

life story of Fred Hirst

Fred Hirst, age 82, was at one time a private serving with the British 1st Army in World War II. Taken prisoner by the Germans in Tunisia, in North Africa, he was held captive, escaping and being recaptured twice over before finally, the war was over. Now, editor of *The Manchester Veteran*, the newsletter for the Manchester Branch of the Eighth Army Veterans' Association, he has written a book on his war experiences, and gives talks to students in local schools.

Born in 1923 in Bentley, in Doncaster, Yorkshire, Fred and his older sister and younger brother were raised by their mother alone. He left school at age fourteen, as was the custom for those who didn't go on to the local grammar school, taking up his first job, as an errand boy, making bicycle deliveries of small car parts.

Fred was sixteen when the war started, on September 3rd, 1939. By this time he had been promoted to working inside the warehouse, putting together orders and making out invoices. In due course, this experience would stand him in good stead. Meanwhile, several staff members and many of his friends were being called up, and even his older sister had been called into service. At age eighteen, Fred was called to serve in the armed forces.



Private Fred Hirst. Infantry Training Centre, Lincoln. 1942.

Training for the infantry began for Fred in Lincoln, in Lincolnshire, from where he went to Otley, Yorkshire, eventually joining the Sherwood Foresters in Kent. The Foresters embarked on Christmas Day, 1942, on HM Troop Ship, *The Derbyshire*, for the Mediterranean and the port of Algiers, in Algeria, then travelled eastward by cattle truck into Tunisia. The troops were greeted by the sound of guns firing and shells landing, and the sight of Green Hill in the distance, which was occupied by the Germans.

Writing later about his wartime experiences, particularly as a POW—a prisoner of war—Fred tells the story of his capture at Tamera, Tunisia, in March, 1943, and his transportation to a POW camp in Italy, and of his escape at the time of the Italian Armistice. Following his recapture, he escaped once more in early November by jumping off the train that was intended to take them into Germany (Hirst, 1998). There's more, a tale of a harrowing adventure that lasted two and a half years and which ended, finally, with the Americans' advance into Munich, Germany, where Fred was again being held prisoner. Three days after the liberation, on May 4th, 1945, he turned twenty-two.

Soon afterwards Fred returned home, going to the family home of his mother and grandmother in Bentley, and eager to get in touch with his friend, Ronnie Ford, with whom he had escaped not once, but two times. Ronnie's mother gave him the news – Ronnie had been killed in battle.

Several months later, in November, 1945, Fred married, seemingly on impulse because he was being sent abroad again. He and his bride had met a few months earlier, in August, at a dance in Bentley, his hometown. By coincidence, her hometown was Otley, where he had first been stationed for army training, in 1942. They had met several times more before his

leave, from Haywoods Heath, in West Sussex, was up and he had been required to go to Blackpool, Lancashire, to undergo re-training, due to having been a prisoner of war for over two years. So in November, when Fred and the others were informed they were being granted ten days leave before being sent to Germany to join the British Army of the Rhine, Fred and Margaret had decided this would be a good time to get married! Leave for the men was extended over Christmas, Fred's first Christmas at home since 1941.

The following month—January 1946—they sailed for Ostend in Belgium, from where they travelled by train to West Germany, to serve as part of the occupation forces. “In February,” he says, “I received a letter from Margaret to inform me that it was quite possible that I might become a father and this was confirmed a few weeks later.” It was during this time that an opportunity came for Fred to train for Army Clerical Services, and start work in the ‘Training and Infantry’ section at Headquarters, British Army of the Rhine, in nearby Bad Oeynhausen, Germany. He explains,

My clerical work for the British Army of the Rhine in Germany was carried out while I was still a soldier before my demobilisation from Germany in October 1946. At this time soldiers were still being called up to serve as part of the occupation forces in Europe and the Far East, to replace those being demobbed.

