

TALES FROM THE GREAT WAR

The memories of Tom Jeffreys
by Rachel Jeffreys



A BÔNAU CABBAGE PATCH SUPPLEMENT

This is the story of Tom Jeffreys as told by himself and his granddaughter. The words of Tom Jeffreys are in bold italics: those of his granddaughter in normal text. (This is a transcript of a radio documentary broadcasted on WDAV Public Radio – Davidson, North Carolina)

♪ Summer Dance No1" by William Mathias ♪

War! A constant reality in today's world and in the past too, of course. But war used to be different. Hardly anyone alive now can think back to the Great War as World War I was called, but in a way I can go back there. I'm Rachel Jeffreys and I have World War I stories in my head thanks to a Welsh American who lived in, served in and sometimes revelled in the Great War.

My grandfather, Tom Jeffreys, spoke about it to me and my brother David for many an hour in his house at Baltimore telling us vividly and poignantly the personal stories that make plain old history come to life. A great Welsh talker - that's what a friend once called my grandfather. Some non-Welsh folks called him, and all Welsh men, Taff as in the ditty "Taffy was a Welshman Taffy was a Thief.

I called him Dadcu, Welsh for Grandpa.

In 1914 it was, I'm afraid, considered glamorous that this war was breaking out. Surely it would be short and glorious. In Britain King George V was on the throne.

The British Empire was the largest empire in history. By 1921 Britain would

hold sway over one quarter of the world's population. It was often said that the sun never set on the British Empire because its reach across Africa, Asia, the Pacific and North America ensured that the sun always was shining on some part of it.

Step back with me and visit the British Empire and the Great War with Tom Jeffreys.

He was a 19 year old, out with some friends in the town of Llanelly, one summer night in 1914.

♪ Musical Fanfare – Drums & Bugles ♪

"It was almost twelve o'clock at night and the bells were ringing and the bugles were blowing and we said we knew there was a war coming.' Boys, we must be at war' and we went up to the main drill hall. We were on an old horse and cart, we were, and there were crowds of people outside. Third of August 1914, five to ten past twelve in the middle of the night and we stood there and people were singing. Of course people had to sing over there, don't care whether there was trouble or not. Singing you know and really having a good time. And all of a sudden a soldier came out from this building and he tapped the notice' Wanted - 40 recruits' to make the 4th Welsh Battalion up to standard before leaving. We went in. Trevor Williams, and Cole and me went in and I was the very first one to sign up for the Welsh Battalion on 3rd August 1914. 'But', he said, ' be back here by seven thirty in the morning, bring whatever you want to with you.' He meant to share your clothing or something, you know. We went home, and my mother was sitting in the chair. Everybody had to be in before she went to bed. Course, there



wasn't many, anyhow. Bess was young. Bess was only 14 years old. Wasn't a question of her being out late. And Jack was only about ten. It really was, I had to be in before she went to bed and I went there, it was one thirty in the morning. I said, 'Mam, I've joined the army.' Oh, she started to cry. I said, ' Don't worry. We'll have a couple weeks holiday, that's what it will be'. We didn't think the war was going to last over a few weeks and told her then what I had to do, you know, and I went to bed and got up in the morning and off I went.

Now, we lined up into the drill hall. There was all the regular soldiers in uniforms and there were forty of us, fellows like me, in civilian clothes. And coming down now, the main road, and turning round the corner to the station, there was my mother and Bess and Jack, standing on the sidewalk. The three of them were crying. And we were singing, top of our voice, Sospan Fach and all the rest of it, you know, we were having a good time, you know. Well, that was it, you know.

♪ Music: Sospan Fach sung by Treorchy Male Voice Choir ♪

In 1941, we were in this house here. The war had started - Second World War. There was a boy going up the street here and I went out there because I was crying. Yea, 1941. Then I caught myself, what do you know about that, I thought I had sense. My mind is back to 1914 right away, you see. There was I crying now. I could see this boy walking up the street he'd gone up and off he'd went, you know.

Back in 1914, in the British Army, Tom Jeffreys was getting bored. Weeks went by and his battalion was still in Britain.

