

A SHARED MOMENT OF CELEBRATION



80th Anniversary of VE Day
8th May 1945

Some War Memories from Stoneleigh and Ashow

Stoneleigh History Society

2025

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM



A silver on copper plaque in the church commemorates the names of Humphrey Desmond Cooke and John Copland Aris, both of whom died in 1942. Cooke served in the RAF and Aris in the Royal Navy, and the emblems of each service are included on the plaque. It was placed under the World War One memorial in 1946.

Two other Stoneleigh men are buried with Commonwealth Headstones in the churchyard. Donald Stewart Hegan died 1942 and John Alun Edmunds died 1944.

JOHN COPELAND ARIS

C/JX 207145 Ordinary Telegraphist HMS Nigeria, Royal Navy.

Remembered with Honour, Chatham Naval Memorial, Kent

Commemorated in Stoneleigh Church

John Copeland Aris was the son of Ernest Aris and his wife Margaret Bird née Copeland. His father served on HMS Queen Elizabeth during the Great War and subsequently spent much of his life serving as a naval reserve in Australia.

John (or Jack, as he was known) was born on 5 April 1921 – sources vary as to whether he was born in Stoneleigh or in Dunfermline, Scotland. He had an older brother Ernest and two younger siblings, Gordon and Jessie, all of whom emigrated to the USA with their mother in later years.

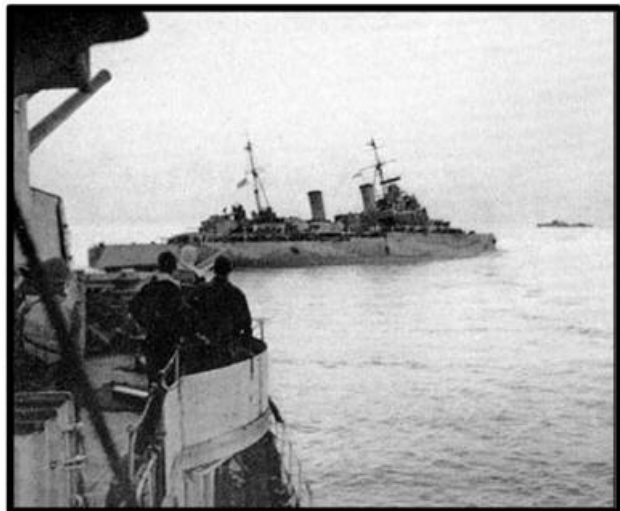
John served on *HMS Nigeria*, a flagship light cruiser which on 10 August 1942 left Gibraltar as part of a large escort for an important convoy carrying supplies - particularly fuel - to Malta. Operation Pedestal, as it was known, supported Malta as a base from which Allied ships, submarines and aircraft attacked Axis convoys to their forces in Libya and Egypt during the North Africa Campaign.

On 12 August the air attacks started with Nigeria leading the port column of the convoy. Concerted attacks from both German and Italian aircraft and submarines lasted all day until at 19:56 hours a torpedo from the Italian submarine Axum struck the ship on the port side abreast the forward funnel. A list of 17° developed in a few minutes.

John Aris was one of the 52 casualties:

4 Officers and 48 Ratings were killed, and 15 wounded.

HMS Nigeria managed to make it back to Gibraltar.



HMS Nigeria after being torpedoed

HUMPHREY DESMOND COOKE

Wing Commander 37062, 206 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Remembered with Honour at Hamburg Cemetery

Commemorated in Stoneleigh Church



Humphrey Desmond Cooke was born on 18 January 1914, the second son of Stoneleigh's vicar, the Reverend Herbert Cooke and his wife Edith Maud née Harrison. He was baptised at Stoneleigh Church on 3 March. His sister Dorothy was born six years later in 1920.

Humphrey was educated at Shrewsbury, and in the summer of 1938 married Maureen Alice Elinor Alcock, in Aldershot. She was the only child of Colonel and Mrs H. Alcock, of Chester. He and Maureen had a daughter, Sally, born in summer 1939.

Initially reported missing in air operations over Germany, Humphrey was killed in action over Bremen on 25 June 1942. His squadron was part of Coastal Command, working in co-operation with Bomber Command. On the night of 25 June 1942, they took part in the attack on the city of Bremen carried out by a thousand bombers from all the combatant commands. Their Hudson aircraft flew in four formations of three aircraft each.

