

THE
LOST
YEARS
BY
FRED DIGBY



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Dedication

*For all those young men
and women who had
their lives so abruptly
taken from them in the
War, especially those who
were known to me.*



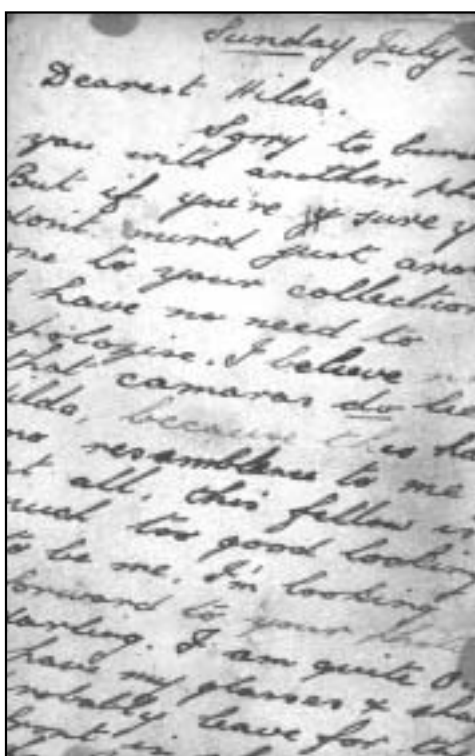
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The photograph on the front cover is of the author and is part of a mail card (the reverse is pictured left) which was sent from Egypt in early 1942 to his future wife. Their correspondence covered a period of four and a half years.

Preface

Many stories have been written concerning the disturbances and upheavals which affected the lives of so many millions of people during the period of the Second World War which raged from 1939 to 1945.

All aspects of that great global conflict have been well analysed by historians and many stories relating to it have become popular reading not only for the people who lived through that grim period and for whom memories of events and situations are recalled with which they could associate themselves, but also for those then unborn who have a keen interest.

There are without doubt lots more stories yet to be told by anyone who can recall those years, writing of their experiences, their exploits, places, situations and of the people associated with them, whether they were members of the armed services or served in any of the number of war-based occupations, such as miners, dockers, land and munition workers, firemen, nurses, merchant seamen and, of course, the evacuees who when so young were forced to leave their homes and families to settle in some far distant unknown place.

Then of course there were the housewives often with a wartime job who faced the prospect of being bombed possibly with their man overseas and the constant round of shopping and queuing for provisions which were restricted and rationed; all I believe have a story which could and should be told.

After reading of the experiences of others with a tale to tell similar to my own and having an accumulation of books, newspaper cuttings, photos, all stored away since 1946 and almost forgotten, I was prompted to write what I hope might turn out to be interesting reading and at least a record of one man's life covering that period of time.

I have tried to portray something of what it meant to myself and thousands of other men of my generation to have our teenage years and our early adult life disrupted and uprooted from our homes; to have those years of youth taken away from us in order that we in some far land might play a part in that great global catastrophe and be forced to carry out such acts of war in line of duty which no man, young or old, should be required to do.

I do readily admit that at the time I did not at all object to the loss of my liberty because in the first place I was under the impression that I was being called up for a period of six months, after which I would resume my usual routine; I rather welcomed the change and what I thought could be an exciting time.

That war was declared before I had finished my training was a different matter entirely; even then though I thought that any loss I might feel would be well compensated for by the opportunity to travel the world and to share in the excitement of the ensuing conflict.

In retrospect though I would readily have foregone that travel and excitement which came my way during the following long six-and-half years.

Having returned safely to civilian life and almost in one piece I do not ever forget all those other young men particularly those known to me who not only gave their days of youth but their whole lives and all which was theirs to give. None of what I have written has been researched and apart from the previously mentioned accumulated material all, as I recall it, is from memory as accurately as possible.

What happened to those hazy summer days of youth? So suddenly did they leave us. Now, today, trying to look back down the misty years and seeing ourselves as we were then in our games, at our lessons, with the friends we made and remembering the girls that we kissed, does it help when suffering the aches and pains of later life when we try to recall that we once were young?

Fred Digby

Chapter One: When We Were Young

It would have been about the year 1936, I suppose, that I and my mates of a similar age began seriously to take notice of the black headlines appearing in our daily papers, the wireless news bulletins and the Pathe Gazette News shown on our cinema screens regarding the disturbing reports of a massive rearmament programme being carried out by the Germans under their new Nazi masters, rearming in spite of the restrictions placed on them by the League of Nations after the Armistice in 1918.

Until that time we had been used to turning to the back page first to read the sporting news, but of late we had become concerned about the situation on the Continent; concerned because what was at that moment a matter of threats only, a deterioration in conditions could quite easily bring us to the brink of war, and we who were then approaching our 18th birthdays realised that we could well be among the first to be involved should the threat increase and our country be forced to take some action.

Adolf Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and his Nazi Party had assumed power of government, they had already become involved in the Spanish Civil War by despatching land and airforce personnel and equipment to assist General Franco.

Although we young men were made fully aware of these disturbing happenings which we thought could possibly affect us and to cause our future to be uncertain, in no way did it at that time change any of our habits, or our youthful pursuits.

We had known each other since our early schooldays when we began in that old redbrick, iron-railed, Victorian-type building in Main Road of old Far Cotton in the Infants. Others of us had been together in St. Mary's church choir and we had maintained that association after our schooldays were over; then as youths we played our football and cricket, went swimming and roller-skating, played snooker in a dingy hall on the Market Square, began drinking together, and together followed the girls. There was a great choice of cinemas in the town about a dozen I think, with a change of programme during the week, television had not then become available to us.

On Saturday nights there were the dances, the usual one which we went to was in the upstairs room at the 'Whyte Melville' in Fish Street. Then on Sunday nights we paraded up and down Abington Street among dozens of other boys and girls taking part in what was known as the 'bunny run'.

A little later on as we grew older we formed a friendship with a gang of lads from what we called 'uptown', most of them lived in Park Street or in streets around that area, none of which exist today, but at that time they were opposite the Mounts Baths and the Fire Station.

Several of the boys were out of work, others on 'short-time', that is they worked three days and had the other three days on the 'Dole', unemployment throughout the whole of the country was very high at that time and especially in the town's staple trade, the making of boots and shoes.

Others of us working in the service trades, although not exceptionally well-paid were at least certain of a pay packet each week. So that on occasions we were able to help out those who were without the price of a pint of Phipps', or Northampton Brewery's ales, or a seat at the pictures or New Theatre.

