

**An Interview
With
Seaforth Highlanders
WWII Veteran
John B. Shivas**

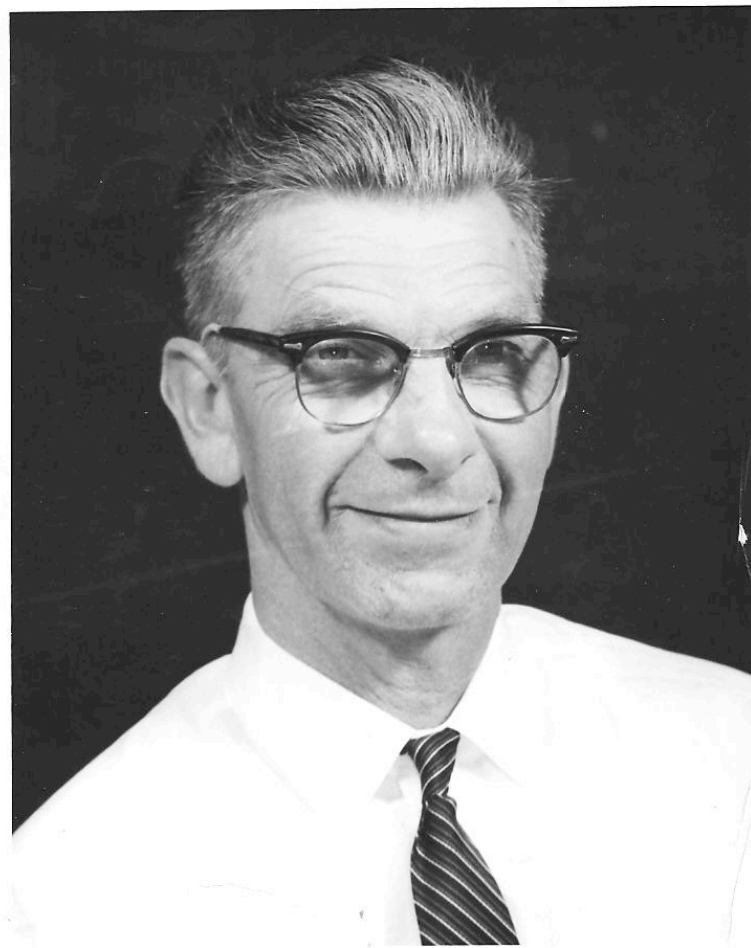


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Introduction

This story is about my father John B. Shivas. Recently, I compiled my fathers recollections of his WWII experiences, that I had researched in High School. In January 2015, I submitted this document into the Invergordon Archive.

This can be viewed by visiting website www.theinvergordonarchive.org under Albums, "Wartime", **Picture No 1638** and selecting "Open Document".

Shortly after being submitted, I received a report from May Knapp who was a student at Chesley District High School, Ontario in 1978 and who knew my father. May had an assignment to interview a War Veteran as part of her studies for Remembrance Day.

May chose my father, who was more than happy to enlighten her on both his experiences serving in WWII and his life as a POW. It was as important for him to keep his story alive as it was to share these recollections with a young student who would present it to her peers. It was also imperative for him to know that this will not be forgotten.

With May's permission, I have compiled her account of this interview in essay format as it had been narrated. The words and terms are written as they were spoken at the time of the interview. This historical document will be submitted to the archive as well.

As part of this presentation, I have also included both the employment of my father prior to joining the Seaforth Highlanders and going to war and where he was employed after returning home from the war in 1945.

Pamela Shivas
November 2015

Interview With John

Before receiving my "Call Up" papers, I was employed as a Deckhand Steward on a private yacht. One week previous to the outbreak of war, I had applied for a transfer from Territorial Army to the Navy, but that was too late because of the "Call-Up".

I had three brothers and two sisters engaged in the war effort. My older brother served with the Air Ministry abroad and the other two and I were in the army. One sister was in the WATS (Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service). The other in a munition factory. My father James Sangster Shivas was in the home guard.

The British had a "build-up". They were prepared to protect Britain. Every man put his effort into the war. They were determined to prevent the enemy from landing. The leader of the British force was General Bernard Montgomery.

All of Europe had more than enough of bloodshed and destruction. They were forced through circumstances, to tolerate the fanatical attitude toward innocent civilians who didn't feel safe. The older folks suffered aerial bombings, they had to flee from their homes. They were uprooted and some of them went to internment camps, others went to concentration camps. At times they were allowed to go home, maybe once a month others were less fortunate. An example would be the Jews, who not only suffered severe privations in the concentration camps, the Jews were led to believe they were being taken for a shower. But, instead the pipes leading into the building emitted gas. Hence, the gas chambers.