Two aircraft of the squadron of twelve failed to return including the one with **Squadron Commander, W/C. Cooke**; it was his first operational flight with the Squadron.

(information gathered from <http://www.coastalcommand206.com/historical-manuscript>)

JOHN ALUN EDMONDS

1816413 Sergeant (Flight Engineer) Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Buried in Stoneleigh Churchyard Section E Row 9 Grave 1



John Alun Edmonds was born in Coventry in late 1916, the second son of John Odey Edmonds and his wife Margaret née Williams. Two sisters were born in 1919 and 1922.

In mid-1938 John was married to Edna Beatrice Powell, in Coventry. He was a senior stores account clerk.

He died aged 27 on 25 July 1944 on war service, on a night training flight. The engine of his Stirling III aircraft developed problems and landed just short of the runway at Gaydon. He had lived at 134, Anchorway Road, Coventry.

DONALD STEWART HEGAN

129635 Pilot Officer (Observer), Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Buried in Stoneleigh Churchyard Section C Row 5 Grave 11



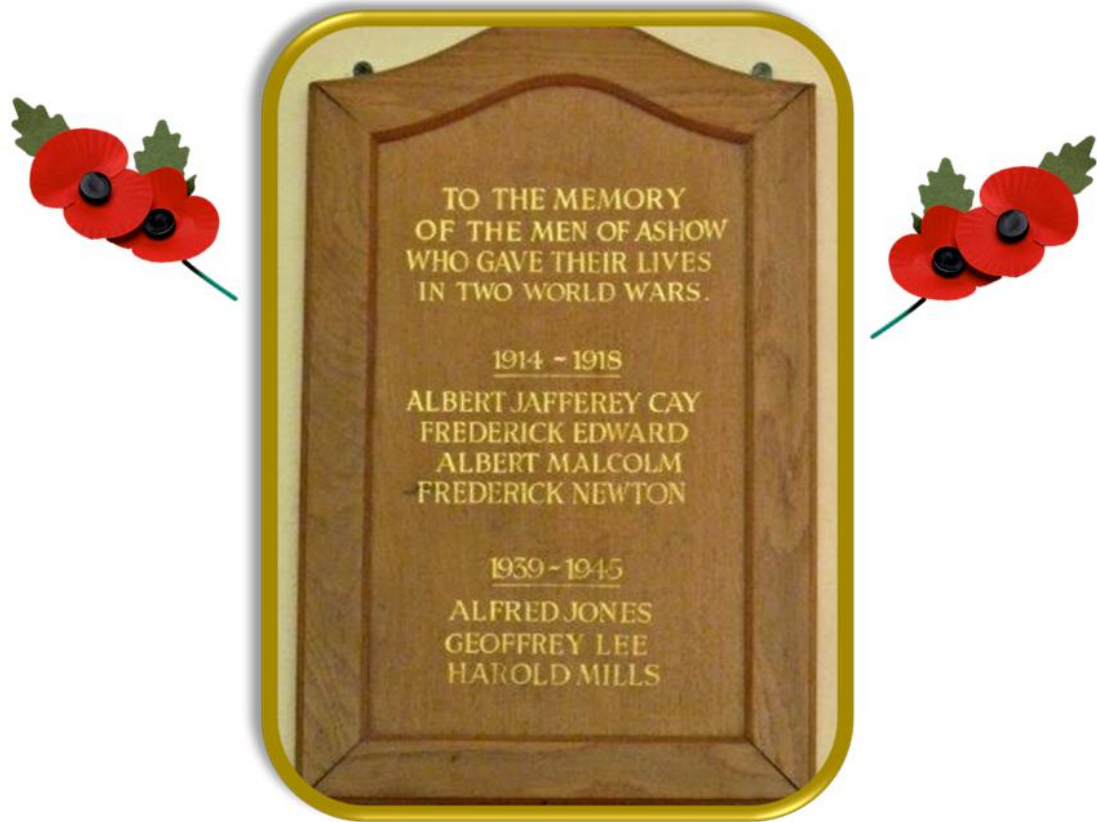
Donald Stewart Hegan was born in Coventry in 1916 to Horace James Hegan and his wife May née Booth. His father was a chemist, who travelled to the USA as part of his profession and was the chief research chemist at Courtaulds in Coventry. Donald was educated at Coventry Preparatory School and Wrekin College before going up to Exeter College, Oxford; he, like his father, became a research chemist and was living at home at 69, Kenilworth Road with his parents at the time of the 1939 register.