I was employed by the 'Midland Co-Operative Laundries Association' as a roundsman in the house-to-house collection of laundry in the Kingsley and Abington area of the town, not many households then could boast a washing machine. The collection and delivery of the work was made by the use of boxed tricycles, they were filled and each load delivered to the depot which was at one time in Far Cotton, but later moved to South Street which was much more central. Several journeys had to be made before the whole of the round was covered, the deliveries were made in the same manner.

When old enough we advanced to become van drivers, the firm taught me to drive and I passed my test in 1936, before that date no tests were necessary. Having passed my test I was then qualified to take the next van driver vacancy as one became available, until then though I would continue to pedal my trike to and fro.

My take home pay with the addition of commission was above average for my age; we could not expect an adult wage until we turned twenty-one with just a few pence increase each birthday, it was however more than my dad received per week on the 'Dole' and he had to support a family of five. Dad was one of those men who about seventeen years earlier had returned victorious to 'a land fit for heroes to live in', having fought with distinction throughout that Great war, which was said to be 'the war to end all wars'.

He was a regular soldier who had worked his way up to reach the rank of regimental sergeant-major. For his devotion to duty during one campaign in France he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, when for twenty-four hours under constant shell fire he had carried in wounded comrades; he was twice mentioned in despatches and later was awarded the 'Belgian Cross of War'. During my boyhood I recall the many occasions when he laid shaking from malaria which reoccurred every so often, the result of his years of service in India, and yet a man who had given so much for his country and with all of those notable achievements he was not able to find employment.

The twenties and thirties were for many people a time of severe poverty and hardship, our family were very poor and although for a while there was no money coming in from anywhere at all (when dad was not entitled to 'Dole') many of our friends and neighbours were far more needy, in fact some of them almost destitute.

I clearly remember seeing children without footwear. That whole period was known as the 'Depression', during that time there had been the 'General Strike'. 'The Wall Street Crash' in America in 1929 had its repercussions here at home too.

I remember very well seeing men sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, playing instruments in the street, among them there were men who had lost an arm or a leg, there were men who gasped for breath still suffering the effects of a gas attack; then there was the pitiful sight of men who lurched their way along with shaking limbs who we were told were 'shell-shocked'.

One of the most degrading sights was that of the man, or from time to time many different men, who stood in our road out there in the middle with his cap at his feet trying to sing, hoping that a few kind people, understanding his plight would contribute a copper or so. What a loss of dignity! Then there were the blind men, many of them, all rejected by the country who a few years earlier they had so proudly wore the King's uniform for, and helped to secure our freedom.

Then there were those who we called the 'Gentlemen of the Road' or 'Milestone Inspectors' but more commonly known as 'Tramps'. We saw them daily as they made their way up the London Road, moving on to the next Workhouse en route. In our case they would have left the one in Wellingborough Road (St. Edmunds) and would be making their way to the one on the corner of Water Lane, Wootton, on the Newport Pagnell road just above where the Queen Eleanor pub now is.

Often they would leave the main road and come round our estate, we have had them knock on our door many times asking for just 'a twist of tea please missus', or 'a crust of bread'. And even though people were short of food stuff themselves they seldom refused. In fact the inquirer often left with what for him might have been a luxury in the way of a piece of cake or some pastry. They would then go on their way again, moving on, hoping to find that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow in the form of permanent work.

Some other unemployed men banded together and took their grievances to Parliament, by marching to London, they were known as the 'Jarrow hunger marchers' where their treaties received no sympathy, their pleas fell on deaf ears.

In our home conditions did improve as each one of us boys reached the age of fourteen and left school, and began to receive a wage, thereby contributing to the family purse. I myself began part-time work at the age of twelve, delivering parcels of wool around the town for the 'Scotch Wool and Hosiery Stores' in Gold Street, working each evening with the exception of Thursday, which was the early closing day and on Saturday afternoons until five-thirty, for which I was paid seven shillings and sixpence. I was allowed to keep one shilling and sixpence, that was quite a large sum for a schoolboy's pocket money.

Some of my friends attended night school but with my evening job it was not possible for me to do so. In any case there was not a great deal of incentive to study, or to try to obtain a higher placing at school, because we knew that it was expected of us once we had turned fourteen to go out and find employment of some sort.

As it was jobs were limited with just the boot and shoe factory or, as in my case, to become an errand boy, whether that meant working for a butcher, baker, greengrocer, or for any other tradesman. That was as far as the choice of work went for those of us without qualifications.

At least no pressure was ever set on us by our parents urging us to do better and to reach a higher standard at school; even our reports were only briefly examined by them, just so long as we could read and write, add and subtract, that seemed to satisfy. I believe that the teachers realised that they were training us only in the main so that the majority would be just capable of carrying out some inferior sort of work.

On leaving school I was first employed by Mr Stevens as an errand boy at the 'Scotch Bakery', at the Wellingborough Road shop. There was another shop in Kingsley at the top of Byron Street and two in the town. The hours were very long, I think that I worked about a sixty-hour week for a mere three shillings more than I was paid in the part-time job.

There was no set time to leave off; while the shop was open there could still be orders to deliver, I gained a sort of promotion to van-boy to the roundsman, Fred, delivering bread and cakes from door to door in the Abington and Kingsley area. Then later I was moved into the bakehouse where along with an older boy, Albert, I worked on the ovens. This led to a health problem and on Dr Stone's advice changed to an outside job.

At this time the newsreels at the cinemas were showing pictures of our 'Teddy' who was making the headlines. As Prince of Wales he was well loved by the ordinary people but was of late fast losing favour, he had become King on the death of his father, King George V, but had relinquished the throne and his brother George became King. 'Teddy' had abdicated on 10th December in order that he might marry an American divorcee, Mrs Wallis Simpson.

We were also shown pictures from the continent of Hitler opening the Eleventh Olympic Games in Germany, and the people's car' the Volkswagen was being launched.

While on a lighter note the film *Modern Times* starring Charlie Chaplin was the box office attraction at the time, and Margaret Mitchell's epic novel *Gone with the Wind* was published.

I believe that there were around about a dozen cinemas in the town at that time, so we were well served as film-goers, which most people were before the days when almost every household owned a television set.

There was one cinema in Cotton, the 'Tivoli', in Gold Street was the 'Majestic', on the Market Square the 'Exchange', on Abington Square the 'Savoy', in Newland the 'Temperance' (which we called the 'Fleapit'), the 'Picturedrome' was in Kettering Road on the Racecourse opposite corner;

the 'Plaza' was in Wellingborough Road, there was the 'Coliseum' in Kingsthorpe Hollow, the 'Cinema De-Lux' in Campbell Street, the 'Essoldo' in Grove Road and the 'Roxy' at St James's End. I also remember the latter being used as a roller-skating rink at one time, I do know though that it would be known to many men of the town as the hall where they bared all for their medical examinations, when they registered for the services. There were possibly other picture houses but those are the ones which I remember.