"We went to Carmarthen and they put us in the barracks there and we had to stay there until we had uniforms and

all that kind of stuff. So my first uniform that I had of the army somebody had been shot in the arm or shot in the breast or he'd been cut somewhere or other, there was some blood on it or something, you know. Eventually the forty of us got fixed up and then we had to walk all the way down to Fishguard which was thirty odd - 32 or 34 miles, I think. Yes. Down there for quite a while, mud and, Oh it was nothing, you know. All we were waiting for was to be sent - we wanted to go to France, you see.

And Trevor Williams and I, one of the jobs we had, people were beginning to make clothing and things, you know, for the soldiers, stocking and all that, and we had charge of this building where they were keeping these things, you know, and one part of the building about the size of this room here, the doctor used to come in the morning, he was a civilian doctor, and he would treat everybody that had anything wrong with them, you see. So, one time Trevor said to me, 'Good gosh Tom, he's got palpitation of the heart. I have that', he says. So after everybody had gone now the old doctor would sit down and talk to us for a few minutes - he was a real good old timer, you see. And Trevor said to him. 'You got palpitation of the heart?' 'Yea, yea' said Tom and he wrote out 14-day sick leave. So I told one old soldier, an old timer who had been in the army for years, I told him, 'I'd like to go back to Llanelly for a holiday.' 'Where's Trevor?' 'He's gone', I said, 'He told the doctor he had palpitation of the heart and he gave him a pass.' 'Ha,' he said, 'you can get palpitation of the heart at anytime you like', he said. I said, 'How?' 'Oh,' he said, 'take a couple of soap pills,' he said, 'and swallow them. You'll have a palpitation of the heart.' So, that very same morning I cut my finger. So when the old doctor came the following morning

I had to show him my finger you see, and between that and the soap pill I believed I really had palpitation of the heart. 'Oh,' he said. 'You're in bad shape,' he said. 'There you are, that's to go home.' And home I went.

So I had a holiday. I came back and I thought, well now, I'm not going to stay in this mud, I'm going to get to France somehow or other. I just packed my clothes and I ran away and got into the train and went back to Llanelly. I had no intention of joining the navy at all. I can't swim. I can't swim today. Never could swim. Never did like the water any higher than up to here. Walking along the seashore, I used to enjoy that, you know, when the tide is coming in. But, anyhow, I went to my mother. My mother said, 'Where you going Tom?' 'Oh! You can't stay here!'

Boy! I was beginning to worry now they were going to catch me because there was a policeman in Llanelly, called Tom Pwll - Tom Davies - he had a note for catching all the deserters and he was getting £5 for every time he caught one of them. I thought to myself, he's going to catch me, I gotta do something. I walked from there over to the seashore, over the railroad, along the sands all the way to Llanelly Station and got a train to Swansea. So I walked out and there was a sign on the road 'Navy Headquarters'. I went in and joined the navy. So from then on I was safe, because you could run away from the army to the navy but you can't run away from the navy to the army. The navy is senior service in the old country. And that's how I came to join the navy. And I'm one of the few men, I bet you there are not very many men today that saw the wreck of the Lusitania. That was May 1915.

It was on May 7th that a German submarine astonished the world by firing a torpedo into a passenger ship and sinking her. The Lusitania was the queen

Below: R.M.S. Lusitania



of the Cunard Fleet - the fastest liner in existence. She was carrying one thousand nine hundred and twenty four people from New York to Liverpool. Nearing the coast of Ireland there was fog and she was not running at full speed or trying to take an evasive zigzag course. One thousand one hundred and nineteen men, women and children died in the sinking. Even though it was widely suspected that the Lusitania also carried a hidden cargo of munitions and supplies for the British war effort, the world was still aghast at this attack and animosity towards Germany grew. That day my grandfather was on a Canadian-Pacific ship under orders not to slow down or stop for anything. So they kept on going, in spite of what they encountered.



Above: T.S.S. Missanabie

'I was on the Missanabie. Now we were going from Liverpool to Halifax, Nova Scotia to join H.M.S. Suffolk and the first thing you know next morning there were these dead bodies in the water, and chairs and anything wood.