Although his work was a “reserved occupation” he joined the RAF in 1940, undertaking training in the USA. He was married in 1941 to Valerie Kerby, many of whose family are also buried at Stoneleigh – her parents and brother at Section B 1.22.

Donald became a Pilot Officer Observer in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and died on 31 October 1942 during training at Amerton, Staffordshire, as the result of a flying accident in a Wellington bomber. He and five other crew were all killed.

His last address was Oak Lawns, Stoneleigh Road, Gibbet Hill. He and Valerie had been married for less than a year.

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM



The Roll of Honour board in Ashow Church commemorates the names of Alfred Jones who died in Normandy in 1944, Geoffrey Lee whose aircraft crashed in Germany in 1943, and Harold Mills who was killed in action in Italy in 1944.

GEOFFREY LEE

Geoffrey Lee 31 August 1943 Sergeant, 102 Squadron RAF

Geoffrey Lee was born in Ashow in 1920, the youngest child of Mabel and Frederick William Hobill Lee, an architect who designed many of Leamington's buildings and who became Chairman of Warwick Rural District Council. Geoffrey had joined 102 Squadron, part of Bomber Command, and become a navigator, based at Pocklington in Yorkshire.

In May 1943, while on an operational flight to Dortmund, his aircraft was fired upon by flak guns on ships in the North Sea, receiving damage. Just a few months later, on 31 August, his aircraft crashed in Germany with the loss of all six crew. They had been shot down by a night fighter just south of their target during a raid on Monchengladbach. He and his comrades are all buried at Rheinberg War Cemetery.

In Memory Of

Sergeant

GEOFFREY LEE

Service Number: 921759

102 Sqdn., Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 31 August 1943

Son of Frederick William Hobill Lee and Mabel Dora Lee, of Ashow, Warwickshire.

Remembered with Honour

RHEINBERG WAR CEMETERY

Sp. Mem. 3. G. 6.



ALFRED WILLIAM JONES

Alfred William Jones 17 July 1944 Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Alfred was born in Coventry in 1925, the son of Alfred and Mabel Jones née Armitt. The family lived in Ashow and Alfred had a younger sister, born a year after him. Alfred joined the 6th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers and landed in Normandy at the end of June 1944.

He was killed in battle in the Bocage a few weeks later, on 17 July 1944, when he was just 19. Such was the ferocity of fighting there that he has no known grave but is commemorated on a panel on the Bayeux War Memorial, which honours the names of 1808 Commonwealth service personnel who died in the Battle of Normandy and who have no known grave.



Bayeux Cemetery

HAROLD MILLS

Harold Mills 31 August 1944 Private, 5th Battalion Sherwood Foresters

Harold, born in Ashow on 19 June 1921, was the elder son of Albert Mills and his wife Alice née Gardner. When war broke out, he was working as a groundsman on a local golf course but joined the 5th Battalion Sherwood Foresters.

He was twice wounded while serving, before being killed in action on 31 August 1944 during the Italy campaign. On that day the 5th Sherwood Foresters took Monte Vecchio on the second day of their assault. It was an extraordinary feat of arms as the fortified hilltop village was taken by the infantry alone; his battalion received seven gallantry awards over those two days. He is buried at Montecchio, along with 581 other Commonwealth servicemen.



Montecchio War Cemetery

The Village in Wartime



School Photo at the end of the 1930s

Notes from the School Logbook

On September 4 1939, the day after war was declared, the school logbook tells that the older boys opened up the school cellar as an air-raid shelter, and the Infants' room was taken as an Air Raid Warden HQ.

Sandbags were put in place, and the 122 children had practices on a daily basis in case of air-raids.

By July 1940 the shelter was equipped with battery torches, sanitary buckets, seats and first aid equipment. Gas masks were regularly inspected.

On September 30 "air-raids during both morning and afternoon caused the whole school to adjourn to the shelter".

On November 15: "During the night an extremely heavy air-raid was made on Coventry." Voluntary evacuees were admitted to the school. From then until Christmas there were still more raids, and the children had to take shelter during the day.

The second blitz on Coventry, on April 9 1941 had similar effects.

On May 8 1945 the school was closed in celebration of Victory in Europe, and the flag was raised.