Our working and social lives followed their normal pattern, there was no van available for me so in the meantime I continued to pedal my way around. There was a difference in my social habits however which were to my later shame and regret, I had got myself involved with a group of lads in our gang older than myself who were heavy drinkers. They were all working and could afford to spend their time in the pubs and clubs of the town, boozing most nights and more so at the weekends, the group included my two old pals from Cotton, Walt and Sam, Jack from Park Street was the leader of the pack and had a great capacity for the amount of beer which he nightly put away.

We young drinkers could in no way keep up with them, Walt much less so because he would keel over in the early part of the evening, beers then were strong and malty not so many chemicals were used then, the five or six pints which I drank at one time were ample for my consumption, others put away considerably more than that, particularly at the weekend, during the week it was not quite so bad, drinking just the odd pint or so.

Our favourite pub at the time was the 'Swan', it was situated somewhere near to what is now the rear entrance to the Derngate Theatre, there they had a three or four piece band, a crooner, vocalist, and I recall that one of his regular numbers was 'It's a Sin to tell a Lie'. That large room was always crowded.

A memory comes to mind of seeing as I walked past those two breweries, Phipps, and the Northampton Brewery in Bridge Street, the man with a wheelbarrow shovelling warm hops in and wheeling it off inside, the smell of those hops lingers still.

When we came home at night from our drinking sessions in town it became a fairly regular habit to call at the fish shop in St. Leonard's Road (owned by Gambles, I believe) and on one such an occasion we were told by them that local people had referred to our usual drunken state and had remarked that it was such a pity that those nice young lads should arrive home like that every night. That was apparently how we appeared to them, how they saw us, whether at the time it set us to think of ourselves in light of what we had heard I don't recall. It didn't go down too well at home either, fortunately though they didn't see me at my worst, as they were all in bed when I arrived home. I spent very little time at home anyway, just there for a few hours' sleep.

Mealtimes had, apart from workdays, always been strictly observed in our house and it was very much frowned on if any one of us did not appear at the meal table at the appropriate time, this was particularly so with regard to the Sunday dinner, which was in keeping with most other families when the traditional roast and Yorkshire pudding would be served and they would eat together at least on that occasion during the week, so that it became important that those strict times be adhered to.

I at this time was persistently late due to the fact that I lacked the guts to say to my fellow drinkers that I was off for my dinner when the time came. Instead I would stay along with them until we left together, I thought that otherwise it would mean losing face, with the result that I usually arrived home about two o'clock, over an hour later than the one o'clock which had been the set time at which dinner was served as far back as I could remember; the meal was by then all cleared away and I would be greeted with the remark that "...if you want your dinner it's in the oven". I resented their criticism of me and I could not understand that with the arrogance of youth that I



A Laundry outing.

(Left) The author aged 17.

(Right) Delivering laundry in Kettering Road.



Walt doing his 'Tarzan' act!



Our tent at Billing. I am second from the left with Walt centre.



Billing camp. Workmate Gilbert Gibson is on the right.

was unfair and ought to change my ways, especially was I at fault in not realising that mother would need to have meals over and done with, Sunday being her one day when she might have the opportunity to have a restful afternoon, on what was then known as a 'day of rest'.

That reminds me, the Sundays of my schooldays meant that we not permitted to play any games whatsoever on that day, of course there were always places where we kick a ball around without anyone knowing.

The heavy drinking stage ran its course and was just a passing phase on the way to growing up, some of the boys started courting, even Sam met a girl which eventually became a serious partnership, others were dating girls. It all rather broke the gang up and the result was that our drinking habits became more sensible, the remaining unattached lads still went to the dances and walked the 'Bunny Run' on Sunday evenings, it was a meeting place for boys and girls and many lasting marriages were the outcome of these meetings. It was harmless enough but we were not allowed to loiter we were forced to keep moving by the rap of the policeman's boot about the ankles. For most of us it amounted to no more than walking a girl home, and perhaps to make a date to see her again during the week, there were those who paired off as far as 'Cow Meadow' which some nearby residents thought was most aptly-named it was more reverently known as 'Becket's Park' of course.

In the summer there was a change of venue for our parade, it then took place round the bandstand in Abington Park, it was assumed that if you made repeated dates with the same girl that you had met then you would be 'going steady' after a while then such a couple would get engaged, that was the traditional way those days, a sort of understanding and commitment to one another. Something like a promise of marriage. Sometimes a couple could be engaged for years before being actually wed, more often than not waiting until they could afford to do so.

As we grew older, one by one the lads were spending more time with their girlfriends, so that our group became somewhat slimmer, we could count on meeting up with them at the County Ground either to watch the Cobblers or the County cricket team. That was of course in the days when the football club shared the ground, where also tennis and bowls were played, long before Sixfields was even dreamed of, I've tried to recall players' names of that period who turned out for the Cobblers but only a few come to mind.

Anyway I do remember goalkeeper, Bill Gormlie, Danny Toland, Shadow Wells, the Dawes brothers, Fred and Albert, Thane, McMenemy, MacQuire, Fanny Walden, and that is as far as I can go, maybe I can do better when I name the cricketers of the time, there was Jupp, Bakewell, Timms, Nelson, Clarke, Snowden, Northway, and Greenwood, Partridge and Bellamy, that is a little better provided that I have them in the appropriate order as it is quite easy I find, to mix up the seasons in which they played having followed each club for so many seasons.

My association with the county ground began at the age of twelve and I was fortunate enough to watch some of the great names of both sports who then graced the county ground. In the early days when I first watched it was only for brief periods, the first time that I set foot inside the ground was on a Saturday afternoon in 1930 while I was delivering parcels for the wool shop, I was allowed by the stewards to stand inside the gates in Abington Avenue and I saw the second half of a Division Three South match. I cannot remember who the opposition were that day, but from then on whenever possible I would arrange my deliveries to coincide with a match and to spend as much time as possible there, after a while I became known to the gatemen, I saw quite a lot of part games in that way.

It seems strange that after leaving school and working either as an errand boy or baker's van boy I still found myself doing the same thing: calling round the same streets as before, indeed in some cases calling at the same houses and able to continue my calls in at the ground whenever it was

possible, and that, when I was with Fred on the van, was fairly frequently because he was a sports lover and would switch the round so that we could time our Abington Avenue calls in order to get in a spell, of whichever was in season, football or cricket.

