

~Reg Shepherd ~

~ A life Filled With Memories!!~

By Katie Shepherd



At 85 years of age- Reg Shepherd's life is filled with many memories. Reflecting back Reg admits that even the difficult times in his life had a meaningful impact on his future and while many may choose to forget their past, Reg Shepherd finds his enjoyment in sharing it!!

In 1937 and the tender age of 16, Reg joined the Royal Artillery at the urging of a close friend. The first two years were more of a vacation to these adventurous young men. Being too young for any real action they were transferred to Derby, England when war was declared in September of 1939. During this time he was able to chronologically arrange his travels thanks to some detailed note keeping and with the aid of a hidden camera.

In Feb 1941 he was shipped overseas to Durban, South Africa. This young Scottish man said he marveled at the many differences between the cultures. Throughout the first few years he enjoyed many ventures. He claims it was an exciting time as he sailed up the Suez Canal, spent leave time touring Cairo, as well as visiting pyramids and the Great Sphinx – From there he was relocated to Tobruk, North Africa where he stayed until they were captured in the fall of Tobruk in June 1941.

This is his account-

“The Siege of Tobruk started in late May and finally fell into the hands of the Germans in early June. John Brand and 2 other friends and myself hid out in the caves of Tobruk for 3 days and nights hoping to escape captivity by the Germans and making it back to the British Lines. However our only way to escape was by sea and since that was not possible we gave ourselves up. (June 1941) After our capture in Tobruk, we were finally moved up to Bengazi, Africa where we met up with many South African prisoners in a transit camp before being shipped over to Brindisi, Italy.

We had no control on how we were shipped so upon arriving in Brindisi, Italy I knew no one and had to make new friends. I got a job working in the office with Rapisarda Mario the camp INT. Christmas of 1941 we formed a theater group after moving up from Brindisi to Capua, Italy, a large prisoner of war camp that contained 5 separate camps. I was in “Settore 2”. A nativity play was our first play, followed by many more and I soon started acting and dress designing. Arts and crafts helped pass the time and the finished work was sent from camp to camp. My drawings were spotted by John and we finally made contact through sick calls and were able to keep in touch.

We stayed in Capua, south of Naples, Italy, until well into 1942. During this time I had made friends with many South Africans, one of which was Lionel Meskin- a lawyer from Johannesburg. Another such friend was Dan Boseman, an actor from the old Vic in London who had been touring in South Africa when the war broke out. During this time my only contact with John was by notes.

John and I managed to get together when Italy capitulated in 1943 into a retreating German unit in a camp south of Milano, Italy. We had long since lost contact with the other members of our unit. While in transit from Italy to Stalag IV G in Germany, John and I decided to fake it going through interrogation, claiming that we were half brothers so that we would not be separated.

After the interrogation we were finally shipped out on a working party of approximately 275 soldiers to work at the railway station in Liepzig. Our camp was an old hotel. On the grounds of the hotel was a large hall which previously was a dance hall or auditorium. We had a stage and 3 floor levels. It became our home while we worked 3 shifts at the railway station.

John and I had our bunks on the second floor. Stealing food from the Liepsig station became a means of survival and during that time I was also able to steal a 35 MM camera. We had socks in our crotch area where we were able to hide small items to avoid detection during our search upon return to camp. Once in camp I hid it in my water bottle, in my closet, so it would not be found when searched by Gestapo. A German girlfriend, Marion Schmidt, developed them for me allowing me to document our stay. We played football in the field across from the hotel when we were not on shift work. Eighteen months later we hid out in a pavilion in this same sportsfield, after escaping from a forced march out of Liepzig. Had we not escaped we would have been moved to the Russian area. John and I hid out here with three other prisoners for several days before leaving the other guys and making our final escape to the American Lines.

Painting, costume making and acting have since become my pastime for the long weeks, months and years to follow.

Working a shift at the post office required 3 soldiers and a German Meister to load wagons. John, Jack and I worked together.

It wasn't long before "Zina" a Russian forced labor worker caught my roving eye. I then struck up a friendship with Marinne Schmidt who worked the station. I would write to her in German and she to me in English until our friendship was discovered and she was sent to another station.

One such way to escape the reality was to stay busy. This included our down time and when asked if anyone knew how to make costumes I quickly volunteered. Having no experience in this area I figured it couldn't be too hard. Luckily for me I had a natural talent and this talent led to a life long career.