Memories



Bob Scarsbrooke (born in 1930)

- I remember the air-raid shelters, one on the blacksmith's green and one outside Craine's store (now The Old Post Office).
- I remember the army camp set up on the Finham Road with its anti-aircraft guns, and the American army base in the Deer Park.
- I remember when I was in the school playground and saw bombs leaving a German bomber which was being chased by a British fighter plane; a line of bomb craters came from the National Agriculture Centre's field, across the River Avon and to a further field. We children went to the field to see the damage and collected spent bullet cases and clips and made belts to wear round our waists. A bomb also dropped in the field behind the village hall but did not explode.



Peter Lambert (born in 1935)

On the night of November 14 I watched Coventry burn, the light of the fire lit up the German bombers coming over our house. [Peter lived opposite the Co-Op on Coventry Road]. Later when we were bombing Germany, bombers took off from Baginton every teatime, so heavily laden they barely cleared our roof – the noise from the engines was deafening. I remember a morning in school when a brave Polish airman crashed just on the other side of the bluebell wood, less than half a mile from the village.

Dennis Craddock (born 1934)

- I remember going to the picture shows at the army camp in the Deer Park and trying to scale the high training walls there.
- I remember when American army trucks got stuck under the Rocky Lane bridge.



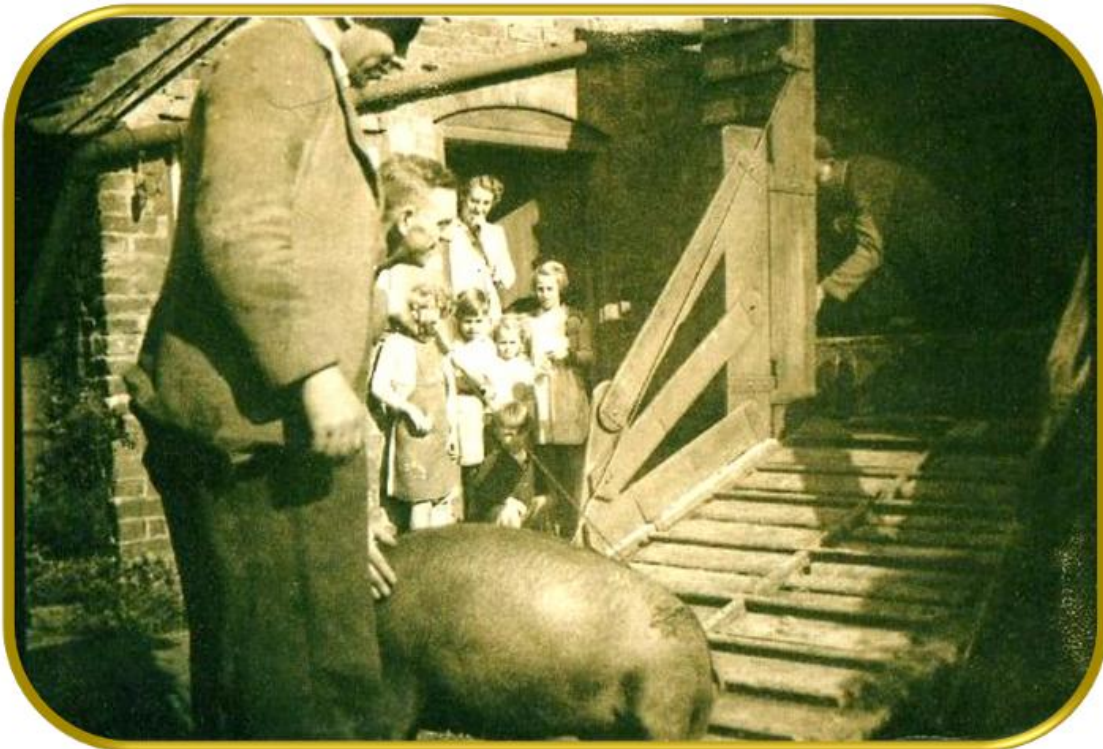
Memories



Philip Healey

- I remember the Americans in the Deer Park and that when the British Army replaced them, some “army children” attended Stoneleigh School.
- I remember that refugees from the East End of London - some of whom were pretty rough! - came to stay with village families. Those who had been bombed out of Coventry came to live at Stareton and on the Finham Road in hutted camps, and their children also attended school.
- When the American Air Force was based nearby, I remember a crash on Motslow Hill when two pilots were looping the loop. Boys used to like scavenging for “aeroplane glass” – Perspex – and by using a red-hot poker would make rings from it.
- I remember the King driving along the Kenilworth Road when visiting Coventry, and when Churchill came, the children marched with flags to Gibbet Hill to see him go past. The great man was presented with a cigar tied with a red ribbon!