We knew when the gatemmen were most likely to allow us inside and as all roundsmen wore a smock in those days they realised that we were dodging work for perhaps an hour and not intent on staying and would allow us in. It all worked out so well and made our delivery work that much more interesting, then amazingly when I took over the laundry round once again I worked that same area and with the County Ground on my route was able still to and watch occasionally.

As the summer of 1938 approached a few of us, about six in all, decided to set up a tented camp at Great Billing mill. As it turned out it was not always the same six for various reasons and there were others who came just for the odd weekend. In fact one of my workmates, Gilbert, came on one or two occasions. We were fortunate with regard to the weather for it turned out to be one of those rare long hot summers, so that we set up camp early in the year and as the summer rolled on it was just so ideal that we longed for the weekends to come around so that we could get over to Billing, to get our clothes off and into the water. I suppose that when we were young and healthy all summers were such as that one, sunny and hot. Whether that be so or not the one I write of was, and is the most remembered of my life.

It could possibly have had something to do with the freedom and relaxation in which we found in getting away from the uneasiness which most people then felt due to the daily news of the happenings in Germany, Neville Chamberlain had become Prime Minister in May 1937 and Winston Churchill's lone voice was continually warning Parliament that the Nazis were hell bent on war and predicted what could happen if some means were not urgently found to halt the drift towards it.

So we camped each week from early summer and into the late autumn (an Indian summer?), sometimes staying over and sleeping there and going into work from camp. We swam in the locks nearby, but our evenings were spent at the 'Royal Oak' or the Working Men's Club in Cogenhoe, all the tents and huts were situated to the rear of the mill. This was long before the aquadrome was developed.

Those lads in full-time work would have to work on Saturday mornings others were able to go over early and open up the camp which amounted mainly to drawing enough buckets of water and buying eggs and milk. In my case I could not go until I had completed my deliveries, which depended on how soon my work was ready; once finished it was a matter of dash home, put some rations together and arrive at Billing as soon as I could.

We had a wind-up gramophone and a few records I can still recall a few of them, some 'jazz', because that was most popular at that time and among them were some of Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli. A couple of tunes were 'Dinah' and 'Georgia on my Mind', there were one or two cowboy songs of which there seemed to be a spate of them, one was 'Prairie Moon' and another 'Roll Along Covered Wagon' due no doubt to the number of Western films being made.

We did a lot of tree climbing and had much fun from the raft which we made and used in the stream which ran on into a small pond. At weekends girls came over to see us and to swim. We had lots of fun with them in the woods and fields. They went home at night of course, we could not accommodate them, as much as we would have liked to, it would not have been permissible for them to have stayed in those times. They would certainly have their parents to deal with as we were all considered to be minors, and not of adult age until we were twenty-one, being answerable to our parents most of whom ruled rather strictly.

Several of the lads, particularly those who were unemployed, had then joined the Territorial Army. It gave them a few bob in their pockets, a summer camp and training weekends, also there is no

doubt that it did something towards their self-respect, where not being able to find work they felt unwanted, it helped restore their dignity.

It so happened that behind our camp a group of 'Terries' had set up their tents. One day I saw that they were setting up a boxing ring and being interested went along; I had owned a pair of gloves since I was very young, the sport in those days was much more popular than today, with many boys participating, we could watch professional boxing every week within a few miles distance. There would be a programme at the Drill Hall in town, at Wellingborough, Bedford, Kettering, Rushden, and other nearby towns, we followed the progress of our Far Cotton welterweight, Norman Snow, he was the southern area champion and contender for the British title.

I became friendly with these men and spent a lot of my time with them, they seeing my interest, one day asked if I would like to put the gloves on and to do some sparring with them. I had never previously as much as set foot in a boxing ring and then the opportunity for me to do so was offered. So I accepted the challenge. I couldn't at that stage back out anyway after appearing to be so keen, so I next found myself gloved and ducking under the ropes, facing a man about ten years older than myself and weighing I guess between ten to eleven stone. I began to wonder what my puny eight and half stone body was doing being within a mile of him.

My early thoughts that they were in need of a punchbag, and I was to fill that need - someone at whom they could throw punches with no threat of hurt to themselves. Nothing could have been further from the truth because I found that they required me to hit them. That was not so easy though, because whichever one was in the ring with me the result was the same; they were never where my flaying arms and fist were, I so rarely landed a punch on them; if I had done so I would have been surprised, I had been known around home and school from quite young as being able to fight, it was in fact said of me that "he can use 'em a bit" and what's more I thought I could too.

A few bigger and stronger boys were reluctant to put the gloves on with me. There however, with those men, I was made to realise that I knew nothing, although learning fast. They really took me in hand and tried to instill in me something of the art of Boxing, as opposed to fighting, just slogging and striking out in all directions, each taking turns in my instruction teaching me to use my feet, to dance on my toes, how to cover up for protection and very importantly how to breathe. There was much more too, most of which I have forgotten now. Some years later when I was an Army boxer, if I had remembered just part of what they had taught me then, it might have saved me from some of the bashings which I received.

I learned that they were members of their regimental boxing team and were training for a contest. But I was most surprised and disappointed one weekend to find that my friends had struck camp and left, maybe they had been recalled to their regiment and posted away. Such things were happening then, men were being called back into service and we were living in unusual times.

I would have liked to have said 'cheerio' to them and thanked them for their friendship and interest. For a while I felt a little lost in not being able to be part of what I had become to accept as their 'man's world' but at the same time grateful to have known them. This sudden parting was to be one of the many partings which everyone would become accustomed to in the years that followed.

As the long hot summer continued we enjoyed to the full the Great Outdoors, all of us brown-skinned and fit. Sleeping under the stars on balmy nights, the air filled with the scent of the recently-mown hay, our cooking for sure was not perhaps up to mother's standard, but it seemed to do us no harm.

At the time many young and middle-aged people had taken up outdoor pursuits, probably encouraged to do so by the fine weather, hiking became a thing of the time. The walkers could be seen along the highways or over the fields dressed in shorts, wearing stout boots, long stockings, carrying a stick ambling along in groups of both sexes, footpaths then connected most villages, or

by skirting edge of the farmer's crops they could be reached and in that way avoided using the roads. It is possible that the sudden urge for the Great Outdoors had something to do with what we had been witnessing on our newsreel screens at the cinema, where we were shown pictures of the Germans at their exercises, especially the young folk, the difference being that theirs were mass exercises and walks with their packs on their backs marching along and singing, as they went. But for them it was compulsory, part of the programme of fitness for all Germans which Hitler had instigated, where by order all Germans must be physically fit what he called his 'Strength through Joy movement'.

