

Carrick People

'It was a brilliant life, and I'd do it all again if I had the chance,' says Suez veteran

When a Maybole man picked up his copy of the *Carrick Gazette* a couple of weeks ago and started to read, he was delighted to see that Bobby Sweeney from Girvan had recently received a military medal more than 50 years after serving in the Army.

Memories came flooding back to 71-year-old John Urie of his time in the forces, and serving in the same conflict as Bobby, the Suez Canal Zone Emergency in Egypt.

In fact, last August, exactly 50 years after being de-mobbed, John was also delighted to receive his medal with Canal Zone Clasp.

"Unlike Bobby, I didn't even consider applying for the medal when I arrived home from Egypt all those years ago, and it wasn't until I saw the campaign in the paper at the beginning of last year that the thought entered my head," he said.

John was an 18-year-old youth working at High Pinmore Farm with two other lads when he was called up to do his National Service.

He recalls: "One of the boys didn't have to go as the farmer needed him to stay and work the land, but me and the other one, Tam Brownlee, had to go to Glasgow for a medical. We were passed fit, and while I went into the Royal Army Service Corps, Tam went into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

"I remember us travelling by train to England. Tam got off at his barracks first, and I went on to Blenheim Barracks in Aldershot.

"After three months basic training and 14 days embarkation leave, that was me away to Egypt.

"I flew out from Stansted just as they were first starting to build the airport, and we landed at Nice in the South of France for refuelling.

"It was then on to Malta for four days, where our barracks were up in the mountains, and I hated the place!

"We finally arrived at our base in Egypt on the Friday night, and on the Saturday morning we were out on parade.

"We were then asked if we wanted to go back to 'Blighty' to be paratroopers, which I was shocked at as all this money had just been spent sending us out to the Canal Zone.

"I opted to stay, and ended up as a staff car driver with the 58 Car Company."

John says he too remembers the frequent sandstorms, and grimaces: "It's very true that the sand would get absolutely everywhere. It was unbelievable and not very nice at all.

"I can still see the row upon row of tents we slept in in the desert. We all had to take our turn at guarding the perimeter, and if you heard someone approaching, you had to shout - 'Halt. Who goes there, friend or foe?' If nobody answered you the third time you asked, then you had to shoot to kill. That could be frightening."

However, John was only in the desert in Fayed for three weeks.

He explained: "I was washing the car one Sunday morning when one of my mates came down and said the Officer in Command wanted to see me.

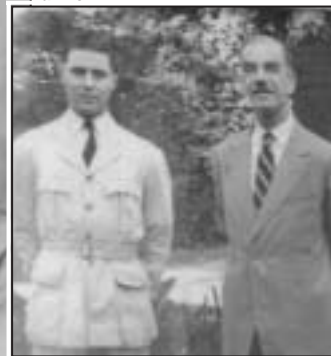
"He then asked me if I would go to Cairo to drive for General Sir Brian Robertson, the Commander in Chief of the Middle East Land Forces at the time.

"I was promoted to Corporal to go Cairo. As the city was out of bounds to troops at that time and because the General was in the middle of negotiating for the removal of troops from the Canal Zone, we had to have a police escort whenever we went to the British Embassy.

"During my 20 months there, I stayed in a villa on Gazera Island, right in front of the River Nile, with another five staff including the General's bodyguards, and I soon realised that if you can drive on Cairo



ABOVE: A proud John with his campaign medal. BELOW: A young John with General Sir Brian Robertson. LEFT: John in uniform.



roads, you can drive anywhere!

"As we were supposed to be civilians, police also had to guard the villa.

"Sir Ralph Stevenson was the British Ambassador at that time and they were all great people. I have many happy memories of my time there.

"Sir Brian came home in 1953 to take over as Chairman of the British Transport Commission and General Benson came out to take his place. I picked him up at Port Said to take him back to the villa."

The Suez Canal Zone Emergency was the only active service campaign since 1945 not to be recognised with a medal.

There is evidence that General Sir Brian Robertson had made a tentative enquiry about the possibility of a campaign medal in 1952. It was assumed that the matter was discussed by members of the Army Council, out of committee, and they decided that there was no case to justify a medal at that time. That changed 50 years later when the government finally gave in to demands from veterans, MPs and the media.

"When I got my medal last year I was absolutely delighted and very, very proud. I thought it was great to receive it after all these years, as I would never have applied for it if I hadn't seen the campaign in the national newspapers," John said.

John returned home to Minishant in August 1954, after refusing to stay on for another year. He said: "Negotiations weren't finished and I was asked to stay.

However, I'd never been away from home before, and I was starting to miss my mammy!"

However, there was soon another lady in John's life after returning home, and him and wife Catherine have now been wed and settled in Maybole for 48 years.

Like Bobby Sweeney and countless other veterans, John has always taken an interest in other conflicts over the years, and has strong views on the controversial Iraq War.

"Tony Blair was right in sending the troops out to Iraq. He did what he had to do, and although it's sad that so many young lives have been lost, they joined the army knowing that was their job and that they might have to go to war some day.

"Rose Gentle, who's young son Gordon was killed in action, really does beggar belief. She may be grief-stricken, but she should remember that she also had to sign a consent for her boy to go into the army because he was so young. Me and hundreds of thousands of men like me and before me, had no option. We had to go and do our National Service as teenagers when we were called up.

"Although war is obviously a horrible thing, I don't really have many bad memories of my time in Cairo. "It was a brilliant life, and I'd do it all again if I had the chance."

With a final coy smile, John went on: "There's not many people who can say they learned to swim in the Mediterranean!"