We didn't see any machinery or anything but that's what we saw. Now, there were about twenty of us from Llanelly on that ship and we had one Edwin Bennet, he was a very good singer, so we saw that wreckage and these poor women and people crying, and all the rest of it, and everyone on the ship was crying, and Bennet gave us a concert that night. That's when he sang, I think it was, 'When will I see you again' and that made it worst still! We were crying twice as much then.

♪ Song: When the Lusitania Went Down ♪

The Missanabie got to Halifax. Tom Jeffreys and his comrades were part of a crew of nine hundred sixty aboard the armoured cruiser H.M.S. Suffolk, flag ship of the British North American fleet. My grandfather worked as a coal stoker in two 4-hour shifts every day. Shovelling coal to fuel the engines. Hard, hard work. The commander of H.M.S. Suffolk was a Rear-Admiral Yelverton, a spit and polish officer who insisted that the ship's brass work be cleaned and the decks scrubbed every day. The crew had to look their best at all times. I wonder if the commander ever ventured down into the stoke hold to see how the sweaty labourers looked?

Here's what the ship was charged with carrying out in 1915 and 1916.

'One of the jobs that we had on H.M.S. Suffolk was clearing the Atlantic Ocean of German ships. Now, America was neutral at the time, so here's what we had to do. Our headquarters was Bermuda. There were three ships, H.M.S. Suffolk, H.M.S. Kent and H.M.S. York and we'd relieve each other. We'd go out and patrol the Atlantic Ocean all the way outside New York. So we sank dozens of ships.'

The Suffolk, Kent and York were examining these German ships to see if

they were bringing out of the U.S. anything that could be used by their military.



Above: HMS Suffolk

'So, that's what we were doing. Fourteen days doing this and then we'd go to Kingston in Jamaica. While we were there, the York or the Kent would be up and down, you see. We'd go back and do another fourteen days. Next time we wanted coal, go down to Bermuda. Just imagine, wouldn't that be a living? Next time we needed coal Halifax, Nova Scotia. So there we were, you see, the three places, for a year until we escorted the first shipload of coloured soldiers that ever fought for the British Empire. We escorted them from Kingston, Jamaica. We took them to Gibraltar. Course they were going then up on to the eastern, um, up to Germany and places where they were fighting and we went, of course, to Southampton. And when we were almost in Gibraltar on the way back an old time sailor said to me, 'Taff', he called all the Welshmen Taff, 'Taff, I'll tell you what to do, speaking from experience, why don't you go in and volunteer to be care and maintenance party. What the care and maintenance party is, when a battleship is in to be repaired they keep about fifteen men there and as you know you're keeping a track of what goes on there's a lot of thievery going on and you'd have about six men to take care of and make their meals for them. And I did and they

gave me the job and that changed my life all together.

Here's how. Along with a daily pint of limejuice to prevent scurvy, every sailor in the British Navy was given a tot of rum each day at noon. But my grandfather never drank.



'And instead of drinking I'd keep my tot and I was supposed to take care of

these men and they'd come to me, and they'd have a fat head they'd been out the night before getting drunk. 'What you got Taff?'

And Dadcu would make them pay him for small amounts of the rum he was saving. And pay him they did!

'When I came back home, I had over £400, and only making 25 cents a day in the navy. I was making all this on this rum thing because I never drank, you see. I was taking care of my tot of rum every day so that made a good move when I made that. What a life, isn't it, eh? I got a memory there I can go way, way, way back.'

♪Music – Col Bogey by Kenneth Alford – Military Brass Band♪

Colonel Bogey, my grandfather's favourite piece when it was played in concerts on board H.M.S. Suffolk in the North Atlantic by the Royal Marine Band, whose members were part of the crew. The band played once a day for the sailors and twice a day for the officers.

After nine months in dry dock in Southampton the Suffolk was sent out again in 1917. This time to the Far East - a sailor's dream as my grandfather used to call it. Guarding and generally checking up on areas of British influence was a huge job because there was so many. There were colonies, dominions, subject nations, territories and a whole informal empire of nominally independent

countries whose economies depended on Great Britain because of her dominant position in world trade.

