

Royal Marine Training Group (Wales)

The Royal Marine Training Group (Wales) set up camps Burma, Iceland, Gibraltar and Matapan around the Mawddach Estuary to train Royal Marines in the art of beach assaults, while the Amphibious School at Tywyn trained those responsible in maintaining the supply lines of such landings.

Burma Camp – A Royal Marine camp at Llwyngwrl, built on requisitioned land approximately 68 acres in extent.

Crete Camp - A Royal Marine camp at Barmouth, consisting mainly of requisitioned houses

Gibraltar Camp – A Royal Marine camp at Llanegryn, Tywyn, consisting of a country house and a camp built on requisitioned land approximately 60 acres in extent. Connected with this area was the training area at Llanegryn, covering some 700 acres, under requisition by the War Department.

Iceland Camp - A Royal Marine camp at Arthog, built on requisitioned land approximately 25 acres in extent.

Matapan Camp – A Royal Marine camp at Ynys y Maengwyn, consisting of a country house and a camp built on requisitioned land approximately 25 acres in extent.

With the threat of war in the late-1930s, northwest Wales was considered a 'Safe Area.'

In the second year of the war a development took place in the south east that was to dramatically affect life on Mawddach Crescent, Arthog, a small development of terraced properties on the Mawddach estuary.

On 15th July 1941 the Marine Naval Base Defence Organisation II (MNBDO II) was formed at the Royal Marine Barracks at Eastney in Southsea. Initially it was accommodated at Alton and Hayling Island in the South Hayling Sunshine Camp!

A year later MNBDO II was transferred to North Wales. The Royal Marines operated at five locations: Ynys-y Maengwyn, Llanegryn, Llwyn-Gwrl, Barmouth and Arthog. Their code names were respectively **MATAPAN**, **GIBRALTAR**, **BURMA**, **CRETE** and **ICELAND**. It has been suggested that the Royal Marines were stationed in the quieter areas of Wales, in preparation for deployment during the D-Day landing operations for the invasion of Europe as well as Far East operations.

The camps were used to train and re-train men in seamanship for landing craft as crewmen, coxswains and gun crews.

ICELAND camp at Arthog was also used for handling naval craft.

In early 1943 the Royal Marines Training Group (RMTG) functioned as a provider of disciplinary training, artillery and engineering. Their focus was on guns, mounting piers and roadways. Completely unexpectedly, their role changed to seamanship training. **ICELAND** Camp (Arthog) became the RMTEC (Engineering Training Centre). Some of those responsible for these operations had their quarters in Mawddach Crescent. Mr Roberts, the farmer at nearby Fegla Fawr Farm, was informed by the War Office that his land was to be requisitioned. He and his daughter, Dorothy, could stay in the farmhouse and farm the land not used by the military. The eight families living in Mawddach Crescent were given notice that their houses were to be requisitioned and the residents were required to leave with very short notice.

Miss Beatrice Carr, of No. 6, refused to go because of her father's age and frailty. She was so determined that she went to the War Office, dressed in her British Red Cross Commandant's uniform and demanded attention. She was allowed to stay

on the ground floor. Maybe she also put the case for three other residents as, on 12th February, the Royal Marines, under the command of Major D. D. Stewart, moved into all the upper floors and four of the ground floors.

The ground floor of No. 2 was the galley and men's dining hall with men's sleeping quarters on the 1st and 2nd floors. The first floor of No. 3 was the SNCOs Mess and sleeping quarters. The ground floor of No. 8 was originally the Officers' Mess with their sleeping quarters on the first floor. The lower floors were taken over by officers. Hurricane lamps had to be used as there was no coal or lights due until 28th February. The connecting walls in the second floor had doors knocked through to allow access to all the properties. Troops slept up there and there is still graffiti showing evidence of their stay. Bryn Celyn Cottage, hidden by trees on the wooded hillock about 400 metres further upstream was later requisitioned as the Officers' Mess.

The Officers' Mess of **CRETE** camp (Barmouth) was over the river in Barmouth in the gabled buildings of Porkington Crescent.

Major Stewart, Captain G. Yeomans and Lieutenant V. G. M. Kelsey, two SNCOs and seventeen ORs from Dalditch ran two week courses for the Marines.

