



Heritage Newsletter



Issue 32

TO WAR WITH A TYPEWRITER...

Memories of a great Portrush journalist
(by Hugh McGrattan)

ON Tuesday 6th June 1944, the Allied forces of Britain, the United States, Canada and France made landfall on the coast of Normandy, with simultaneous assaults being made inland by aircraft and airborne forces. D-Day had begun and thus was opened up the final front in the war in Europe. It was the biggest invasion force that the world has ever seen, involving hundreds of warships, thousands of aircraft and tens of thousands of men. A Portrush man was there to witness the momentous event.

But Ernie Sandford, strapped to his seat in the cramped interior of an American B.24 Liberator bomber, was not carrying a gun. His weapon was a typewriter, for he was one of an elite group of newsmen chosen to cover the landings and to report to the world on the progress of the historic campaign.



A B.24 Liberator bomber of the US Eighth Air Force, similar to the aircraft in which Ernie Sandford flew above the Normandy beaches on D-Day.

Ernie (or Sandy as he was known to many colleagues) was the Press Association's war correspondent assigned to the United States Army Air Force. He later remarked light-heartedly that, as a result of his role in the landings, a red bomb symbol with the letters "D-Day" underneath had been painted on the side of his portable typewriter, in the manner of aircraft that had participated!

Such humour was typical of Ernie, whose Stump Press column in the *Northern Constitution* newspaper in the 1930s had his readers in stitches with his weekly look at life in the Coleraine area – with particular reference to his home town of Portrush.

Ernie Sandford was the younger son of Joseph Sandford, who had a grocery business on Main Street. His mother, Elizabeth, had died of tuberculosis in 1916 when he was only three. He and his brother Tommy (later to become Chief Cashier of the Northern Bank and the official whose signature appeared on their bank notes) were brought up in Victoria Street, opposite the Kelly Memorial Primary School, which Sandy attended at the same time as another Portrush great, Open Golf Champion Fred Daly.

HUMOUR

Ernie had a delightfully candid manner of reporting and even in his school days appears to have been busy observing the activities of the residents of Portrush. In one humorous article written many years later, he described the daily scene at the back of his father's shop where an unofficial "bookies" was located. He stopped just short of naming some of the eminent citizens he observed nipping down the back lane to place illegal bets!



So, it can be seen that Ernie's observations on the ways of the world began early in his life, a sure indication of the journalist to come. At the Kelly School, where he commenced his education in 1919, he proved to be a bright pupil, being one of the first in his year to learn to read.

He progressed to CAI – Coleraine Academical Institution, now the Coleraine Grammar School - where he was again among the brightest of inmates. A place at university was still a rare distinction in the 1930s, but Ernie won a place at Queen's in Belfast where, characteristically, he was actively involved with the Students' Union. He graduated with a BA degree in 1936 and the same year joined the *Northern Constitution* as a reporter.

While in Coleraine his witty and often controversial Stump Press came to be one of the first items in the paper that readers turned to each week – particularly councillors! On a more serious note, in addition to his news reporting he contributed several articles on local history, particularly noteworthy being a series on the early history of his hometown.

At the same time, he was a leading member of the town's first amateur dramatic society, which became the Portrush Players, and he served for a few seasons as secretary of the Portrush Hockey Club. He was rapidly becoming one of the Province's best-known newspapermen and today is recognised as one of the most distinguished journalists Northern Ireland has produced. It was not until the 1970s that I finally met Ernie, but it was to be my privilege to work with him on a couple of journalistic projects and my great pleasure to become his friend.



Sandy on stage! Ernie Sandford is seated in front (on left) with the Portrush Players cast of "Yellow Sands", in which he played a fisherman. Other members of the cast are: Back row – John MacDonnell, John Logan, Harry Hamilton, Bobby Kennedy, Maggie Dunlop and Mina Clarke. Seated – Daisy Logan (Moore), Olive McConaghy, Etta Mogeey and Isa Campbell (Hawley). At front – Ernie Sandford, Jack Woodhouse and Vin McIlmoyle. Produced by Harry Hamilton, the play was staged in Portrush Town Hall in February 1937.



TRAGIC

After leaving the *Constitution* in 1939, Ernie was on the staff of the *Belfast Newsletter* and covered many of the tragic stories arising from the blitz on Belfast in 1941 - which included the death of all five members of the Elkin family, originally from Portrush, whose Belfast home received a direct hit.