In my grandfather's words, *'We took nine weeks to reach Hong Kong and enjoyed every mile of the trip. Imagine me, a Welsh boy who had never been far from home now going almost round the world.'* He and his shipmates went around the Cape of Good Hope calling at Sierra Leon, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban, Mauritius, Penang, the British penal settlements of Andaman and Nicobar and many more sites, staying a few days in each place.

Dadcu, after his experience in the care and maintenance party had been put in charge of catering for the chief petty officers. Now, I never realised my grandfather has much expertise with food. But then again, he was in the navy and couldn't swim. Being in charge of catering meant doing the shopping in the outdoor markets in all the exotic foreign ports and the gregarious Tom Jeffreys was good at haggling and getting bargains and choosing the best offerings. While he was in Shanghai he did something many sailors did. He had himself tattooed - all over both arms with pictures that many years later would greatly intrigue and amuse his grandchildren. My favourite was the snarling head of a tiger with ferocious looking teeth and wild eyes staring out from just below a strong left shoulder. Then he could also be a pensive, solitary man and I think my grandfather's favourite aspect of his catering assignment was the opportunity to stroll about and take in the people and the atmospheres.

'I used to go walking around on my own to these various places. Shanghai, Hong Kong, Nagasaki, Yokohama, Singapore. All of them, on my own I would go and I've seen lots of things. Seen starvation and I've been on the Peak in Hong Kong and on the band in Shanghai. I could really

write a book on what I've seen and heard.

H.M.S. Suffolk and Tom Jeffreys were 18,000 miles from home when they arrived in Hong Kong harbour in the autumn of 1917. They were intending to start for home after that visit, but...



We'd hardly got to Hong Kong when the note came out that the Bolsheviks had deserted and we were ordered up to Vladivostok.

And America had entered the war then and U.S.S. Brooklyn represented America and we tried to save the Tsar. They took the big guns off our ship - one big gun off our ship - and sent it to the Tsar who was only 700 miles from Vladivostok. That's where they killed him and his family. I don't know whether these fellows ever got back to our ship but in the mean time, the first thing the Russians did was, when the Bolsheviks took over, any foreigner they could get hold of they made them leave the country. Well, there were a lot of Welshmen there in the tinplate mill. Men from my hometown, Llanelly, anywhere in the world where they made tinplate that's where they started men from Llanelly and there was a crowd of them there. Going back to Wales you could either go through Norway and across the North Sea and down Scotland or come clean across the Trans-Siberian railway and from there to San Francisco and then all the way back. A crowd of these fellows decided they would rather come on the Trans-Siberian railroad. So, one day, the train pulled in and there was a crowd of maybe 20 Welsh people, some of them were married and had their wives and children with them and

there was nowhere for them to stay but they had to stay on our ship - what was flying was the Union Jack. There was nowhere else for them to stay. Waiting for a ship now to come and take them to San Francisco. And that was the end. We played together, played football and it took about two weeks for these fellows to come and in the mean time we were trying to clean up the mess that they had when they rioted and killed a lot of people when the Tsar was overthrown.

♫Music – Serenade by William Mathias ♫

Homesickness had by now caught hold of the crew of H.M.S. Suffolk. On November 11th 1918 the ship was ice-bound in Vladivostok harbour when news came that an armistice between the allied armies and Germany had been signed. There was great excitement and talk of going home again, right away. But no such luck. The crew had to wait for a relief ship, H.M.S. Kent, to get through the ice on her way from Hong Kong. Finally, the Suffolk got started for Britain. She arrived in Hong Kong on the Welsh national holiday, St David's Day March 1st 1919. Dadcu and the other Welshmen on board were allowed to attend the big St David's Day banquet on the shore. One more detour then, back to Shanghai to help deport 2000 German nationals out of China and onto two American ships. Then at last, Tom Jeffreys was really on his way home. The Suffolk called at Bombay, Colombo, and Aden and went through the Suez Canal. Port Said, said my grandfather, was the only place in all his travels where he found it impossible to eat a meal. The smell of the cooking oil used there, he reported, was terrible. Through the Mediterranean Sea they went and finally they got back to native soil, arriving in Plymouth on July 1st 1919.