Every country invaded by the Nazi's had to suffer the tyranny of the notorious "Gestapo", who were a secret police agency. They were efficient, ruthless, inhumane and well trained in what they had to do.

One memorable moment was when, as a POW, I was to hear from a German guard that the HMS Hood was sunk. To me, the HMS Hood was unsinkable. It was sunk in the North Sea. It must have been a lucky shot from the German ship, the "Bismarck". A shell exploded in the magazine and 1200 - 1400 men were killed or drowned, very few of the crew survived the wreck.

World War II was caused by Hitler's desire for world power. The more country's he subdued the more confident and greedy he became. The word "blitzkrieg" became famous and eventually infamous as his massive, well trained and well armed forces raced over Europe subduing all in its path. Eventually the country's concerned, known as the allies, had stopped and crushed the invading Nazi forces.

I was in the war from the beginning and was captured in France by General Rommel.

"Desert Fox" was his nickname.

I was captured on June 12, 1940 by the Germans. I was forced marched to Zuiderzee, thence by coal barge to Stalag VIIIB which was a POW camp in Lamsdorf, Poland. I was kept in this camp until January 22, 1945 when the evacuation of the prison camp began.

I was a POW for five years. During this time our food consisted of a ladle of soup a day, generally made from millet seed (bird seed). They also gave us a kind of kale and fish soup which resembled ordinary salt water. Also, we received one cup of ersatz coffee which consisted of acorns and worked like a diuretic on ones system. We received one 4 oz slice of bread which was black and was sour as lemon. This bread was said to keep up to 15 years.

We received one spoonful of jam each day. Our meat usually consisted of a little piece of horse meat, which was sometimes put into our soup. We received a little round piece of cheese which resembled gouda. The colour of the fresh cheese was orange and after a long time would become slimy. It not only looked rotten it smelled rotten. We were warned not to drink the water because it was contaminated and would cause dysentery.

Fortunately, the Red Cross of the Geneva Convention succeeded in getting us food. Their packages mostly contained Klim (powdered milk spelled backwards), sardines, herring and sometimes chocolate drink. Sometimes we received eggs from the Polish people among whom we sometimes worked.

Stalag VIIIB was a miserable overcrowded lice infested death trap. No insulation from cold or from heat and low ceilings. Wooden bunks with straw palliasses, three tiers high and the topmost within two feet of the ceiling with only one small blanket for warmth. Wood bugs, lice and red ants in abundance. Some POW's suffered more than others from sores and lice infestation.

We were marched to the shower room maybe once a month where water trickled from perforated overhead pipes. Lack of food and medicines caused weakness and dizziness to a point where if one sat down, he could hardly get up, without reeling around for a bit. One almost became "inhuman", though we did try to maintain some self respect.

Those who were married and those with strong family ties suffered severe mental strain. Especially when they would hear snatches of German propaganda, which was most demoralizing to us all. Lack of mail too, didn't help. It was several months before that became available to us. It was about this time too, that the "Red Cross" food parcels started to filter in. How we did indeed thank God for that organization.

Gradually the mood changed and petty arguments, quarrels and the cheating for an extra morsel of food got phased out and an atmosphere of camaraderie began to show again.

Sunday religious services were amazingly patronized and little fake concerts now and then raised our morale. Our war planes passing high overhead, going to and from Russia, dropping bombs enroute and attracting a barrage of Anti-Aircraft fire from German gunners, gave us a boost and hope for the future.

German guards were very strict and “touchy”, especially the younger ones. Then, too, a lot depended on the Commanding Officer. If he were a good soldier, who respected others, then this reflected on the guards and all concerned. If, however, he inherited this fanatical Nazi “doctrine”, then woe betide both the guards and the prisoners alike.

After America and Russia entered the war, the young and fit were replaced by older veterans as guards and they were very “edgy” and “trigger happy”. If a guard showed a little respect for us, we showed our appreciation by secretly slipping a cigarette and a piece of chocolate (Red Cross issue) to him.

According to the Geneva Convention ruling among participating nations, POW camps must be located away from any military target such as airports, military installations, ammunition factories and hydro dams.

