

tomorrow the war started in Hitler's panzers after many and sabre-rat-

and France officially day, September 3, serve forces and well under way.

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the weekend, hun- and women from comes to join the Naval Reserve, theitorial Service and isations, to fight nation.

to answer the call lowed.

ite war memorials village from Muir Ardgay still testi- were never to

rk the anniversary y of one man who ordinary private rial unit, the 4th ghlanders, on the sneak attack thatocaust.

70 and lives with little pensioners' Crescent Ainess.

A native of Dornoch, Sutherland, he was working as a ploughman at Castlecraig, Nigg, that last week before war broke out.

Indeed he could have used his occupation as an excuse to keep well away from the firing line and the forces altogether, as farm workers were exempt from military service from the very beginning.

"It was a reserved occupation right enough," recalls Willie, "but I had joined the Terriers three years before and I wanted to serve King and Country.

"We were called up on the Friday Hitler went into Poland and Chamberlain declared war the following Sunday.

"We were all local boys of course and we mustered at Ferintosh Distillery, Dingwall. These were our digs for the first few months of the war."

The battalion left Dingwall shortly after New Year, in the middle of one of the coldest winters of the century.

The Seaforths spent a brief spell in Woking, Surrey, then at Bordon Camp, near Aldershot, before crossing the English Channel to Le Havre - the first time most had ever been away from Britain.

DIARY

Like many of his contemporaries Willie kept a diary, though the exigencies of the service didn't

always allow him to fill it as regularly as he would have liked.

It records that on February 2, his battalion, part of the famous 51st Highland Division, had reached Amiens and that on February 26 it went up to take its place in the front line for the first time.

It was in the front line again early in April and on May 5, five days before Hitler invaded neutral Holland and Belgium, it moved up to the Maginot Line, France's vast chain of fortifications along its boundary with Germany.

On May 29, as thousands of other British and Allied soldiers were being evacuated from Dunkirk, Willie's diary records tersely, "The boys went into battle." That was near Rouen, many miles west of Dunkirk.

REARGUARD

On June 4 they began a rearguard action on the Somme - where so many Ross-shire lads had perished nearly a quarter of a century previously.

The diary says "From June 4 we were on the move day and night."

At one point during the retreat Willie, whose job was driving a ration truck, remembers finding a young Strathpeffer piper lying badly wounded and carrying him in agony on his back to a makeshift first aid post.

The wounded man, Sandy MacKenzie, was

fortunate. He was evacuated and recovered to take part in other campaigns. Sandy became a pipe major, latterly with Dingwall Royal British Legion Pipe Band, and is still playing.

He and Willie didn't meet again until March of this year at a Seaforth Highlanders' reunion.

On June 12 the 51st Highland Division, battered and bruised in an epic struggle with General Rommel's tanks, finally surrendered.

Says Willie, "We went down to St Valery believing we were going to be evacuated, but the boats never came.

SURRENDER

"At nine o'clock in the morning on June 12 a French bugler blew a bugle to herald the surrender - and one of our snipers put a bullet through him!

"The bugle blew again at 11 o'clock - and that was that."

For most members of the 51st, the sound signalled the beginning of nearly five years of captivity.

The defeated Jocks were quickly bundled out of St Valery by their captors.

At first they marched eastwards. Then they sailed down the Rhine on barges. Finally, after five days in closely guarded railway carriages, they arrived at a newly constructed prisoner of war camp in

Poland, where on July 7, Willie's diary records again, he and his colleagues were "finger-printed and photographed."

Willie spent two years in Poland, before being moved with his mates to Germany in 1942.

The following year they moved again within Germany and in 1944, when things were going badly for their captors, Willie's diary records moves to three different locations.

MARCH

Eventually on March 20, 1945, in a futile attempt by the Germans to prevent their liberation by advancing Russians, the captive Seaforths were forced to begin a long, gruelling march west - an ordeal which sadly proved fatal to many of the prisoners, weakened as they were from years of imprisonment and malnutrition.

For Willie and his friends who survived, the war ended on May 9, when they met up with American forces, who took them first to the German city of Regensburg, before sending them on to Brussels.

There, Willie recalls, "We got rid of all our lice and fleas and we were flown to Britain."

A week later, he and his friend Neil MacDonald, who had shared all the privations of POW camp with him and still lives nearby in Novar Road, alighted at Ainess Station.

UNREAL

"It was a lovely spring day," remembers Willie. "My father was there to

meet me and he took me home to meet my mother and my sister. I was so delighted to see them all again. It felt unreal."

Demobbed shortly after, Willie went to work for five years as a driver with local timber merchant the late Andrew Munro. Less than two years after his return he married. His wife Lily, a native of Redcastle in the Black Isle, had played her own part in the war, as a munitions worker in Glasgow.