♫Music – Serenade by William Mathias ♫

During the four years of the Great War, ten million men had died in action or of

wounds. This was twice as many as the number killed in all the major wars from 1790 to 1913. More than twenty one million men were wounded. France and the horrific trench warfare there accounted for an enormous amount of this blood. When my grandfather didn't get his wish to go to France that might have saved his life. No record was kept of the number of war orphans, widows or refugees. In material losses the cost of the war was over three hundred billion dollars. In 1918 dollars such a sum would have given every family in England, France, Belgium, Germany, Russia, the U.S., Canada and Australia a \$2500 house on a \$500 one acre lot with a \$1000 worth of furniture. But life went on and for my grandfather it meant returning to work in the steel mills of South Wales.

'After the war was over I came back to Llanelly, your Mam and I got married. But they were trying to unionise the mill. They'd had trouble trying to get men to join the union in the mill where I was. Most of the problems was with fellows like me who had been away during the war. I'll never forget this old man, I'll never forget until I die, This old man I knew him well, you know, he was one of the men standing by the gate 'Now come on so and so', so he got hold of me, 'Tommy, Tommy, you'd better join.' I said to him one day, 'Don't tell me! You're always telling me I got to join. I've just finished fighting five years for the likes of you fellows.' He looked at me and he said quietly, 'Tommy, I had two sons that went to that war. Never came back.' I didn't know what to say for myself when he said it so quiet, you see. 'I had two sons that went there. Never came back.' Here, I'm back anyhow.

Yes, Dadcu was one of the lucky ones. He was lucky too to have a visit from a relative who had emigrated to Pittsburgh.



Above: Tom Jeffreys (third from right, top row) - 1917

Uncle Tom came down and saw where I was working in the steel mill and he said 'Tom', he said, 'You're foolish', he said. 'You're cutting off the other end of your life working too hard. Why don't you come to America.' I said to Mam one day, 'What shall we do?' She said, 'I'll go anywhere you want to go.' And Mam and I came to this country, and, I'll say one thing, as you know, I'll be a Welshman for as long as I live but, I said, we're living in a great country. We are. No question about it - the greatest country in the world. But there's no need to forget where we came from. That's the main thing. And that's a problem now - lots of people are coming out now, the minute they land in New York they're americanised. I see no reason for it. But at the same time I will say we are the greatest country in the world, at the present time. Which is the truth. I have a couple of children that I am proud of and grandchildren. I don't see where I could have done any better. They've never been any problem to us that I know about. There's one sitting alongside me know by the look of him. Ha! Two of them! They're eating my Welsh Cakes now. Of course, I've been very fortunate with my wife. She's a great woman, there's no question about it. And it is a fact, too. I've worked hard but I've had the result of it. So, I'm all ready for when the day comes.

Tom Jeffreys was ninety-five years old when he died in 1990. By that time he

had attended and presided over decades of St David's day banquets as president of the Baltimore St David's Society. He sang favourite Welsh songs at those banquets hundreds of times and he loved to collect jokes to tell on those occasions. After Dadcu's death, my father found pages and pages of paper filled with single sentences. They were the punch lines of all those jokes, which my grandfather had written down to remind himself.

♫ Background – Welsh Choir - Men of Harlech ♫

My grandmother must have baked for him thousands of the delicious cookies called Welsh Cakes and once in a while he did let other people eat a few. When Dadcu retired, as a foreman from Baltimore's Eastern Rolling Mill he was called "The last of the tough Welshmen." He never did write a book but I think you'll agree with a friend who described him as "a great Welsh talker".



Above: Tom Jeffreys (1919)

This programme, "Tales from the Great War", was produced with pride by Tom Jeffreys' granddaughter, Rachel at WDAV public radio in Davidson, North Carolina. Diolch yn fawr. Thank you very much for listening. © Rachel Jeffreys