My first work job, was laying the tarmac on a Luftwaffe air base. Another job was on the railway line laying new tracks. Finally, I along with 20 others were sent to coal mines at Knurów, Poland. Because of my complaining ear problem I was given work on the shunting yard of a massive mine. I was so glad not to have to work underground where conditions were bad and dangerous because of more demand for more and more production of coal without fire precautions against accidents.

After the war when we were released from POW camp, we generally rested in disused barns after long marches. On the day previous to our release, the German Officer guards wanted us to march on. However, our interpreter told them, that, because of our condition we just couldn't be moved. Hunger, weariness and the extreme pain from poorly shod feet after so many weeks of forced marching to keep ahead of the advancing Russians proved too much for us.

The USA army was also approaching from the west, and the guards were not anxious to leave us as we could be their only protection from being shot at by our allies. The officer and some of his men did leave and the remaining guards eventually handed in their weapons to us. We selected a leader and he then selected his ‘aids’ and announced “You are now back in the British Army and will obey my orders”.

Emaciated as we were, we cheered and the guards now our prisoners, seemed to understand and even they seemed to appreciate these moments of jubilation. We all seemed to straighten up and to act as men again.

Our new leader, immediately told us to stay within the barn, not to panic because of the approaching gunfire and lie perfectly flat and quiet, should his spotters notice anyone approaching. Through the cracks in the barn boards on the following morning, we noticed people moving out from a nearby village, with a huge white flag towards an approaching column of tanks.

Within moments we were enjoying, for the first time in five years, good stable American food, cigarettes and a friendly handshake from General Patton's 3rd Army soldiers. Above all, our first taste of freedom.

The American padre had us congregate in a field, where we joined in prayer and hymn singing, ending up with that patriotic song "Land of Hope and Glory".

For almost a year after returning home I felt I was still being kept under observation. I experienced the strangest feeling on boarding a train or a bus. Perhaps I should mention too, that when stepping off the train at my home station in Invergordon, I was exceptionally nervous and waited until it pulled out before crossing the footbridge to the exit.

I found out from the one and only person I recognized, an old signalman, as to how my parents and other kin were faring and was relieved to learn they were still alive. I had absolutely no idea what to expect up to that moment, because since the intensity of the war had increased in 1944 and Germany was getting severely bombed and destroyed, all mail was cut off to POW camps.

The same could be said of my folks, who were not aware of how I was faring! When I was first captured, the War Office sent word to my parents that my brother Andrew and I were reported "Missing in Action" after the fall of France in June 1940.

Our fate was eventually made known to them several months later when POW's were allowed to send one letter and a post card per month censored by the Nazi's.

Then you can imagine the joy of "Welcome Home" for us all, after years of anxiety and privations, bravely borne by those at home.

