

# NORTHERN IRELAND'S WARTIME MEMORIES

## A project with a difference



**Joyce Gibson: Member of the  
SLP National Support Group**



Four members: Ronnie McClements, Adrienne Brown, Joyce Gibson and Lorna Douglas. Adrienne presented the WW1 Army jacket to the Museum.

**H**ave you ever thought of taking part in or setting up a Shared Learning Project? This is our third project. It's in the planning stage and will be the most flexible and far-reaching yet.

Eight members of North Down and Ards U3A (with happy memories of our last SLP) wanted to get going again. So we discussed possible targets and decided to approach Bob, a senior member of staff at a nearby museum.

The Somme Centre near Newtownards in Co. Down is one of Northern Ireland's war museums. It was built to commemorate the casualties from the Province killed or injured at the infamous Battle of the Somme.

Bob and Projects Officer Richard were delighted by the prospect of some voluntary help, especially when they learned about the 5,000 members in U3As all over the Province.

There are 18 U3As in Northern Ireland and we hope to enthuse them all. We have phoned the chairmen (and some secretaries too), sent out posters, hand-bills and detailed requirements, talked at the regional meetings and are now waiting expectantly for replies.

Members can participate up to the end of June, contributing as much as they wish. They can form their own research groups, work on their own interest with the help of the team leader or even send in just one piece of information – all contributions gratefully received.

The Museum has asked us to uncover personal memories, memorabilia and facts concerning the Second World War but also the conflict in Korea, where the Royal Ulster rifles played a leading part.

They are anxious that this information should be preserved or at least recorded before it is too late. After all, the veterans of the Korean War of 1951-3 are at least in their mid-70s.

There is also a sense of urgency because a Korean War exhibition is scheduled for March and exhibits and information are sparse.

Other topics to explore include the whereabouts of prisoner of war and refugee camps situated in Northern Ireland. Some sites have been well researched, such as the Jewish Refugee Camps in Millisle, Co. Down and the settlements round Ballymena in Co. Antrim. But nothing is known about camps housing refugees from Gibraltar or Malta which were reputedly situated near Downpatrick, and around Seaforde, Raholp and Clough.

The population of Gibraltar had to be evacuated to make way for the allied troops on the North African Campaign. After several attempts to house the refugees in the much-bombed South of England, this remote area of South Down was chosen as a safe haven.

What happened to them? Where were their camps? Did any of them stay behind to found a family in Northern Ireland? In the interest of preserving our wartime history these questions need to be addressed as soon as possible.

Perhaps U3A members, living either locally or further afield, could shed some light on the mystery. Information, especially accompanied by photos, would be most welcome.

Rolls of Honour, listing casualties of both world wars, are to be found in schools, church halls, company board rooms, and factory canteens. Sadly some have been lost owing to the demolition of such buildings especially in the 60s and it's still happening. Can our members photograph them before it is too late? Memorials are usually a bit too heavy to transport. The Centre owns a few and would like to locate more.

Personal memories of WW2 have been recorded on two DVDs made by the museum. Two retired historians have volunteered to write a series of lesson plans to save time for overworked teachers and to encourage them to use the materials to their best advantage.

There remains the collection of memorabilia. So much has been thrown out: tin hats, medals, army uniforms. Younger generations, when clearing out attics, took the contents to the dump. Some of the WW2 relics could make a valuable addition to the Museum's collections. Much material has already been handed over to the centre. Let's hope there are some more gems to come.

Each of the eight team members has agreed to be responsible for one topic, to discuss the way forward, follow up contacts and write up the final findings. We meet occasionally to compare notes, but the next step is to consolidate.

After Christmas we will start a regular SLP workshop, meeting every second week which will also serve as a sort of drop-in centre. The eight of us will hopefully be there.

Others interested can call in at will. This will form a focal point, encourage participation and help the team leaders by gaining support from each other and of course, do a little socialising.

We have until June to complete the project and are looking forward to the challenge. We will be meeting new people and cementing old friendships, in our U3A and further afield.

We will be discovering all kinds of fascinating information and we will be helping to preserve much of our heritage which may otherwise be lost. What more could we ask?

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