Winston Churchill, although at the time holding no government appointment, followed closely the rise of Hitler and his Nazi Party, and noted and informed our nation of the marching and drilling of German troops, and of the complete and extensive training for war, with the overwhelming mass of the population enthusiastically involved and supportive.

We were able to see evidence of this at the cinema where the screens displayed the fervour of the crowds of people whenever Hitler or one of his henchmen made a speech, ranting and spewing out hate, it appeared that the whole of the German race was in favour of the warlike aims of their leaders. Everyone with their hands thrust defiantly in the air in way of the Hitler salute.

One could wonder why after suffering so much from such a costly defeat only about eighteen years before, when they had lost so many of their country's young lives and their economy in ruins, that they should be so ready, so keen to enter into another conflict which would be an event more hideous, destructive and devastating than any previous war, with the danger that such a conflagration would be so disastrous that it was foreseen that it might even destroy the whole of the world. And yet they were allowing themselves to be led into what was certain catastrophe.

It was not difficult to understand that when suffering so much poverty and deprivation after the last war, that when someone appears on the scene as Hitler did, to lead them and to give them the means to be able to purchase that loaf of bread, where previously there was none, with the promise of jam tomorrow, that they would be only too ready to support him. There was no doubt another reason as well for giving that support, and that was perhaps the lust for revenge after the defeat from which they had only recently emerged, and were enthralled with a leadership which could bring it about.

It was obviously difficult and dangerous to oppose the new regime in any way, because it had then secured such a hold on minds and actions that any dissident would be sure to be aware of the consequences, and readily dealt with by the Gestapo, and likely to be despatched to one of the concentration camps set up for the purpose. It was not only the Jews who were dealt with in that way but any political opponents, Communists, Trade Unionist, Gypsies, and anyone who got in their way.

In Britain at the time, in spite of the promises made, there was an air of troubled anxiety. Many of the aristocracy and some members of Parliament, particularly on the Conservative benches, were in favour of appeasing Hitler and would have gladly settled for a compromise. Among the population opinions varied, some would have settled for a pact of non-aggression if one could be obtained, mainly due to the fear of what would be the consequences of bombing which they expected the Luftwaffe would subject them to.

On 15th September 1938, Prime Minister Chamberlain met with Hitler and the whole country breathed a sigh of relief when on his return he was able to assure us that Germany had "no further claims in Europe" and that there would be "peace in our time". Pathe News showed him on the steps of the plane waving the piece of paper which was to have been a guarantee of peace. So it appeared that all was well, we all hoped so anyway, at least it gave us a breathing space. The wonderful long golden summer was at last drawing to its end and it drifted gently into a warm

many-coloured autumn. I remember one of the popular songs of the time was 'September in the Rain', that was the one which the errand boys were all whistling, but for us at camp the whole month was rain-free, in fact only once or twice during the summer through did we witness any rain. There was on one occasion a very heavy downpour, but it was quite welcome and made a refreshing change from the hot sultry spell. It was then that our tents (two bivouacs joined together with safety pins) let us down rather badly, they leaked in so many places that hardly a dry spot could be found. So that we more or less sat the night through huddled in wet blankets, with the morning though with everything laid out on the bushes all soon were dry again. How refreshed the earth seemed afterwards with a feeling of new cleanliness, the scents of the hedgerows and grasses, the fragrance of the fields appeared to be all the sweeter that morning, our little stream where we often laid down our sweating bodies to lap up its clear water as it flowed over the washed white pebbles, babbled along then in more than its usual hurry. The air too which always seemed to be that much cleaner than that of the town was even more invigorating.

After the Czech nation had been overrun our Prime Minister was still reluctant to rearm, still hoping for a favourable outcome to negotiations rather than to put ourselves on a complete war footing, but opinion began to sway towards those such as Mr Churchill who advocated a full rearmament programme, and that intensified after Hitler signed a Non-Aggression Pact with Russia, then with the likelihood of Poland being next on the list for the Germans to overrun there was a wholesale surge of people who were in favour of complete rearmament. In America there were statesmen who admired Hitler and the German Nation and thought that Britain would not survive many months and that we would soon succumb if war did come.

When getting up for work in the first week of October a low mist hung over the fields and locks where we had spent and enjoyed so much of our time that summer, and the dew glistened on the grass as we pushed our bikes out onto the road, deciding as we did so, to go over on the following Saturday and strike camp (actually what we meant was that we would pull down the remnants of the tents). And that is what we did, having gathered together what equipment we thought was worth salvaging we pedalled it home on our backs, with pots and pans dangling down from the handlebars and crossbars, to be stored away for use the following year, we were not to know then that no such summer would be ours to enjoy ever again, because in little less than a year we were at war with Germany. Just some very pleasant memories however still remain with me.

Our weekends then were resumed much as before, going to the dance on Saturdays. The first time we went I took a girl home who lived in one of the roads off St. Andrew's Road, and we had to rush along because she feared that she would be late home, and was concerned because her dad who was very strict about what time she returned home. If she was late he would be angry. I intended to leave her at the corner of the street, but anyway carried on and turned the corner. I had no intention of confronting an angry father who would possibly blame me for keeping her out, but a little further on she said "Here he is," and then I saw this shape hurrying towards us, and I am ashamed to tell of it now that I ran, putting as much distance between them as quickly as possible. Only later did I realise what a cowardly thing I had done.

One night during the same week a crowd of us were on the Racecourse with some girls when I had a more fortunate encounter with a girl, someone that I knew slightly by sight passed nearby while walking her dog. I didn't have a chat-up line but just fell in along with her making some sort of conversation until we had reached the road where she lived in Kingsthorpe Hollow, leaving her there but not before we had arranged to meet again. Not many of the girls that I had been out with wished to make a second date, whether the fault was theirs or mine I don't know. But that meeting was the beginning of a regular relationship.

I had seen her often when I biked past her house where she lived as a schoolgirl, which was in the

town but was demolished many years ago. The girl's name was Jane. I met her parents and we went out with them usually on Sunday evenings to the WMC in Semilong. Dad, Bill, was a very heavy drinker, and on the occasions when I went out with him alone I'm afraid that I tried to keep up with him pint for pint, and thought to myself "here I go again" trying to drink above my capacity until one night having drunk far too much I was not able to hold it and disgraced myself. He then warned me not to attempt to keep up with him, not to match him, I was pleased to take his good advice. We became good mates, going to the Cobblers, or to boxing matches together, even lending him money when he was short. I had most of my meals with them at the weekends.