He then moved to Fleet Street as a sub editor on the *Daily Telegraph* before being appointed the Press Association's first war correspondent. The many stirring and historic events he covered for the PA included the attack by the Royal Navy on the island of Walcheren, in the mouth of the Scheldt, and the D-Day bombing mission to the Cherbourg peninsula by the US Eighth Air Force.

The D-Day raid, on an important road-rail junction, was made by 12 Liberators, flying at 15,000 feet. The bombers were protected by a squadron of Mustang fighters from the Ninth Air Force but no opposition from the Luftwaffe was experienced and on the flight home Ernie described the scene below his aircraft, a "great convoy of several hundred ships" being sighted off the English coast, as well as a double line of powered invasion barges.

After the war Ernie returned to Fleet Street as chief reporter of the *Sunday Chronicle*, but in 1946 suddenly found himself "sick in every sense of popular journalism". He resigned and went to live in France. There, for two years, he taught English in a small college on the outskirts of Paris, earning enough to attend the Sorbonne, where he took a course in French language and civilisation. He wrote his first book, an account of a canoe trip from Macon to Lyons, down the Rhone to the sea and along the coast to the Riviera.

Joining the world-famous news agency Reuters, Ernie became head of their Paris office, his work in France and previous studies giving him fluency in the language and a wide knowledge of the European scene. He then became information officer for the Marshall Plan, the US funded scheme for the post-war reconstruction of Europe. His last assignments in Western Europe included covering a number of historic international conferences and he was present at the signing of the Treaty of Rome – the foundation of the EC. In 1959 Ernie joined the Northern Ireland Government's London Office as press and publicity officer to the Ministry of Commerce and the Northern Ireland Development Council. Some ten years later he returned to the Province as publicity officer to the Tourist Board, with direct responsibility for publications, advertising and literature, as well as information services, displays and exhibitions. He held this senior appointment until retirement to Killyleagh in County Down in 1978.

MASTERLY

It was during his time with the Tourist Board that Ernie used his extensive knowledge of the Province to write "*Discover Northern Ireland*", a masterly guide book considered by many to be one of the finest works in this field. It is still being used and is much sought after to this day. In retirement Ernie continued to write and contributed to several publications. His articles in the magazine of the Coleraine Old Boys' Association (sadly no longer published) were a joy to read and his name also appeared frequently in the prestigious *Bann Disc*, journal of the Coleraine Historical Society.



Ernie (Sandy) Sandford during his time with the Tourist Board.

When I became a journalist in Coleraine in the late 1950s, I soon heard of Ernie (as he was better known). Although some 20 years had elapsed since he had left the borough, he was still well remembered by former colleagues and his career was followed with much interest.



My own connection with Ernie began when he rang me at the *Chronicle* to find out about Rabbit Row, a little street of cottages that once stood on the outskirts of Portrush. Someone had given him my name as being an amateur local historian. I was somewhat overawed in actually speaking to the famous Mr. Sandford, but over subsequent weeks we became firm friends and I had the privilege of assisting him in two series of articles. We again worked together when he became fascinated by the Magus Barefoot legend and it was an education to me, even as a senior journalist, to witness Ernie's interviewing techniques and his wonderful way with the written word. More articles followed, as well as all too rare get-



Ernie Sandford with his wife Joyce, on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

together for a meal and reminiscence. One of the last times I saw him was at his 90th birthday party in the Royal Court Hotel when his Portrush friends gathered to pay tribute to a great personality. Despite his enormous output of writing, one thing I never heard Ernie refer to was his life story, although I know many of us urged him from time to time to consider writing an autobiography. I do not know whether he ever got round to putting anything on paper. I hope he did.

Ernie (Sandy) Sandford passed away in hospital on 10 August 2006 after a short illness. A thanksgiving service for his life was held in Inch Parish Church near Downpatrick and in the congregation were a number of his old friends from the Portrush and Coleraine areas. Ernie was survived by his wife Joyce, who sadly passed away last year, and by daughter Christine and son Patrick. His brother Tommy had died twelve years previously.

It was characteristic that Ernie, generous to the last, should leave his body to Queen's University for medical research. Those of us who knew, admired him and enjoyed his company just rejoice in the fact that we had his dynamic and energetic presence up until the age of 93!

Our thanks to Hugh for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters.

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