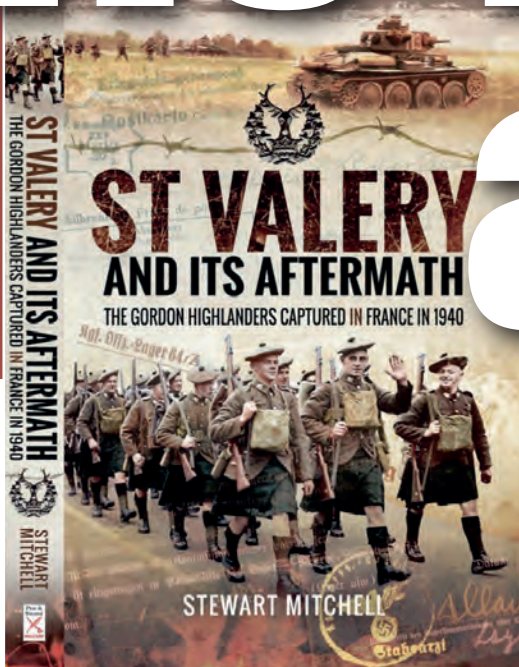


# He never about



THERE'S usually a trigger for *iScot* stories, though it's not always obvious at the time. Back in November last year, I read something that made me search online for a Channel 4 documentary, *Dunkirk: The Forgotten Heroes*, that tells the story of the 51st (Highland) Division who were left behind in France after the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940. Never having heard of this before, it left a great impression on me. I

*Coincidence, or a perfect example of the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon?*

was shocked. A few weeks later I happened to mention it to a friend who said he was aware of some of the story as his father, after never having talked about his wartime experiences, belatedly related some tales that he had kept private for more than 50 years. Around the same time an email arrived at *iScot* from reader Les Wilson asking if we'd be interested in his father's wartime experiences as part of that 51st (Highland) Division left behind... Coincidence, or a perfect example of the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon? (Sometimes known as the Frequency Illusion, this is a situation where something which has only recently revealed itself continues to appear with improbable frequency shortly thereafter.) Either way, this chain of events has led to us uncovering the extraordinary story of Les's father, Lance Corporal Leslie Wilson of the Gordon Highlanders, and the futile rearguard action fought by the 51st (Highland) Division at St Valéry-en-Caux.

Like many Scots, young Leslie (Les) Wilson wanted to 'do his bit' and managed to blag his way into the Gordon Highlanders when he was only 15 years old, despite the minimum age for signing up being 18. This was not uncommon, and many recruiters were not particularly scrupulous about evidencing their keen young recruits' ages, as they just needed 'men!' His son Les explains, "He lied about his age and, as he was a fairly hefty guy, a big laddie for his age, there wasn't any doubt they'd want to have him because he looked big enough to fight. After basic training he was sent off to Northern France and joined the Highland Division at St Valéry just prior to Dunkirk. So, he was in amongst them when Churchill's so-called 'miracle of Dunkirk' took place, and the Scots troops were left stranded."

In *Dunkirk: The Forgotten Heroes*, the narrator explains the background to St Valéry:

"The evacuation of troops from the beaches of Dunkirk was rightly celebrated as a great moment in British history. On the 9th of June, the day the last troops came home, Prime Minister Winston Churchill rallied the country with his most famous of speeches:

Military Cemetery at St Valéry-en-Caux  
Photo courtesy Stewart Mitchell





# spoke it...



by Gordon  
Craigie



51st (Highland) Division memorial at St Valéry-en-Caux. Photo courtesy Stewart Mitchel

*We shall fight them on the beaches, we shall fight them on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields, and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender...*

What Churchill didn't say was that on that very same day, tens of thousands of British troops were still in France fighting for their lives."

What the narrator, typically, failed to specify was that those *British* troops were, in fact, Scottish – the 51st (Highland) Division...

In 1940, the 51st (Highland) Division comprised infantry soldiers from Scottish regiments – Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Black Watch, Cameron Highlanders, Gordon Highlanders and Seaforth Highlanders – alongside

*They said it would be over by Christmas – didn't say which year though!*

various support units. The *Channel 4* programme features interviews with six survivors, all in their late 90s at the time of recording. The most striking feature of each man's recollections is their quiet dignity and modesty, harbouring no ill-will against their 'enemies' who they clearly saw as being in the same situation as themselves. One softly spoken Scot, Geoff Bryden, (who, sadly, passed away before the programme was broadcast), has a cheeky glint in his eye as he recalls, "They said it would be over by Christmas – didn't say which year though!"





