

Geoffrey Ernest Delauney

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Wartime Memoirs

I was almost 16 when the Germans arrived in Jersey in June 1940. I was a trainee baker working with my father, Philip George Noel Delauney, and living with my parents in Langley Avenue, St Saviour. After leaving school at the age of 14, I really wanted to join the Royal Navy as a boy entrant at 15. Unfortunately, that dream was shattered when I received a letter saying that no more youngsters would be taken on because of the hostilities so I had to stay in Jersey.

When the Germans arrived in June 1940 nothing really happened that changed my daily routine too much; I went to work and life rolled on. They were here and you were here. As long as you kept your nose clean life went on except for the curfew.

I first came to the attention of the Germans in 1942 on the day that the English born islanders were being deported from the island. I was part of a large crowd of islanders up at Mount Bingham and we were all shouting and singing and making a big commotion whilst watching their departure from Jersey. Then the Germans arrived with fixed bayonets and revolvers and they tried to get the crowd to break up and disperse, but there were hundreds of people gathered there. The troops rushed in and it turned quite nasty. Some of the more vocal of us, myself included, were rounded up and taken down to the Pomme D'Or Hotel under fixed bayonets. They took our details and then sent us off home. I'm not sure if I was in the wrong place at the wrong time or just shouting too much.

After that, everything went quiet and I carried on working with my Dad at the Co-Operative Bakery in Don Street which then moved to Sand Street when the Germans took it over.

However, after a period of nothing significant happening, the relative calm was shattered when I was cycling along David Place past the Royal Hotel with some mates. A group of Germans came out of the Hotel; I think they had been drinking. One pushed me off my bike so I got up and called him a 'Deutsche Swine', the other German soldiers rushed towards me so I hopped on my bike and did a bunk. A few days later, the same German officer spotted me in Val Plaisant, it was only me and him so I told him to shove off and he did. He wasn't very big and I did a bit of boxing so I wasn't worried about him. A few weeks later I was in a café in Colomberie and we came face to face again. This time he was with his friends and I was also with a group of mates. There was a lot of shouting, swearing and squaring up to each other. At the same time a naval patrol went past and wanted to know what all the commotion was about. The young officer told the patrol commander and I was marched off at rifle point to the secret headquarters at Silverside, Havre des Pas. I was really scared at this point but very stubborn too so I didn't want them to see that I was scared so I had a smile on my face. The officer told me to wipe the smile off my face, which is where I made a mistake as I made a gesture of wiping my face with my hand. The officer then said something in German and two big guys came in and gave me a beating.

I've only a hazy recollection of the next four days as I was recovering from the attack. Within days I was in Newgate Street Prison. I was sentenced to six months imprisonment on March 11th 1944.

One day the guards came in and told six of the men they were going to be deported to France, one of them being me. We were put on a barge and taken to Granville before moving onto the prison at St-Lo in Normandy. At first it wasn't too bad; we were locked up all day but didn't have to work.

However, everything changed when the Allies landed on D-Day. The prisoners were moved out and sent to an old French Army camp in Villeneuve St Georges just outside of Paris.

The prisoners had to march on foot from St-Lo to Paris with only cabbage soup and bread to eat. We slept in barns or out in the open. Luckily I was young and fit but some of the old, sick and weak men died along the way and were just left where they fell; they were French and English POWs. Two weeks after I left the St-Lo prison it was bombed and razed to the ground; everyone was killed.

In Villeneuve St Georges they wanted us for workers. There was a huge railway junction and it was getting bombed night and day and there were lots and lots of unexploded bombs. They made us dig up the bombs. There were four people to each bomb and there were bombs all over the blooming place. We would dig down about six feet in steps. On one occasion the gang I was in was sent to an area just below a large Fort in the town which was where a lot of the bombs had been dropped. We were then redirected to another area. The gangs digging up the bombs in the first area were all killed when one of the bombs exploded during the digging. Although French prison officers looked after the prisoners, the Germans had taken over control of the prison. The German guards used to stand about 50 yards away with their guns and dogs. They weren't front line soldiers, but probably fought in WWI. They weren't vicious or anything like that.

It was here that I met Jack [John] Soyer, a fellow prisoner. Jack was about 40 years old and a 'tough nut'. He told me that he was planning to escape in the confusion of an air-raid; I thought this was pretty foolish as Jack had no army training; however, he did make a successful escape and joined the French Resistance. He didn't ask me to join him. I was just a kid really and didn't have any experience and I wondered what I would've done if I'd suddenly found myself alone and half a mile from the prison. Sadly, Jack was killed by the Germans.

I was digging for quite a few months. Eventually when the Germans heard that the Allies were advancing they just left. That was it. All the French and a few Spanish prisoners headed into town singing the *Marseillaise*. The town had not yet been vacated by the Germans and was still under martial law. I was at the back of the freed prisoners and when the Germans opened fire some of the prisoners at the front were killed but the rest managed to run like hell and we ran back to the safety of the prison where we remained until the French Freedom Fighters arrived. I and the only other English speaking prisoner, who was a chap from Australia, were invited to march into Paris with the French Freedom Fighters. On the way they came across some German snipers, many of whom were killed or captured by the French.

When we arrived in Paris the scenes of relief and excitement were unbelievable. We were received as heroes; it felt great. I got there before de Gaulle! The following day General de Gaulle and his troops arrived and I was in the Champs Elysee waving and celebrating with the crowds.

I was taken in by a French family for a few weeks before getting a lift into the British sector with some Americans heading towards the Normandy coast. I was taken to Southampton where I was interrogated to make sure that I wasn't a spy. I also saw a doctor as I only weighed about 7 stones at this point.

The Mayor of Southampton at that time was a Guernsey man who, when he heard that a fellow Channel Islander had arrived back from France, came to meet me and offered me a job. I wanted to volunteer to join the Navy and told him I was a baker by trade. There were no bakers in the Navy so I was offered the job of a stoker. I was on HMS Berwick which was a heavy cruiser escorting the North Atlantic convoys. Later I served on the aircraft carrier Theseus. I named my boat after Theseus.

I wasn't able to let my family know that I was safe as Jersey was still occupied at this time. Whilst I was in the Navy I suffered with perforated ear drums which meant that I wasn't able to go to the Pacific but could only do hostilities. Some of the other sailors were perforating their ear drums deliberately with match sticks so that they wouldn't have to go to the Pacific. I didn't do this.

I served in the Navy until October 1948 when returned back to Jersey. I had been back home when I had leave to visit my family after the war.