

PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY

British Empire Medal recipient **Billy Duncan** reveals how he rejuvenated his local Legion Scotland branch

WORDS: CLAIRE MACAULAY



The Moffat
War Memorial

Billy Duncan always knew he wanted to explore the world. In 1945, as a young man of 16 working in a railway signal box, he travelled from Moffat to Bristol on his own to train with the Merchant Navy. “I just had this burning ambition to see the world. I was determined,” says Billy, now 91.

And see the world he did, finding himself in Madras in India shortly after completing his training.

“It was quite a culture shock, believe me. It was my first time out of the country. I didn’t believe in doing things in half measures.”

After Madras came Mumbai (then Bombay), and soon Billy found himself on a troop ship preparing for the reoccupation of Singapore, where he witnessed the Japanese surrender, which he found an awe-inspiring experience.

“For a lad of my age ... it was unbelievable. It was wonderful that it was the end of the war. We brought the first ex-prisoners of war home from the death camps to Southampton. We had youngsters on board who were interned by the Japanese as well as troops and civilians. Speaking to them was very moving; they were very brave people.”

Billy’s military experiences weren’t always smooth sailing. One notable

“

The training I went through certainly knocked me into shape. I was just a country boy

voyage to the Gulf on an oil tanker saw an anticipated six-week trip turn into a year on the sea.

Remembering this, he laughs. "In cases like this, once you were on board, that was it. I became pretty close to my crewmates."

After four years in the merchant navy Billy transferred to the Royal Navy, serving for a total of nearly 12 years across both services. He has fond memories of his time in service at sea, and the impact it has had on his life.

He says: "I have absolutely no regrets, even at my age now. The training I went through certainly knocked me into shape. I was just a little country boy before I grew up!"

Billy met his now-wife Audray in Moffat's Station Park while he was on annual leave from the merchant navy. They have been married for 68 years and have two daughters, Linda and Karen. "My wife has been a wonderful support, and we have two lovely girls. I couldn't wish for better. I'm very lucky," says Billy.

With the help of his wife, he found it easy to readjust to civilian life, despite an initial desire to keep serving. He says: "I was married with two amazing daughters; it was no bother at all adjusting from the regime of military life into civilian life, but it was a different world to what it is today."

After a stint working in engineering in Edinburgh, Billy and his family moved to Glasgow, where he threw himself into charity work. As part of a travelling concert group, he raised money for several causes, including the Erskine military hospital and kidney research, for which he was honoured with his local community's 'Citizen of the Year' award.

Billy first became aware of Legion Scotland through his service with the Territorial Army. After moving back to his home town of Moffat, he joined the local branch.

"The branch had almost folded," he recalls. "There were three or four members, meeting only once a year in a local hotel. Four of us got together and decided we were going to get something done. We began to meet monthly and the branch built up to



Clockwise from top: Billy and Audray at the Holyrood Garden Party; 17-year-old Cadet Billy; refereeing for Third Lanark Athletic Club

around 60 members; it went from strength to strength.

"We received a marvellous response from the members and began to arrange visits. We went to hospitals, clubs and village halls, and raised money for charities. We're still a very active branch and we're going strong – despite age and infirmity."

Being part of Legion Scotland has been Billy's main passion since returning to civilian life – from regular group visits to hand out Moffat Toffee at the Poppyscotland factory, to leading a campaign against parking around the town's war memorial.

He says: "It has been a wonderful experience. I started as the general secretary, but from there I think I have held every post in the branch."

Moffat is distinguished for being the birthplace of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, whose strong leadership as Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command was significant in the victory of the Battle of Britain. Each year a service is held in memory

of Lord Dowding, dubbed the 'architect of deliverance', in the town's Station Park, and this year Billy laid a wreath on behalf of the Royal Navy.

Having grown up in the town, Billy has strong ties to the community. His father was provost of Moffat and Billy himself was chairman of the community council. In the 2013 New Year's Honours, he was awarded a British Empire Medal for his services to the community as chair of Legion Scotland.

"I'm very lucky," he says humbly. "I don't know how I deserved to get it but I am deeply proud and honoured."



SHARE YOUR STORY

Voices of Veterans is a Legion Scotland campaign that pays tribute to veterans of all ages by sharing their stories. If you have a tale to tell, whether you left service yesterday or 50 years ago, or know someone with a story and would like to nominate them, let us know. Please call **0131 550 1586** or email **magazine@legionscotland.org.uk**