Everyone remembers the number of pigs kept in the village, which were regularly slaughtered and joints of their meat shared with friends to supplement rations.



Evacuees

Many families whose homes were bombed in the Coventry Blitz were also evacuated to Stoneleigh and to Stoneleigh Abbey. Temporary “homes” or “huttet camps” were set up in fields near the village.

Lord Leigh (John Piers) remembered:

“I was only five years old.

After the big November air raid on Coventry, 69 refugees were housed in the Abbey. They had beds here in the Long Corridor and in the basements – anywhere that room could be found. My mother and Mrs Lee, the housekeeper, gave our temporary lodgers porridge and toast for breakfast, baked potatoes filled with dripping and cheese for tea, when they got back from Coventry after clearing up and salvaging their belongings. For supper – home-made soup made from anything edible that could be found in the garden, toast and pudding. There was a roaring log fire, but no other means of heating and a baby born in the basement unfortunately died from the cold.

The house was very full of strangers as we also had St Joseph’s Convent boarded in the West Wing and run as a full-time girls’ school by the nuns. An unexploded shell which fell near the Abbey landed on the far side of the Gatehouse on the edge of the Royal Showground.”



COUNTRY HOMES IN WARTIME

No. 14:

STONELEIGH

ABBEY,

KENILWORTH

(ON LEFT)

LADY LEIGH AND SOME
OF THE LITTLE GIRLS
FROM ST. JOSEPH'S
CONVENT, COVENTRY

The place is the Natural History Collection at Stoneleigh and the two little girls are Doreen Eggington and Shirley Clawson, two of the ninety-eight children evacuated to this lovely spot in Warwickshire from the convent in Coventry. The particular exhibit which is being shown is probably a sambar, one of the biggest, if not the biggest, stags in the world. Lady Leigh is a kinswoman of Lord St. Aldwyn and a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Hicks-Beach.

Evacuees at the Abbey

The children from St Joseph's Convent in Kenilworth were evacuated to Stoneleigh Abbey in August 1939.

FORMER CISTERCIAN MONASTERY IS WARTIME CONVENT HOME

Since last August St. Joseph's Convent School of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy has been evacuated from Coventry to Lord and Lady Leigh's beautiful home, Stoneleigh Abbey, Kenilworth, which has been in their family for several centuries. Parts of the old building date back to the twelfth century, and the Abbey was originally a Cistercian monastery. The old wing is entirely self-contained, and used by the family; the "new part," built about 1720, is occupied by 93 children of the Convent School, the Reverend Mother and the Sisters of the Convent. A few small boys have been allowed to join their sisters for the duration of the war. They all enjoy their new surroundings to the utmost, the fine panelled rooms as classrooms; large bedrooms with views over the Park as dormitories, and the stone-vaulted refectory as their dining-rooms.

295



The Reverend Mother with Sister Mary Frances in the room used as her office.

Evacuees at the Abbey



Two of the nuns take a class for the little ones.



Some of the older pupils prepare the little ones for bed.



Small person enjoying herself in a very large bath.



Tricycle race from the gatehouse.



"Girls of St. Joseph's Convent School, Coventry, playing cricket at Stoneleigh Abbey. The school has been evacuated to the 12th century monastery, the home of Lord Leigh."



Americans at the Deer Park



The yanks are coming! “Rehabilitation Center Number One”

In October 1943 a 1000-bed convalescent hospital opened at Stareton in the Deer Park.

At first it was known as the 8th Convalescent Hospital Unit. The main aims were Rehabilitation, Military Training and Morale. “Return the patient to fighting fitness in the shortest possible time.”

Many of the patients were USAAF personnel and equipment to help them return to service was added to the camp – fuselages of B26 and other aircraft, guns and turrets.

After medical examinations the patients were given remedial exercises, physiotherapy and general PT. They were divided into classes according to whether their injuries were to their knee, back, shoulder etc.

On a visit to Coventry one of the men wrote “Evidence of the bombing can still be seen but is apparently forgotten by the residents who go about their business quite normally.”