Willie stayed with Mr Munro for five years before moving on, working variously as a builder's driver, a church beadle, a janitor at Bridgend School and helping to build the ill-fated Invergordon Smelter.

RECOLLECTIONS

Today, retired, he insists, "I was no hero, just an ordinary soldier doing what he had to do.

"I took a few pot-shots at Germans, but I think I missed them all.

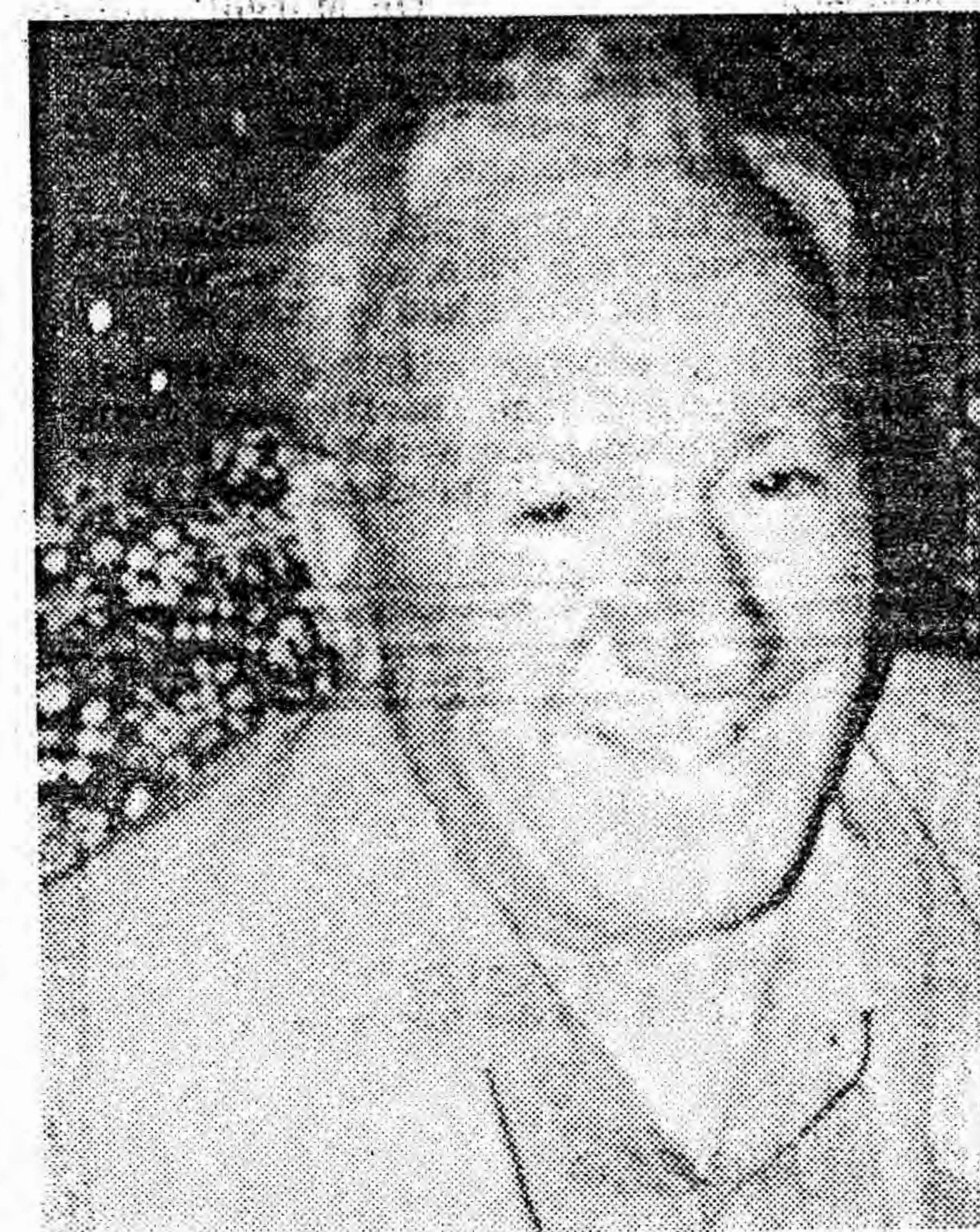
"And when I was a prisoner unloading railway wagons, I did my little bit for the German war effort by rubbing sand into the grease used to lubricate the wheel axles. I hope it helped.

"POW camp wasn't very pleasant and we were pretty thin by the end of it all - but it wasn't as bad as the front line or as hard as the lot of the boys who fought to free us.

"I have a specially soft spot for the International Red Cross, for they fed us. If it hadn't been for them I wouldn't have been here today. They're still very special to me."



With some fellow Ross-shire Seaforth Highlanders in a prisoner-of-war camp shortly after capture in 1940. He's the young man on the left, sitting down.



Willie as he is today.