Before the War

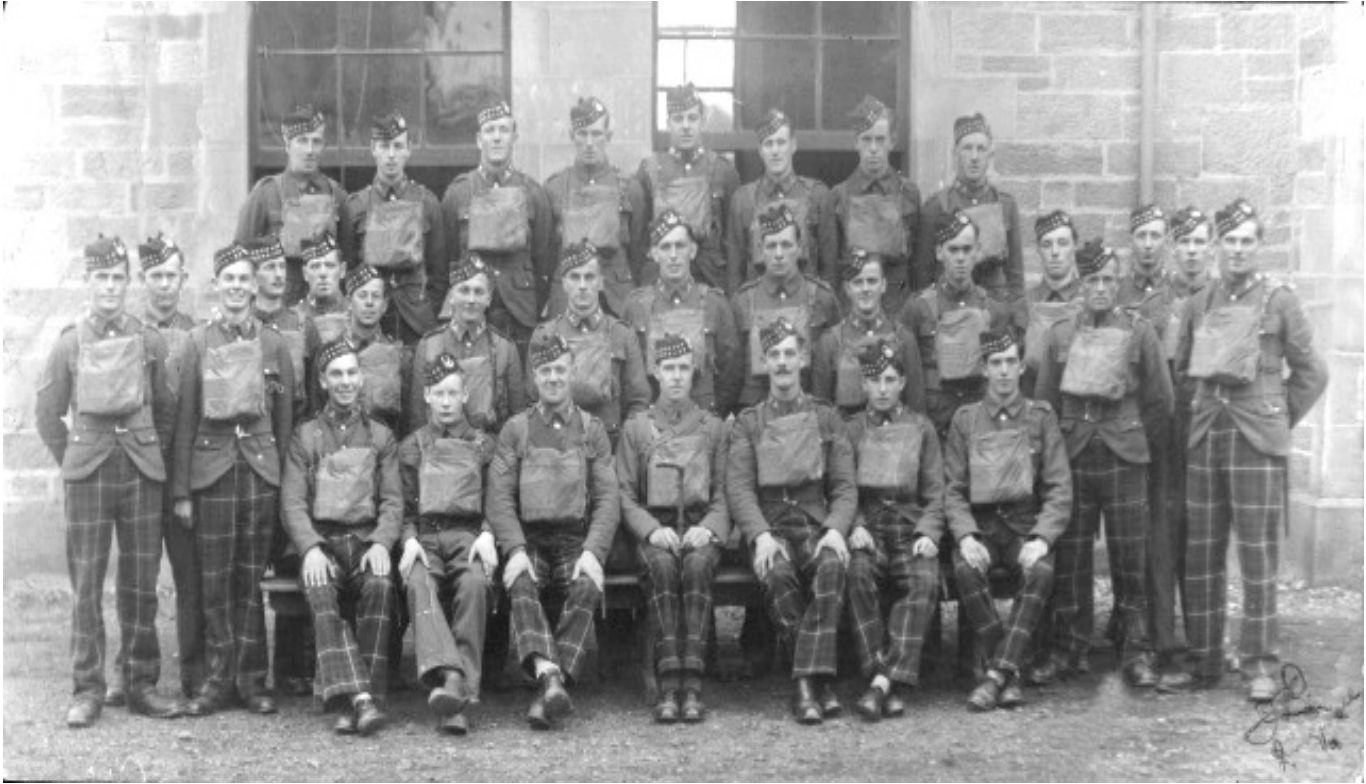
Andrew Carnegie's Yacht

John B. Shivas - approximate year 1938 just prior to WWII before receiving his "call-up" papers. He was employed by Andrew Carnegie's daughter Mrs. Margaret Carnegie Miller. John was the Deckhand Steward aboard Andrew Carnegie's Yacht on the Dornoch Firth where Skibo Castle is located in Dornoch, Scotland.

He wanted to transfer from the territorial army to the British Navy but that was too late due to the "call-up".



4th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders 51st Division, Line Infantry



Picture taken at Dingwall Academy Scotland in 1939.

Back Row: Ackie Ross (Millcraig), Richard Geddes, Murdo Murray, Dune MacDonald, Colin Ross (Saltburn), ?, Ronnie Fraser.

Middle Row: Willie Ross (Decko), Ackie Urquhart (Saltburn), Andrew Shivas, Jack Rhind, Dave McCulloch, George Munro (Alness), Bobby Speed, Arthur Riach, Hugh Morrison, Sandy MacLennan, Paul Calder, Dune Urquhart, Ali Mitchell (Alness), Jocky Duff, Davie Ross, Andrew Fraser, Roddie MacDonald.

Front Row: Johnny Shivas, Colin Urquhart, Sgt. Kenny Ross, Capt. McBeath, Reid Ross, Davie Beaumont, Willie Pirie.

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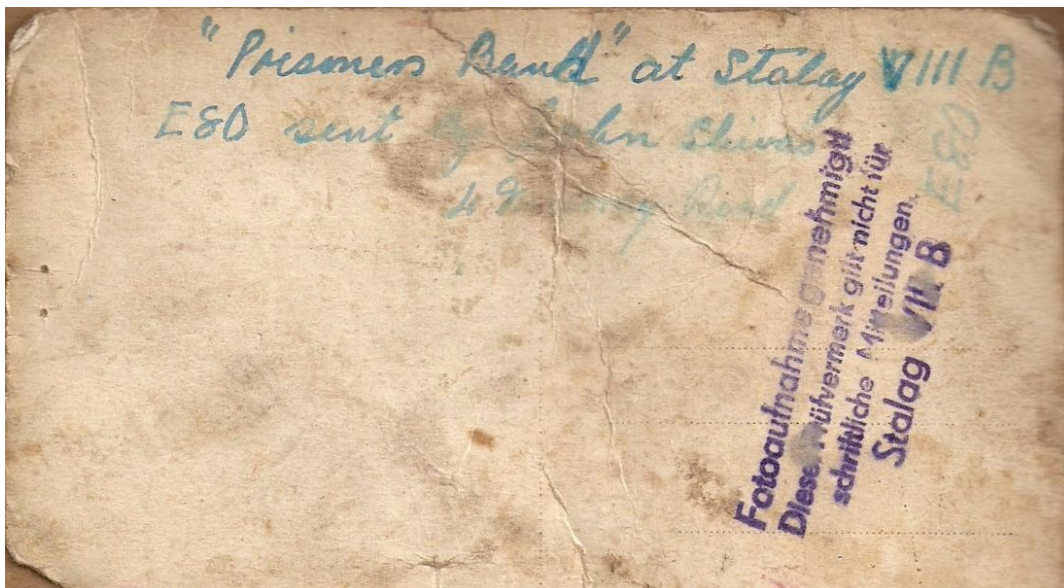
Pte. John B. Shivas / Camp No. 344 Lamsdorf Poland / POW No. 17006 / Army No. 2820489