In April and May two hundred men arrived from 22 Training Battalion and from 1st August about two hundred joined weekly from **BURMA** camp (Llwyngwrl). After their fortnight they left for Dartmouth - HMS Effingham. On the promenade in front of Mawddach Crescent the outline of a ship was carefully laid out in gravel. Here the marines could learn various movements on board ship prior to the real thing. There was a flagpole set up on top of the small knoll by the bay to the west of the Crescent. This was used for training practice. Another was erected on the seawall by the steps and both were used for signalling practice. Two grey, pebble decorated concrete sentry posts were erected at the entrance to the camp at the foot of Fegla Fawr. Numerous concrete bases were laid on both sides of the track leading to the Crescent as platforms for a variety of Nissen huts. These included the guard room, stores, womens' quarters, dining hall, ablutions and sick bay. Concrete steps were also laid to allow safer access to fourteen concrete platforms up the small wooded hill to the east of Fegla Fawr, where other Nissen huts were erected. A quartz inlaid fireplace from one of the buildings lays undisturbed on the

oak tree covered hill. A drainage network was also installed allowing toilet facilities. These buildings were brick built with corrugated iron walls and roofs. Amongst them there included a big cinema sited on what is now Bryn Celyn land and its oblong, slightly sloping floor is still obvious. There was a NAAFI at the bottom of the wooded hill where meals were prepared and served.

It is reported that the Roberts family got on well with Major Stewart and his men. The only complaint was persuading the men to buy milk on days other than their fortnightly pay day!

Stan Blacker, a trainee from Somerset, who spent time at Arthog:

We arrived in Iceland camp and were billeted at Mawddach Crescent. The first morning we had to fall in at 0530 and run and walk five miles before breakfast. Next morning, when we expected to do the same, there were only half a dozen of us on parade - the rest had gone sick. The officers and NCOs played merry hell, one NCO was placed outside Sick Bay, and as the Marines came out, if they found nothing was wrong, they were placed on a charge and given pack drill. I was pleased to say that the violent running and walking at 0530 was soon discontinued!

But we did come into contact with boats here, although obsolete; we had rowing races across the River Mawddach in boats resembling pontoons. In the evenings we could walk into Barmouth and generally this camp was quite pleasant.

When at Iceland Camp, with a route march taking place next morning, I bought four doughnuts from the NAAFI the previous evening and put two into each of my ammunition pouches. Next morning after marching for fifty minutes, we had our first stop on the road the other side of Arthog village, so I decided to try one of my doughnuts. After a few mouthfuls up came the officer in charge and told the sergeant to put me on a charge for 'Eating without permission'! Later that day, having returned to camp, I was given 7 days pack drill in full marching orders, one hour each evening, for my crime.

When doing route marches it became a favourite ploy to fill one's water bottle the night before with beer from the NAAFI. It was obvious that sooner or later the officers and NCOs would find out. One morning before commencing our march the squad was called to attention then given the order 'Empty water bottles' - and away went our beer. Those of us with beer were given three extra parades."

Marine F. C. Adams joined the Marine Corps in 1941 and served in the Orkneys, Egypt and Sicily before being given further training in North Wales. After a stint in Burma Camp:

The order came for us to pack and move out, this time to a camp on the bank of the Afon Mawddach, a short distance from the old railway bridge which was used in the film 'The Ghost Train'. The scenery from our billet was magnificent and looked across to the well known Panorama Walk, to a large house high up from which the Commander of RMTG(W), Major General Leech-Porter, was said to keep his eyes on our camp!

This fourth camp was **Iceland** and this was where we had to practise with real landing craft. We soon found out why the Afon Mawddach had been chosen for this training for, to get to sea, we had to negotiate the railway bridge and the very fast current running beneath it and then go over the bar from which the town, Barmouth, got its name. Careful judgement had to be made when steering through the bridge not to go aground on the shallow bar. To add to this excitement, if one could call it that, was the dubious practice of trainee fighter pilots using our craft as targets out at sea. One day a plane misjudged the rise and fall of the waves and pancaked into the sea causing fishermen to go to the rescue. It was said that they got the salvage money if the plane was saved as it was on this occasion; so too was the pilot.

We all enjoyed our trips out to sea but there was one trip which nearly ended in disaster. This came about when a sergeant took a group of us for training in one of the LCAs and forgot that the warning signal 'high seas' had been made and we should have remained upstream. He took us over the bar and we had great difficulty getting back. However, it was not all boat training and we continued with instruction in all other aspects of seamanship, tides, winds, morse, pilotage, etc. then tests for night vision, the simulator and machine-gun practice.

So the days went by with only short occasions at weekends for a run ashore to Barmouth. This entailed a walk across the bridge only to find that we had to pay a toll of tuppence, but some soon got round this by going through in groups of a dozen or more. As each went through the pay desk he said "The last man will pay" but we were rumbled in time.

Everyone knew that our intensive training was for something big and we could only guess that it was the invasion of France. During our stay in **Iceland** Camp some of us who were there received our Africa and Italy Star ribbons and we had the pleasure of sewing them on our Blues.