Toward the year's end our work foreman called me into the office to inform me that there was a vacancy for a vanman at Bedford, to be available in the New Year. Charlie Woods who worked that area wanted assistance as his rounds were steadily expanding. It had been decided that the Northampton department be asked to supply the applicant and so it fell to foreman Horace to consider who of his staff he should recommend as suitable and he offered it to me.

There were those some senior to me who for various reasons when offered it declined and were unable to take advantage of the opportunity, my mate Gilbert for instance supported a widowed mother, two were recently married and buying their own homes, consequently it came down to me, and I readily accepted.

The decision gave me no difficulty whatsoever in fact I would have been disappointed if I hadn't been given it, so I jumped at the chance to leave home where I was far from happy, a good deal of the reason for that I realised as I grew older was much my fault. It was easy to blame others but it was as much my own attitude as anything, my life at the time had not been very creditable, although since meeting Jane my habits had improved.

It was with some anticipation that I awaited the New Year, I was to be a van driver with an increase in pay, about to begin a new life. Bedford I thought was no great distance from home, and I would be able to bike there on Monday mornings return on Wednesday afternoons and again at the weekend.

The distance from home (before motorways) was about twenty miles, Charlie had found lodgings for me in the Queen's Park area and introduced me to my landlady, Mrs Cattrell, a widowed lady, who had a daughter and two sons all within a year or so of my age. I moved in on a morning in early January having biked there in icy wintry weather typical for that time of year.

Dad had got me up at six-thirty and I well remember the breakfast which I ate before setting out, not that it was unusual at the time in our house, but bread sop was hardly the meal to sustain me for a twenty-mile bike ride, especially in winter. It consisted of bread soaked in a basin of tea, I was expected to be at the garage by eight-thirty but called in the digs on the way to let them know that I had arrived, and would be in for the evening meal.

That was to be the pattern of my working life for the next ten months often arriving soaked from a rainy journey, sometimes very cold when the roads were icy and when snow lay upon them. The worst of those rides were perhaps when trying to force along against a strong wind, there were though those beautiful mornings when there could have been nothing more pleasurable than to be bowling along that road, the road on which I must have travelled about three thousand miles to and fro, able to almost recognise each and every pothole every rut, each hill, and dale. There were occasions when a lorry driver would pull up put my bike on the back and give me a lift, failing that it was possible sometimes to hang on to a tailboard to be pulled along for a few miles.

It was far from the best of mornings to begin a new venture, for a start the promised van hadn't arrived, I had therefore to do the round on a trike in the meantime. It was snowing heavily and I was not sure of the district or the addresses of the customers which were mostly in the centre (that area is now much changed).

I still had a lot of calls to make as it grew dark and I became more dejected, cold and miserable with not making much headway, I wondered then if I hadn't made a wrong move in going to Bedford, I was very much cheered however when Charlie pulled up in his van. He had been to my digs to see how I had progressed during the day and found that I was still out so came on to help me finish the remainder of the round of collections, he saved the day for me, Charlie was that sort of man he loved his work he and his van could be seen at all hours. It seemed that he had very little home life, and chose to be working. It was about eight o'clock when I finally reached the garage, thankfully returning to the warmth of Mrs Cattrell's home and an enjoyable late dinner.

I very soon settled in with my new family for she treated me as one of her sons, and those of her family as a friend. Mrs Cattrell was so considerate and caring that by the time I left I regarded her as a second mother. The daughter was the eldest of her children and I learned that she worked at Woolworth's and engaged to an airman at nearby Cardington. The oldest son Charlie was about my age and the other a little younger, he was Bob and worked as a baker and was a territorial soldier. We all got along fine and it was most pleasant to sit and talk with them in front of the fire on those cold winter evenings when they were at home.

My Tuesday round was much easier and smaller, but some distance away over in the London Road area. On Wednesdays we cashed in at the laundry office at Irthlingborough, after which was our half-day and from Bedford I would bike home. On one such day when cashing-in I enquired who the dark-eyed girl who handled my work was, and learnt that her name was Hilda Freeman, later, on those days we began to talk and somehow always managed to meet in the loading bay. I found that she was engaged to a local boy and I too had then recently become engaged to Jane.

It was usual for four of us Jane, myself, Sam and his girl to go to the dance at the Fancier's Club on Saturday nights. While the girls danced in the ballroom upstairs Sam and I played snooker and generally propped up the bar, making a point of going up to attempt the last waltz; neither of us could ever dance but did make the effort at the end of the evening.

Jane had told me that she had begun going to dances in the week while I was away in Bedford to which I saw no reason to object, that is until I saw who her dancing partner was: I knew him, he was at school with me not my type at all, I thought him too flashy. And my dislike of him had something to do with the fact that he was an exceptional dancer which made that dislike more intense, and was the cause of my jealousy.

I told Jane that I objected to her so close association with him, especially after learning that he was her regular partner in the week, my attitude regarding it caused us to fall out and I regretted that it appeared as though I did not trust her. I decided to let the matter drop and put aside my jealous thoughts, because on reflection I realised that I was being unjust in view of the fact that I continued to meet Hilda for a few minutes on Wednesdays; in addition we wrote to one another.

It was a strange sort of situation when considering that we were both engaged to others, it often happened that I would post a letter to Hilda on my way to meet Jane. What tangled webs are woven by the young, maybe we were just young and foolish, or could we use the excuse that it was due to the uncertainty of the times through which we were passing?

Wednesday, our cashing-in day caused me no problems when working in Bedford but previously at the time that I was drinking it was always a worry as to whether my cash would meet the receipts; whatever the total I always seemed to be short, caused by dipping into my cashbag during the week to feed my habits of drinking, and betting on the horses. The only way in which the shortfall could be overcome was either to borrow from my workmates or to use cash from one of the next week's deliveries. It got so bad that I stopped betting altogether, cut down on my drinking and have never gambled since.

I still went out on Wednesdays with the Northampton roundsman, to the pictures or skating. In

the summer Frosty who was a little older than us would call round and pick up about four of us in a little soft-topped Austin Seven, of which he was a part-owner along with his friends; he would drive us out somewhere, usually to go swimming, Midsummer Baths were our favourite, we had some very happy times in that motor.

The mention of Midsummer Meadow Baths brings back memories of some wonderful times spent there especially during the month-long August holiday. Also on summer Sunday mornings early after breakfast a group of us boys and girls would cross the fields from Ransome Road and go to the baths that way; in those days the girls would leave us once inside, because the sexes were segregated and we couldn't see them again until we met them at the entrance to go home. But we could peep through the slits in the timber, or the knots in the wood.

The baths were open from Springtime to October and although open-air were heated by the cooling towers of the electricity works on the river bank, the baths themselves were closed many years ago and the towers demolished soon after. Often on my way home from work when I was employed in the bakehouse I would have a swim, as they didn't close until nine o'clock.