Among the plays we performed was the Musical Revue at the "Silver Slipper Club". Our 1st production was a fantasy Pantomine including Cinderella, Dick Whittington, Snow White and Aladdin.

After an air raid by the R.A.F. we would be sent on demolition. During one of these demolition jobs I met some young Germans that were interested in modern music. Painting which again helped to pass my time and I became quite good at that as well.

After escaping from Leipzig Germany, John and I made contact with the British and American forces. It was the Americans that got us on transportation to Brussels and afterwards a 48 hours flight to London. After 2 years as a prisoner in Italy, 18 months in Germany and 48 hours in Brussels, John and I parted ways- he to Dagenham, England and I for home in Glasgow, Scotland.

Marianne Schmidt, who developed all my photographs in Germany, continued to write after the war and in to 1948.

After a much needed Repatriation we traveled we back to the army in Glasgow. Then we were transferred back to home base in Glasgow and were we meet Muriel Burns in 1946.

During the time that I was a prisoner of war outside Milano, Italy I helped Les Thirwall escape with another boy. Both were dressed up in costumes from the play they were in, at the camp. Both made it

home from Italy. Les later wrote my mom and dad and told them of their escape. I even received a lovely Christmas card from them.

I received my discharge from the army in 1946 (in York) and visited Dad's people in Leeds. Once out of the military I started working as a fashion artist for Lewis's in Glasgow and soon after had the opportunity to decorate my first Christmas display.

I was pleased to join a theater group in Glasgow in February of 1947. October 1947 I relocated to Canada where I was reunited with the rest of my family.....”

Reg Shepherd is a remarkable man that can mesmerize his listeners for hours with his “Hogan Hero” style adventures. While spending time in captivity is far from what he expected of his tour in the army, he does admit that without that experience he might never have discovered his love for theatrics or his talent for design.

Lake Worth Herald's 1975 article described it best “When an actor is asked how he got interested in show business, the usual stock answer is that he was in a play in high school or college. However when Lake Worth resident and well known actor, costume designer and fashion coordinator Reginald Shepherd is asked that question, the answer is “in World War II prisoner-of-war camps in Italy and Germany” Shepherd claims that for him at least, his time in camp really was a lot like Hogan's Heroes. He admitted the prisoners stole all they could and that the guards went along with it- after all they got 50% of the take! According to Shepherd “there was an odd camaraderie between the prisoners and their guards”. He said the guards often attended the plays the POWs staged, to amuse themselves, even though they didn't understand a word of English.

For Reg however learning German was not as difficult- one of his finest roles was when he escaped from camp. At one point John and him had to cross a bridge that was manned by guards bearing machine guns. While he admits he was shacking inside he still managed to muster up his best German accent and talked their way past the Germans. This escape would also not have been possible if not for his ability to alter their clothing to blend with that of the Germans.

His talent for costume making was quite unique. In the camps there were no females so the guys with classic features played the female parts. Costumes, he said, were made from sheets, blankets, anything and everything they could get. Even the twine from Red Cross packages was saved and used as hair on the wigs. This unique talent has stayed with Reg throughout his life opening doors to many such careers. Eventually he and his wife Pat opened a dress shop that catered to the wealthiest Palm Beach residents. Initially dresses offered there were original designs of his.

His dedication to friendship was just as strong as his love for all things art related. As a result of it, John and Reg have remained as closely connected as the half brothers they once claimed to be. Even to this day, not a week goes by that they don't continue to communicate.

Pat and Reg went on to build a life in South Florida and are the proud parents of three children. Their love for life and their many talents have been an inspiration to all that know them. As far as the theater went, Reg claimed it was only through acting that he was able to truly find himself and regain an inner peace. He spent most of his adult life actively involved in theatrical groups throughout England, Canada and South Florida.

Editors Note If you would like to suggest someone for a future Heights profile just email NPBHeights@bellsouth.net. Be sure to include your name and contact information, the name of individual you are nominating and the reason you feel they would make a good profile. We welcome your suggestions.



Reg designed and made these costumes with what ever they could find.



Working on the railway they were able to steal an occasional ration.



Reg on the right with best friend John on the left.



Group photo was taken inside the prisoner of war camp.



A talented artist- his work can be seen in the background



Painting, Acting, Designing or Music- his talents were unending!