He was on leave when his first son was born, in August, 1946, and two months later, in October, he returned home for good, going to the “Demob Centre” before going home to his wife and baby, and preparing to start a new life. “‘Demobb’ (Demobilisation),” he explains, “was the term used to describe the procedure of a serviceman being released from the forces. It signals the end of a serviceman’s time in the forces when he returns to civilian life.” Later, he adds,

Just before the war began the country began to mobilise by calling up territorial soldiers continuously all day on the wireless (radio). Territorials are servicemen who volunteer to train in their spare time, in the evenings, weekends, holidays etc. but still do their normal civilian work during the day. They form a supplement to the regular forces in time of war, i.e. Army, Navy and Air force. Territorial units had to be contacted by wireless, and these men and women had to listen for their unit and instructions on where to report. Many of them were sent to France within hours after arriving to join their units. The wireless was devoted to this task of the call-up messages, and were continuous all through the day for about two weeks until all had been contacted. There were no normal BBC services over that period. This was the mobilisation of the country. At the conclusion the country began to demobilise and that is why we refer to leaving the forces as being demobbed.

Following his release he worked temporarily as a “clippie” (a conductor) on the local trolley buses in Doncaster, then with the Works Department, taking a correspondence course in accounting at the same time. By this time he had two children, but with his wife’s support of his efforts, he was able to progress both in his studies and in gaining work experience. By 1952, he had applied for a job at the Treasurer’s Department in Bentley, a step up from his previous work. From there he went to work for the Central Electricity Generating Board, while still continuing his studies, ending up in Manchester. After twelve years living and working in the area, in 1971 Fred and his wife went to live in Cheltenham while working in Gloucester, both of them continuing in the same field of work.

Fred accepted an early retirement offer in 1982, at age 59. His wife had retired the year before, because of ill-health, and he decided, in part due to having health problems of his own, that he, also, would retire. He had had to stop playing cricket at age 52, and had no idea what he would do once retired, though he looked forward to returning to the north to live, where they could be near their children and grandchildren.

Poynton, in Cheshire, became their home from then on. By chance, he spotted an advertisement asking ex-soldiers who had served in the Mediterranean if they would like to join the Eighth Army Veterans' Association. Within a few years, the branch's newsletter, *The Manchester Veteran*, was launched, and since 1988 it has continued to provide notices about current events, stories from the personal history of army veterans, and other news items for its readership. Fred, editor of the magazine since its inception, eventually bought a computer in 1993, and at the age of seventy took on the task of learning new skills, until eventually he was able to handle the newsletter production on his own.

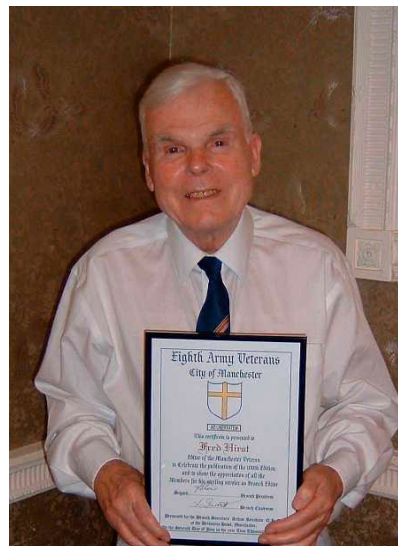
“So that is how I now spend my retirement,” says Fred, having told me all this. He lost his wife in 1996, but continues with his interests, editing the newsletter, writing a book on his war experiences, and giving talks in schools, as well as participating in interviews for organisations collecting personal histories and making documentaries. Fred returned to Tunisia with the Secretary of his battalion in 1997 and 1998, reminiscing and taking photos for a planned compilation of the history of the battalion. On each trip he took one of his grandsons. At this point in time, Fred says,

It is sixty years this year since the war ended and various events have been arranged throughout the country to commemorate this. I have been invited to take part in some of the local events being organised. Veterans of my era encourage me to continue producing *The Manchester Veteran* because of their interest and reminiscences of those important events in their lives. I feel that I am providing a service. It keeps me occupied and busy, which I am told by members of the medical profession is good for me.

Hirst, Fred (1998). *A Green Hill Far Away: A Sherwood Forester's Story of World War II*. Stockport: A Lane Publishers.

Life story of Fred Hirst written by Sue McPherson following email interview in 2005.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.
Alternative Work-Lives: Retirement Possibilities. Sue McPherson writer, website design



Fred Hirst, holding certificate received for 100th edition, *The Manchester Veteran*. Eighth Army Veterans' City of Manchester Reunion. 2003.
Photo by Arthur Renshaw, QPM.