But back to those Sunday schoolboy mornings, having had our swim and met together outside, we boys would have to make a dash for home in order to collect our stiff starched collars and surpluses, so that we could be in the vestry no later than ten minutes before the start of the eleven o'clock service, where us pink-faced and newly-cleansed choirboys would appear to the congregation to be the angels which we were certainly not.

The brewers, Phipps & Co. owned some swimming baths and as schoolboys we used to march once a week to those baths for our lessons from Rothersthorpe Road, it was where I learned to swim. I learnt very quickly because almost before I could get undressed I was pushed in and swam from that moment and on my first visit. How lucky we were in those days of the Depression in the 1930s that these concessions were made available to us.

After I had confronted Jane regarding her dancing partner although not unduly worried or concerned over the matter, I did a few weeks later receive something which gave me food for thought about it. Jane's mum waited until she and I were alone and asked me if, having said goodnight to Jane on the doorstep on the previous Sunday night, did I return on foot? My answer was a simple "no". It was my habit to jump on my bike set off round the corner and bike home. There was no reason which I could think of where I would need to come back on foot, she then explained that a neighbour just happened to be looking out (as they sometimes do,) and was certain that she saw someone come from around the corner and over the road after I had left. Jane's mum was concerned enough about it to mention it to me, I gave it some thought but decided that the neighbour was mistaken. I ought to have treated it more seriously, I didn't realise the consequences then of what had taken place. I was quite naive.

As we entered into the New Year (1939) there persisted a nervous tension throughout the country which was further strengthened by the obvious preparations being made for our defence, in what was presumed the coming war. Trenches were being dug in the parks, air-raid wardens were appointed, and important buildings were being sandbagged, all of which increased the fear of war being imminent.

In April a Bill was passed in Parliament which allowed for the call-up to the services for six months training applying to men aged twenty. And as I had then turned twenty it included me; it was sometime during the Spring that while on my rounds in Bedford I read a notice in a Post Office window instructing all males of that age to register in what was known as the 'Militia'. There was to be an initial call-up of ten thousand. My registration date was in the coming June and my place of enrolment was the old cinema and skating rink, (the Roxy?) over West Bridge, Northampton, just beyond Castle Station

Chapter Two: Only for Six Months

Registration for call-up applied in alphabetical order and as the day in June arrived and I duly attended I was passed medically fit. It was recorded that I was a driver (on a trike) and that my occupation was “driver”; when asked which service I preferred to join I remember saying that it didn’t matter as it was only for six months, to which the recruiting sergeant replied, “I only hope you are right”. I actually did believe it too.

Then it was back to work as usual until such time as that buff envelope stamped OHMS arrived, informing me of the date and place of call-up. Each time I went home I inquired whether it had come Dad told me not to be so eager, to be patient as it would come soon enough.

When talking to Jane’s mother she suggested that Jane and I ought to get married before I went away as the married allowance was more acceptable than the two shillings a day which I would expect to receive, I paid no heed to that, simply ignored it.

To me life seemed uncertain enough without causing it to be any more complex, in any case I had an opinion about wartime marriages I thought them to be very unfair to those who may be bereaved, so I had made up my mind that if war did come I would not marry while it lasted.

After enrolling and being passed fit I felt that I would be certain to be among the first to be called. While back at the digs I found that Mrs Cattrell’s eldest son who had also enrolled in the militia had already left and commenced his training, somewhere locally she thought; his brother had moved off with his regiment but she didn’t know where to.

One Wednesday when at Irthlingborough I asked the transport manager when I was likely to receive my van, he explained that while the present emergency was in force there would be no more deliveries of vehicles, the rearmament programme was then being established, and civil needs would have to wait that was no more than I guessed of course.

It had been anticipated that Poland would be the next country that Hitler would pay his attention to, and it was made more obvious by the numerous amount of speeches being directed against that country. Britain had an agreement that should Poland’s territory be violated then we and France would go to their assistance, in other words in order to honour that agreement we would have no alternative but to go to war against the aggressor.

The French government believed that their defensive Maginot line would provide security for them against any attack from Germany. There was not a great distance between that and the German Siegfried Line, however, with both Holland and Belgium preferring to stay neutral an attack could be made on France through those countries if their neutrality was ignored. In fact such a plan was drawn up by the Germans to do just that whereby France could be overcome in that way.

On September 1st, 1939, the Germans as predicted crossed the Polish frontier with their tanks and Warsaw was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe. Although the Poles put up a terrific defence of their country they were soon overwhelmed by the might of the Nazi war machine. Prime Minister Chamberlain sent a note to Hitler confirming that unless his troops were withdrawn immediately ‘a state of war would exist between us’. Chamberlain even at this late stage of proceedings still hoped that negotiations could achieve peace. There were others too who were seeking a truce, the Pope, Mussolini, President Roosevelt and leaders in Sweden.

The 3rd September 1939 was a fine, sunny autumn morning and I like millions of other people across the world will easily remember where they were at that time, as they awaited the final fearful deadline when the Prime Minister’s broadcast at eleven o’clock would inform the nation of the result of his ultimatum which he had sent to Hitler.

So that just before eleven o'clock everyone, whatever they were doing, made sure that they were in the vicinity of a wireless set. All people wherever they were waited anxiously for that historic announcement. I remember where I was at the time, a few of us had been across the road to the swimming baths, those amongst us who had no bath at home made a habit of using the bathing facilities there. After which we would go off for our Sunday lunchtime drink.

On that particular morning we were all gathered around the lampost in Park Street all the doors in the street were open, everywhere was quiet, all holding their breath, listening for the chimes of Big Ben to strike that dreaded eleventh hour. It was on the hour that we heard our Prime Minister in solemn voice tell us that as he had received no reply to his most recent plea for peace a state of war existed between ourselves and Germany. People began to come out onto the streets, stunned by the news which they had just been given even though most people for over a year believed that war was inevitable.

The old folks had been through it all only a short twenty years before, now it would be their sons and grandsons who would be called on to fight a modern war. Some mothers openly wept, sweethearts and young wives with children clung to their men. I think a lot of young males thought that it was to be a great adventure for them to take part in.

It was a sombre group in the pub that dinner time although we were somewhat comforted by the thought that it couldn't be a long war and that it would be all over by Christmas anyway. That was certainly my opinion. We dispersed early from the pub that day, I think that after the initial shock of the news each one wanted to be alone with his thoughts. I for once arrived home for dinner on time. Dad had three sons all of military age; he had little to say other than he believed that it would be a long war, which would this time affect civilians who would also be in the front line. He added how he thought that wars were so easy to start but very difficult to end.