In December 1943 the hospital was replaced by the 307th Station Hospital. It was regularly inspected by Generals and other high-ranking officers from the US Army. A popular visitor was the boxer Joe Louis, who refereed a boxing contest in June 1944.

By June 1944 an Irish labour camp run by the British Ministry of works was added adjacent to the American camp and 350 more beds were added.

There was a theatre, and dances were held. Stoneleigh residents were invited to these, and their children to the cinema. The American band played at events in the Victory Hall.

After D Day many more injured Americans were transferred to Stoneleigh. All were flown in via Baginton. The centre became known for its orthopaedic surgery as well as for remedial work such as electrotherapy and hydrotherapy to stimulate the nerves. Several men had had limbs amputated and needed to work with prosthetic limbs.

The unit was effectively disbanded in November 1944.

Information from “Bridging the Gap”, US Army Rehabilitation Centres in Warwickshire during World War II” by Fran and Martin Collins

Therapy & Training



Occupational Therapy at 307th Station Hospital (AMEDD)



Occupational Therapy at 307th Station Hospital (AMEDD)



Educational Training at 307th Station Hospital (AMEDD)



Military Training at 307th Station Hospital (AMEDD)



Rehabilitation activities at 307th Station Hospital (AMEDD)



Physical training in the gymnasium at 307th Station Hospital (AMEDD)

Abbey Park Obstacle Course

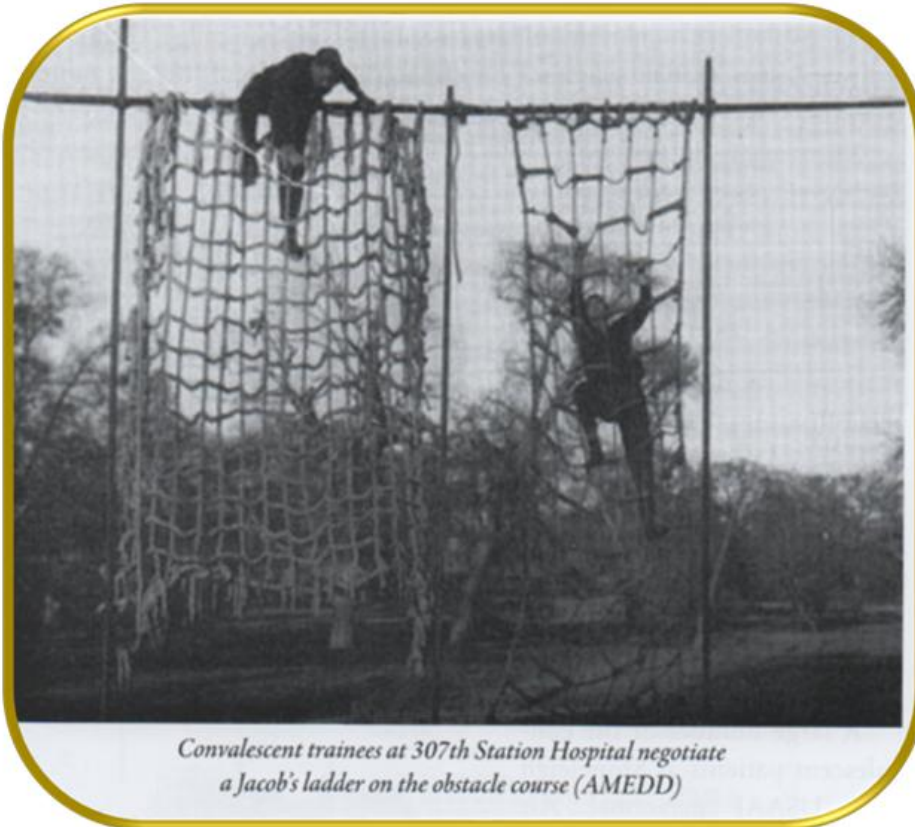


*Grade A trainees on obstacle course, 8th Convalescent Hospital
(© Imperial War Museums D16615)*



Private Gilbert Casados crosses the River Avon on one of two ropes as part of an obstacle course at the 8th Convalescent Hospital. The course was built by trainees who have recently been promoted to A grade (© Imperial War Museums D16617)

Fitness Training



Convalescent trainees at 307th Station Hospital negotiate a Jacob's ladder on the obstacle course (AMEDD)



Trainees at the 8th Convalescent Hospital who have recently been promoted to A grade, test themselves to see if they are fully fit (© Imperial War Museums D16613)