Pte. Andrew Shivas / Camp No. 8B Teschen / POW No. 17046 / Army No. 2820984

The Prisoners Band

The Prisoners Band at Stalag VIII B Lamsdorf, Poland.

This postcard was sent by John B. Shivas from Stalag VIII B / 344 Lamsdorf, to his mother and father, Aimee and James Sangster Shivas of 4 Murray Road, Invergordon Scotland.



News Article From The Ross-Shire Journal



Four sons of Mr and Mrs J. Shivas, 4 Murray Road, Invergordon, serving in the forces. Above—John and Andrew, both Seaforths, prisoners in Germany. Below—Cpl. C. Shivas, R.A.M.C., and B. Shivas, ex-Seaforths, now in the Home Guard. Mr Shivas himself was in the last war. A daughter, Margaret, is working on munitions.



Note: John and Andrew were both captured on June 12, 1940 and were POW's at Stalag VIIIB Lamsdorf, Poland. Andrew was moved to Teschen, Polish / Czech border in 1943.

Sgt. Charles Shivas was with the REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) stationed in West Africa and India during the war.

James ("Beam") Shivas served with the Air Ministry abroad.

Private John B. Shivas

Seaforth Highlanders 4th Battalion, 51st Division, Line Infantry

Army No. 2820489 / Camp No. 344 Lamsdorf Poland / POW No. 17006



Private Andrew Shivas

Seaforth Highlanders 4th Battalion, 51st Division, Line Infantry

Army No. 2820984 / Camp No. 8B Teschen / POW No. 17046

December 1943 the camps Teschen and Lamsdorf were separated and the number Stalag VIIIB was applied to Teschen camp and Lamsdorf became Stalag 344.

Andrew was moved to Stalag VIIIB Teschen in 1943.



After WWII

From : Commanding Officer, R.N.A.S. Fearn.
Date : 1st. August 1946.
To : Transport Officer, R.N.A.S. Lossiemouth.

Mr. Shivas has been employed at R.N.A.S. Fearn as an all class vehicle driver.

On this Station having no fitters, this man has been of invaluable assistance in the servicing of remaining transport, and has been our "Queen Mary" driver.

He has an unblemished driving record, and I recommend him fully to you as a most reliable man.

(Signed) C. Hay
Lieut. Commander, R.N.

After the war John B. Shivas was employed at RNAS (Royal Naval Air Service) Fearn, Scotland as an all class vehicle driver.

The above letter of recommendation notes that he was their "*Queen Mary*" driver.

I asked a good friend Joe Williamson who is originally from Tain, Scotland if he could define a "Queen Mary" driver. Here is an excerpt from his email.

"John, your Dad did drive a few Queen Mary's to the North. The trailer section was approximately 70 feet long and approximately 10 - 12 feet wide with a set of wheels, two at the rear end. They were built of steel.

The reason they were taken up North was to make small bridges, mostly for farmers with small rivers on their property.

The unit was made by Taskers in Andover U.K.. Two versions 3 tons and 5 tons. The actual trailer = 50 feet. With the tractor total was 70 feet in length. Two types of tractors were used: Bedfords and Crossleys. Made for carrying downed or crashed aircraft during WWII. Used by the RAF and RNAS. There are still a few around".

Queen Mary Semi-Trailers
Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre, East Kirkby, Lincolnshire, UK.



Pictures provided and with permission by Michael Hill, East Kirkby, Lincolnshire, UK
February 4, 2015.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone for their contribution in helping to complete the second part of my father's WWII recollections.

A special thank you to May Knapp who chose to interview my father for her WWII project in 1978.

It has been my privilege and with great pride I am able to preserve this historical document of my father's account as a soldier, POW and survivor of WWII.

We must always remember and honour our Veterans and never forget the ultimate sacrifice these brave soldiers gave serving in WWII.

We have our freedom because of their sacrifice.

"Lest we Forget"

Pamela Shivas
November 2015