Photo courtesy Stewart Mitchell

20,000 men of the 51st (Highland) Division arrived in France in January 1940 as part of the 500,000-strong British Expeditionary Force sent to help defend the country against a possible German invasion. In the April, the 51st were sent to the Maginot Line, along the French-German border, under the command of the French army. Some of the 'patriotic' British Nationalist historical analysis and *Pathé News* footage featured in the documentary is the usual jingoistic nonsense, all a bit *Blackadder* – hurrah! – but the scenes showing the underground facilities at the Maginot Line are truly remarkable. It was designed to be impenetrable, and it pretty much was, so those pesky Germans outsmarted the Allies by simple scooting round the outside through neighbouring Belgium! Obviously, it was a lot more serious and technical than that flippant description, but by advancing through Belgium instead that was pretty much what actually happened. This unexpected move meant that the 51st were effectively cut off from the rest of the British army who were forced to retreat along the French coast towards Dunkirk. As 338,000 British and French troops were evacuated, the 51st were never told about Dunkirk. Instead, they were ordered to Abbeville, south of Dunkirk, to help the French stop the Germans advancing through France. On the 6th of June, the 51st were forced back from Abbeville and cornered at St Valéry with only rifles to defend themselves against the

*The 51st were effectively cut off from the rest of the British army*

full might of the German army. Their commanding officer, Major-General Fortune, wanted to evacuate but Churchill ordered him to keep fighting. One of the old soldiers recalls, "This was Churchill's idea – no more evacuations, you fight on." Against Ministry of Defence orders, one naval officer secretly organised a flotilla of 207 small ships to evacuate the 51st... but was foiled by the weather. Back in wartime Britain nobody was to know of the 51st (Highland) Division's sacrifice, as that was deemed to be bad for morale. Even that bastion of the Great British Establishment, *The Sunday Telegraph*, reported only last year that, "In 1940, news that 1,000 men had been killed in France after Dunkirk, 5,000 injured and 11,000 taken as prisoners of war was suppressed. Any attention on the men may have undermined Churchill's propaganda victory."

Did Churchill deliberately abandon the Scots as mere cannon fodder, or was it simply an unfortunate and inevitable conclusion resulting from all of the previous battles? Stewart Mitchell, the author of the definitive work on the campaign from the Gordon Highlanders' perspective, *St Valéry and Its Aftermath – The Gordon Highlanders Captured In France In 1940*, thinks the latter but he stresses the importance and lasting impact in Scotland of the events: "The surrender of the 51st (Highland) Division on the 12th of June 1940 was the worst military disaster for Scottish soldiers in the whole of World War II. This is why St Valéry looms so large in the Scottish psyche, with almost every family in the North and East of Scotland losing a relative or friend, killed or captured."

But Leslie Wilson's story is a little different, barely believable given his tender years, but absolutely true. Son Les tells it in his own words: "Dad was captured along with thousands of others. They were herded into fields with sub-machine guns surrounding them and were left in there in the short term. Supposedly the Germans, being stereotypically efficient, were going to ship them off to factories in Germany. One of the few things my father said to me about it was that that day, the time he spent with those men in that field being watched, was the loneliest time of his life. Nobody was really talking, they were all pretty stunned. Deciding



Leslie Wilson at Buckingham Palace with his wife and mother. Photo courtesy Les Wilson

he 'wisnae gonnae hing about there' and wait to see what happened, he managed to escape from that compound at night and headed off down the French coast. He got one or two hitch-hikes off French people and, somewhere near Calais, arrived in a wee village where he was taken in by a woman. She gave him a change of clothes – her husband's, who had already been killed in the war – and she fed him for a day or two. After that it's not clear exactly where he went next but he did say that at one point, as the Germans were fanning out along the coast, he was that cold and depressed that he approached a German soldier and told him he was Scottish, cold and starving – the German just looked at him and walked away! My mother always used to say, 'they didnae want him either!'

"Then he met another woman who could understand English (he couldn't speak French) and knew he was escaping the onslaught from the north. She kindly took him in – he thought she may have been a lady of ill-repute but he couldn't confirm that! – but when it was time for him to leave he admitted he'd rummaged through her drawers to see if there was anything he could make use of while he was trying to escape! Anyway, he found a pistol so he took that and moved on, hiding anywhere he could. One day he sat near the sea and was that fed up he took the pistol out and was shooting tin cans in the water because he didnae know what to do with himself!

