



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

This fledgling military career tarnished by an angry pensioner

REMEMBRANCE Sunday 2024 has passed and I would like to thank everyone who turned out to mark the event.

This year seemed to see even more crowds at the memorials around the county and due to some clever adjustments, people were able to attend their 'local' services and then head for the main Sunday service at Exeter Cathedral at 4pm.

As president of Dartmoor Royal British Legion, I always feel that the honour of that position should have gone to someone else, someone with a lot more military experience. I left college in 1979 and decided that the army was the best way forward, so I joined the Territorial Army in Exeter to get a taste before joining up. I only did two years before I had to leave due to work commitments and a clash of interests. Being associated with the press, in those days, was considered not acceptable. For some strange reason I chose broadcasting instead of service and thus the nation lost a valuable asset.

We were a terrifying group of camouflaged professionals famous for jumping out on a pensioner in Exeter woodland, thinking it was the 'enemy patrol' that we were sent to ambush. Said pensioner was not happy and he and his Jack Russell chased us back to the car park and lodged a formal complaint. Two weeks later we accidentally set fire to Woodbury Common and shortly after that on exercise, our corporal laid out all of our weapons neatly on the ground and then backed over them in the truck. The only thing I have left from that period is my name patch which arrived two weeks after I left the regiment. I think it was probably best that my military career came to a sudden end before questions were asked as to which side I was on.

I have been very lucky to travel the world reporting on the incredible efforts of the British armed forces. In 1987 I was flown to The Falkland Islands to join the Devon and Dorset Regiment to mark their anniversary of existence. While there I was bitten by an RAF guard dog, got concussion and was involved in smuggling.

I think I should explain ... as I was sitting in RAF Mount Pleasant... which isn't... members of the D&Ds recognised me from the local television and started to chant 'Gus

Honeybun' and point. The RAF Regiment on duty at the airport were not based in the South West and had never heard of 'Gus' so thought I was just a troublemaker and dropped the lead of a beast. This animal, half German Shepherd, half grizzly bear, just followed the pointing fingers and sunk its chops into my leg.

After that was cleared up and banded, I went on a march over towards Goose Green. A hailstorm which swept in from Antarctica hit us full in the face and started to drop hail stones the size of golf balls; fine if you were wearing an army issue helmet but not if you just had a British Home Stores bobble hat.

Then the charge of smuggling. I was asked by several of the officers if I could arrange a delivery of stilton cheese but disguise it as it was the most sought after commodity in the South Atlantic. So, I bought a full round, packed it up and marked the parcel as 'socks!' Three weeks later I got a military communique which simply read, 'Thank you for cheese'. Still to this day I suspect that the Russians intercepted the messages and have an open file on an unidentified operative working for British Intelligence known as 'the mouse trap'. 'Thank you for cheese' has never been decoded and still lies in a KGB vault gathering dust and mice. Apparently, it was used to buy anything from trips on helicopters to replacement lost kit. A little stilton goes a long way, literally... 8,000 miles.

This year was also considerably better weatherwise as 2023 on Plymouth Hoe saw a storm of biblical proportions. Right on the stroke of 11am, the heavens opened on the assembled crowd and The Archbishop



Fitz, who is president of Dartmoor Royal British Legion, on Remembrance Sunday



Both of Fitz's parents were in the RAF during the Second World War. His father was an armourer, his mother a WRAF ambulance driver. Fitz's military endeavours were not quite as substantial



Fitz at The Cenotaph in 2018, acting as a guide for a blind veteran. Right: Fitz with The Red Arrows



of Canterbury. Soaked to the pants, we continued with the service, reminding myself that those in the trenches or Burma would have seen a lot worse than just a bit of rain for 40 minutes or so. The Lord Mayor of Plymouth at the time, a former serviceman, was in full regalia, tricorne hat and fur trimmed cape. Every so often he would bow with great solemnity towards the list of the fallen. Afterwards I went to speak to him and remarked on his act of respect to the memorial.

"I was tipping the water out of my hat," he corrected me. "It was filling every ten minutes. When I was given the poppy wreath by a comparatively dry naval cadet, I nodded my thanks and tipped half a pint of rain-water down his uniform front."

Both my parents and my aunt were wartime RAF. My father was an armourer, mother a WRAF ambulance driver and my aunt Geraldine an RAF intelligence officer. She spoke five languages, didn't say anything interesting in any one of them but was used at Bletchley and as an interpreter.

As the family history goes, she was once used to translate between Barnes Wallis, De Gaulle and Churchill on the upcoming use of the bouncing bomb. Everything seemed to be going well when 'aunty' forgot the French word for bouncing and by mistake used 'duveteuse' ... meaning fluffy! Nobody seemed to notice so she carried on.

Mind you, my French is pretty appalling... after an accident in Paris I tried to say that I was devastated but instead of using the word *dévasté* I used *navet*! The situation was lightened a little by the fact that I was saying... I am a small root vegetable!

I have been through several war zones, flown with The Red Arrows, been winched down onto moving ships, met VC holders and ordinary veterans, who are anything but ordinary, from the first and second world wars and modern-day conflicts. All were incredible experiences... I simply salute them all.

I will leave you with a blurry photo of me marching past The Cenotaph in 2018 acting as a guide for a blind veteran. It was a great honour to have been chosen to help in this quest and I was explaining to my ward where we were in the march and keeping them up to date with what was happening in the crowds. I was very impressed that 'we', the blind veterans, were the only ones in our section who were in step with the band of the guards who were in front of us. As we passed a member of the Royal family taking the salute, the command 'eyes left' was delivered and as you can clearly see, the only one who missed it was me. By the time I realised, the moment had passed, and I was seen on television glancing right and then looking guilty down the camera. As I said before, I don't think the nation lost anything by me walking away from a military career.