbine. He recalls how they were all totally underground and fan cooled in a wind tunnel. Steve describes following the chamber and the tunnels which were at sea level and taking a flight of about a 1000 steps which then led to the Admiralty Dockyard. He recalls once finding an old walled in generator – despite not being used for many years, once restarted it ran perfectly. He also describes further tunnels at Calpe near his workshops which led to the Northern point of the Rock where there used to be old cannons. In these tunnels were hand carved during the war regimental badges and some spurious comments by the private soldiers. He describes how there was a huge hospital underground and how it was vast and an amazing place.

*JR: Supplying power to the Rock:*

Steve relates a story about how there was a power failure over Christmas Day and how he got 'stick' from his mates. In another incident, he explains how there was a base engine running and how others generators would be added or switched off according to the demand for power. He describes how a colleague disconnected the wrong engine by mistake causing a complete blackout around the Rock at a time when a RAF Shackleton was coming in to land. They both ended up in front of the Governor, General Keightley. Being newly promoted and married, Steve feared the worst. However, he was cleared but his colleague got a month's prison sentence. He describes Keightley as a nice man, but how he had to personally apologise to RAF skipper.

*JR: Military routine:*

Seldom there were parades. However, Steve recalls the time when he had to be an instructor on a cadre training course and how he had to do the Governor's Convent. He recalls fondly about life with Tunnelling Troop and how they were all friends together. He also recalls how on sporting events, Tunnelling Troop had never lost the tug of war since WW2. He goes on to recall tales of how they also beat visiting Americans at basketball. He describes the close bonds of friendship within the whole engineering squadrons. He talks about those on national service.

## **Track 2**

*JR: About the Gibraltarians:*

Steve mentions how he got on reasonably well with the locals, especially as a number used to work in the generating station. He recalls one person in particular who used to act as the bouncer at the Trocadero night club. He talks

about social visits to the infamous venue, describing it as a rowdy but fun place. Steve talks about getting to know a lot of the local people and how prices used to vary depending on what fleet was visiting at the time. He talks about some of the social events and about being a Mason. Steve talks about the locals and how they were friendly and understanding towards the military. He mentions about the locals at Catalan Bay and how they locals used to keep themselves separate from those in Main Town.

Steve describes how Windy Hill Power Station was the sub-station of the main Calpe power station. He touches again upon the military prison and how it was very old and was demolished.

Steve and his colleague, Norman Jones, talks about religious tolerance in Gibraltar, especially between the Christian and Jewish faiths. They talk about how they were all friends and helpful towards each other.

*JR: Fond memories:*

Despite serving in Gibraltar for three years, Steve never became bored nor did he find it small. He recalls how relationships between the military and local girls were subject to vetting, particularly if it involved a Spanish girl. Steve talks about the amount of Sport on the Rock. He relates a few amusing stories about the relaxed atmosphere within the military and generally on the Rock. He recalls some of the names of the locals who he worked with, and a few stories of chasing off the apes. He mentions Maurice Bernard (see interview)

### **Track 3**

Steve recalls, after Gibraltar, the shock of returning to UK. He concludes by describing his fond memories of Gibraltar. Steve mentions his disappointment on returning to visit Gibraltar in the 1980s due to it being run down. Concluding, he reveals how he wants to return once again. As an afterthought he recalls how they used to fire out to sea off the end of the runway and how on one occasion they nearly shot up a Spanish fishing boat off Eastern beach. Finally, he speaks about there was an emergency power station on the top of the Rock to keep the runway and control tower running in case of a blackout elsewhere, and how Spanish boats used to nip in ashore to steal cables and equipment

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