"Les gradually moved further south and, near Poitiers, a farmer gave him a lift. This man spoke English and said he could stay at his farm for a time, food and lodgings, if he would work for him. He also warned if there was any hint of the Germans approaching then he would have to leave. That lasted a few months, which was beneficial as it gave Les a chance to think about where he was going to go next and what he was going to do. The coast was packed with Germans so he couldn't go and try to get on a boat. He'd decided that when he had to leave he would go further south towards the Spanish border and try to get into Spain, thinking that might be a way to get a wee bit out of trouble! A few months later, as the French began to work under German orders (Vichy France), it was getting too hot to handle and the farmer told him he'd have to go. They'd been good to him though, so he thanked them and went on his way. In Poitiers he then met a French officer who took him home, fed him, gave him some money and also suggested some local farms in certain areas who could maybe help him

for a wee bit of time. So, Les did some odd jobs for farmers and regularly went back into Poitiers to meet the same French officer, who continued to give him some money, and that also obviously helped to keep him going. On one of his visits though, he bumped into some Germans and the French officer couldn't help him. He was taken prisoner, but escaped – again!

"From St Valéry he had finally reached the Spanish border in a matter of months. But he was still only 16 when he went across the Pyrenees, and he was terrified at night because of wolves! He used to hide as close to hedges as he could and one night a wolf 'jumped ower ma heid!' He got caught by three Spanish policemen as he was walking down a road and was locked up in the local town jail. At night he burst their jail open, stole one of their bikes that was propped up against a wall and took off down the hill! It was pitch black, but he could just about see where he was going in the moonlight. When the sun started to come up, he came off the road and pulled the bike well up a hill, hid it in some hedges and lay down behind. A wee while later he saw the same three Spanish policemen on bikes shooting doon the hill looking for him – they never got him!

"He then tried to get back into the south of France, thinking he might get a boat to take him to North Africa. He was hearing things about the Allies in North Africa, so he thought, maybe... But he got caught again, by the French Vichy police this time, and taken to the Foreign Legion depot in Marseilles. He was handcuffed to a radiator for a period of time over Christmas and eventually they took him in front of a

*At night he burst their jail open, stole one of their bikes that was propped up against a wall and took off down the hill!*



## AWARDED M.M.

### Edinburgh Man Who Was Interned in Morocco

A 20-years-old Edinburgh man serving with the Gordon Highlanders, who was captured at St Valery, escaped and was recaptured by the French and interned in French Morocco after many exciting adventures, has been awarded the Military Medal. He is Lance-Corporal Leslie Wilson, son of Mr and Mrs Wilson, 6 Sunnybank Terrace, Edinburgh.

When the British and Americans entered French Morocco he was released and sent home, reaching this country just in time to "bring in the New Year." After a short leave he joined the Commandos, and is at present in his native city undergoing an instructor's course in physical training.

His 18-years-old wife, whom he married in February, lives at 51 York Place, Aberdeen.



Photos courtesy Les Wilson

Vichy judge. He asked if he could join their Foreign Legion – that's not on his record by the way, he couldn't admit that officially as the British would've thought he was trying to abscond. But he wasn't, what he was trying to do was escape again, which is exactly what the judge said! They put him on a train with other prisoners to take them up to Germany, again to the war factories. When the train slowed down briefly at the start of a tunnel, him and a Polish guy managed to jump out and the train kept going!

"Later on he got caught yet again and was taken to another camp supervised by the Germans and the French Vichy. They had cordoned off part of a river with wire so the prisoners could get a bit of a wash, so he took the chance one day to go under the wire then swam underwater as far as his breath could take him, then turned on to his back and floated down the river for several miles! He ended up back in Marseilles and tried to head down the coast, but he got caught again and shipped off to French Morocco where he was imprisoned. He said it was the only place he didn't want to escape from, because he was getting fed properly and they used to let him out at the

*In all he had been captured and escaped 12 times, and still hadn't celebrated his 19th birthday!*

weekend! His 'holiday' was to end in late 1942 when Allied troops arrived and he was free at last. In all he had been captured and escaped 12 times, and still hadn't celebrated his 19th birthday! He worked for the Americans as an interpreter for a wee while as, by this time, he could speak fluent French but, eventually, he was sent home to be debriefed and that's what his official record is based on."

And what is officially recorded is that Lance Corporal Leslie Wilson of the Gordon Highlanders was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field by King George VI at Buckingham Palace on the 4th of May 1943, aged 19. When the King said, "you're the chap that escaped 10 times", Les replied, "no sir, it was 12 times!"