It was towards the end of our time there that we all had to go over the assault course and this we found very hard. In full battle order we first had to start from the beach, climb up ropes to the top of the cliffs, then once on top it was a run to different obstacles, ditches 6' wide and 8' deep, then a crawl through tunnels with thunderflashes going off all the time. By the time we had roped down the cliff to the road and run the hundred or so yards to the finish everyone was covered in mud and was exhausted.

Our last commitment was a visit to Machynlleth to give a marching and unarmed combat display to the local people. In the second week of May we packed our kit and boarded trucks that took us to Dovey junction and the train to London."

Kenneth Finlayson, another trainee who was stationed at **Gibraltar** camp before coming to Arthog:

Reveille on Sunday 21 May 1944 was at 0600, and then there was a rush getting washed, shaved, breakfast, kit down to the baggage dump and fall in by 0800 in fighting order; then we marched off over the hills to **Iceland** Camp. As it was a fine sunny day and the scenery magnificent, I enjoyed the march. The billets consisted of a row of terraced houses converted, and there were six of us in an attic room which was quite good. The bad news was that I was on Guard Duty that first night - it was quaintly called the Inlying Picket; another rota duty which seemed to come round frequently was East Gate Police.

Every morning we paraded at 0800 followed by Divisions - up to then I thought Divisions only occurred on a Sunday. Then we usually had a morning read on the morse signal lamp and semaphore. Our morse instructor was Cpl Morgan who had been in 44 Recruit Squad with me back in 1940. The training programme was much the same as at **Gibraltar** camp but with the addition of Combined Ops procedures, day and night signalling, landing craft formations, engine maintenance and ABCA lectures. We did a lot of boat pulling on the river and wondered whether Combined Ops had run out of landing craft and reverted to the traditional method of landing marines. In fact all the time I was at **Gibraltar** and **Iceland**, even the potential coxswains course were only out in landing craft three times. These were LCP(S) (Landing Craft Personnel (Small)) and there were so few of them that we did not always get a chance to take the wheel.

The soldier part of our life continued with drill, assault courses, cross-country runs, route marches and night exercises; in fact a drill squad was formed to take part in a forthcoming 'Salute the Soldier' week parade. The weather was very good and by the end of May it was warm enough to sit in the sun stripped to the waist. Perversely, from 'the Glorious First of June' - one of the Corps Memorable Days - the weather changed to become dull and wet and we were glad of the oilskins we had been loaned when out on

the river. On 5 June the news came that Rome had fallen to the Allies and coincidentally, I was officially issued with 'Blues' at long last. That had been one of the attractions of the Royal Marines but these were of a wartime 'utility' type and no peaked cap, just our blue berets so not as smart as the blue uniform I had bought from a long service marine years before and kept at home to wear on leave!

Although everybody was expecting the Second Front, out in Wales there was none of the activity of the assembly areas at the Channel ports, so it was a complete surprise when, on 6 June, we got back from boat pulling and the Company Commander informed us about the landings. I heard the news with mixed feelings; thankfulness that I was not there in the assault waves, yet paradoxically wishing that I had been with my old comrades in 30 Commando (30 AU).

Instead of battling on the beaches of Normandy on 10 June, we paraded in our Blues to see the winning squad presented with a trophy, although again U 239 was not eligible. For the next few days the drill squad took part in 'Salute the Soldier Week' parades, half of us in Blues, the other half in khaki to show that we served Per Mare, Per Terram. We marched and drilled through all the neighbouring towns and villages, along with units from the Royal Navy, the Army and Royal Air Force, plus girls from the ATS and WAAF. We were taken in trucks from one place to another, but I can only remember Dolgelly (Dolgellau), Fairbourne, Barmouth and Harlech, where I had time to have a quick look around the historic castle. Sometimes we were headed by a Royal Marines band and sometimes one from the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. After the last parade we were exceptionally allowed to go ashore in Blues and I was a bit peeved that U 239 Squad was on Picket Duty. Incidentally Barmouth was an improvement on Towyn and I often went to the cinema and dances there.

The 15 June was my 23rd birthday and coincided with the usual medical inspection prior to draft. There was one amusing incident before we left for on the 16th we had an unexpected kit muster to look for some china plates that were missing from the Dining Hall, but none was found. The next day the General Assembly sounded and when we were all on parade the Adjutant demanded that the plates be returned, but no one owned up ... it might have been the permanent staff!

So we returned our oilskins and blankets to stores and I took the baggage party to the station to load the kit bags. As it was a Saturday we had a few hours' sleep after dinner, then marched to the station. It was a lovely sunny evening and I felt quite sorry to be leaving Wales.