Les is justifiably proud of his father, adding, "I just think it's a shame his story has never been told. He's gone directly to St Valéry aged 16, went through all that, was captured and escaped 12 times and was awarded that medal, all before he was 20. Over the years he didn't talk much about his exploits, only snippets here and there. He won six or something medals, but I don't know what they were for. He used to give them to us as kids to play with and we lost most of them! He wisnae bothered – he didn't give them much credence. I used to have lots of newspaper clippings that were handed down, but someone borrowed them and I never got them back. I remember some of the headlines though:

*They could not hold Leslie  
Leslie Wilson – the man no prison camp could hold  
Scot among heroes at Palace*

"When he came back to Scotland in 1943, he met and married my mother in Aberdeen. The army put him through commando training, but my mother didn't want him to go

back into action. I think he must've got relief because of his record as he served out the rest of the war as a Physical Training Instructor. His record definitely commanded respect – he always laughed when he recalled a camp when, at reveille every morning, the Sergeant Major would come into the hut and shout to get everybody up but used to say to him, 'Wilson, please get out of bed'!

"It would be fair to say though that he had a very low opinion of Churchill. Les felt the Scots had been left to be shot, killed, whatever, to allow the English to escape. He believed that was Churchill's method – he wanted them to stay there and fight to the last man while all the English regiments got away. They called it 'the miracle of Dunkirk', all the papers, but Churchill rarely mentioned the Highland Division if at all in any of his communiqués. He knew what he'd done and he just didn't want the world to know it. Steve McQueen got a film career out of jumping over a barbed wire fence on a motor bike – all the thanks my Dad got for his efforts was a Nissen hut in Craigmillar!"

Les's story also features in Stewart Mitchell's book though it differs in some details, understandably, as it has been pieced together from different sources. But this version is what has been passed on to his family by the man himself, and what a story, what a man – yet still only a boy when all this was going on. Leslie Wilson's contempt for Churchill was shared by many of his contemporaries. The old soldiers don't explicitly criticise him in the Channel 4 documentary, but neither do they praise him. Their courage and sacrifice has never received any official recognition from the British authorities and no campaign medals have ever been awarded. Surely that is a wrong that can still be righted?

There is, however, one memorial to the bravery of the 51st (Highland) Division at St Valéry, hewed from Aberdeenshire granite and set on a cliff high above the town overlooking the harbour. That bravery had a profound and lasting effect on one young French officer who fought alongside them, General Charles De Gaulle. In 1942, the future French President delivered a speech in Edinburgh where he spoke fondly of the "Franco-Scottish Alliance, the oldest alliance in the world". As well as endorsing the historic ties between our two nations, De Gaulle reserved his most powerful oratory to remember the Scots killed in France in the First World War and the (then) more recent exploits of the 51st at Abbeville and St Valéry-en-Caux ...

*That the soil of France enfolds lovingly the thousands and thousands of Scots whose blood was shed with that of our own soldiers during the last war, I can affirm. The monument to their memory on the hill of Buzancy has, I know, never been more frequently bedecked with flowers than since the new invasion. If the roses of France are bloodstained today, they still cluster round the thistle of Scotland. For my part, I can say that the comradeship of arms, sealed on the battlefield of Abbeville in May-June 1940, between the French armoured division which I had the honour to command and the gallant 51st Scottish Division under General Fortune, played its part in the decision which I made to continue the fight at the side of the Allies to the end, come what may.*

The First World War, supposedly the 'war to end all wars', resulted in 20 million deaths, with Scotland contributing something approaching 150,000 lives to that cause. Yet the futility of war was clearly demonstrated when, a mere 20 years later, the Second World War claimed another 85 million lives, almost 60,000 of them Scots, including those deliberately sacrificed at St Valéry. Now, when populist and far-right forces seem to be spreading their poison once again, we'd do well to remember how much these brave souls sacrificed in order that it shouldn't happen again. We should also remember that Scotland has been a proud European nation since long before the unwanted union

with England was forced upon the Scottish people undemocratically by the ennobled elite of the 17th and 18th Centuries. Our long-standing international friendships, recognised and endorsed by such as Charles De Gaulle in his poignant words above, were hard earned by our ancestors and should not be relinquished lightly. And, in remembering St Valéry 79 years on, we should be inspired by the story of a gallus young Scot who refused to be defeated by any obstacle put in the way of his freedom – Leslie Wilson, the man no prison camp could hold!

Any readers interested in delving further into all of the details of the events leading up to and including St Valéry should seek out Stewart Mitchell's excellent book, *St Valéry and Its Aftermath – The Gordon Highlanders Captured In France In 1940*, and also the Channel 4 documentary, *Dunkirk: The Forgotten Heroes*, still available online at [www.channel4.com](http://www.channel4.com)

*Their courage and sacrifice has never received any official recognition from the British authorities and no campaign medals have ever been awarded*

Photo courtesy Les Wilson