Cinemas and all places of entertainment were closed immediately although the ruling was soon relaxed, a complete blackout came into force, carlights were dimmed, lamposts and kerbstones painted white, barrage balloons were raised above us, troops were digging trenches in the parks, and air-raid sirens were tested. Bomb shelters were made available which people dug into the gardens, known as the 'Anderson shelters' and all over the town shelters were being built in the streets.

After many weeks of anticipation my call-up papers finally arrived and I was instructed to report to Tidworth to join the Armoured Corps. I am not sure now which barracks I did my training in but I believe it to be either 'Multan' or 'Bhurtapore' (they all seemed to have Indian names).

I took leave of my employers at Irthlingborough and said goodbye to Hilda, left my workmate Charlie and my adopted mother at Bedford and for the last time cycled home along that well-worn Northampton-Bedford Road.

I had had better rides before, that one was far from being comfortable, in fact I think that I walked as much as I rode, about a mile out of Bedford I received my first puncture and another one before I was half-way home, the journey was alternated by riding on the rims, standing on the pedals and walking up the hills, the bike had served me well but let me down on its last ride, it obviously was in need of new tyres but too late then.

It was quite a modern bike, a Hercules, dropped handlebars and a fixed wheel, we had got to know each other well. It was a long journey home that day and I was not sorry to put the old thing in the back of the shed until I would need it again at the end of my six months training (hopefully). In the event my brother Ern repaired it and used it until he joined up.

During my one or two days before leaving for Tidworth I visited friends and relations, aunt and cousins in Byron Street, and to my great aunt and uncle at Quinton who had such a large part in my early life and upbringing, they were known as 'Darby and Joan', everyone loved them just simple farmworker sort of folk, I had much affection for them and will always remember as I left

that they were so concerned over my going away to war, unfortunately that was the last time that I saw them.

Although war had been declared there seemed to be little evidence of any action except at sea where our sailors were protecting our shores and our shipping which in its wake brought the inevitable casualties and deaths, one of the first of our ships to be sunk was the Glasgow liner *Athenia*, which was torpedoed by the German submarine U-30 in the Atlantic, with the loss of 112 on the day war was declared.

At the end of September the Royal Air Force carried out leaflet raids over Germany, it was thought not expedient to bomb them as it could cause reprisals especially while Britain played for time to fully rearm. During the inter-war years there had been a great desire for us to disarm.

The British Expeditionary Force had landed in France and it was generally believed that Hitler would go on the offensive during the autumn, but for some reason no such move was made and then it became too late to do so due to the uncertainty of the weather.

That indicated that the full might of the Nazi war machine would be hurled against the Anglo-French forces in the Spring. In the meantime there were still those among our statesmen and others who were doing their utmost to negotiate and to avert a full-scale war still hoping to do a deal with Hitler.

At the end of the first month of the war we lost the aircraft carrier *Courageous* which was sunk by a submarine. At the same time we saw the end of the Spanish Civil War. We learned too that Poland had been overrun and occupied and definite proof was found that Jews were being banished to detention centres.

On a lighter note, the arts during this year gave us two novels, one was John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the other, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. The most popular film then being shown was *Stagecoach*.

I knew that several of my old schoolmates had received their call-up papers at the same time as myself and some were also bound for various camps on Salisbury Plain.

I had said farewell to Jane's parents and told Jane not to see me off and that I hoped to see her when I got leave, which I thought would be in about a month. There was quite a group of us assembled at Castle station waiting for the London train. And among those who I was school with was my old friend from way back when we were in the infants school together, Walt; then there was Charlie Fryat, and Jack Herbert who happened also to be my next door neighbour.

With us too was my cousin from Blisworth (another Fred Digby) and a couple more whose names I cannot recall at the moment. Jack, I am sorry to say, died within a few months, I believe of consumption. This disease of the lungs was prevalent during the 20s and 30s but it had then eased a little. I can well remember seeing patients on the balcony at the rear of the old part of the Northampton General Hospital in their beds in all sorts of weather, noticeable by the red blankets which covered them. It was thought that plenty of fresh air was desirous in order to procure a remedy. When walking out they always wore open-necked shirts.

There were other men also at the station bound for Tidworth, of those whose names I can remember was Gordon Heard from St. James's End, Clark from Towcester, Chris Stonebanks from town and Danny Saunders from Woodford. So that there was quite a party of us. It was a sensible decision which we had made to catch an early train to Euston because our journey was somewhat delayed in London due to not having one amongst us who understood the workings of the Underground train system, not many lads at that time had ever visited our capital. I had on three occasions but always accompanied and guided by our choirmaster when on our annual outings. Others with us had taken advantage of the cheap Bank Holiday excursions which the London

Midland and Scottish railway company provided, either to London or various other cities or the coast.

It was then that we circled the Tube many times, we were lost and were fast losing travelling time, however we did somehow finally and more by luck than anything board our train for Wiltshire, as years went by of course railway transport staff were in attendance to point the way to servicemen.

I can't remember where it was that we were picked up, it could have been Andover. I can recall climbing into the truck. If not Andover, it must have been Luggershall, in any case the corporal in charge of us dropped us outside the guardroom and departed. Once inside the guardroom we offered our papers, answered as required and filed out, but now with a new title, I became Trooper (followed by that never-to-be-forgotten number) Digby 7901259.

On leaving the guardroom we were escorted to the Mess Room where we were served a most welcome meal of bread and cheese and a mug of cocoa. It was then about 8pm and since leaving home I had only eaten two sandwiches all day, so the food was much appreciated. While we ate a mess orderly was sweeping down the other tables by standing on them; Gordon reminded me of this when I met him some years ago. After eating we were taken to our barrack room where some other new recruits who were to be our comrades during our period of training were already settled in. We went thankfully to bed and I, and no doubt the others too, wondered what tomorrow might bring.

We learned in the morning that we were members of Number Six squad of the 53rd Armoured Training Regiment, with fifty of us in the squad occupying two barrack rooms, and most important we were informed that reveille was at six-thirty.

It was still dark when at a shout from the sergeant we ran down the iron staircase dressed in whatever was near to hand, anything to make our first roll-call on time. Once the sergeant was assured that all of us new recruits were present and correct we were free to wash and shave, prior to joining the queue at the Mess Room for breakfast.

The first morning parade which we attended was held on the square while we were still attired in our civilian clothes which as can be imagined displayed a wide assortment of fashions as we lined up there. Some wore their Sunday best suits minus collar and tie, the majority wore sports coats and flannels, here and there a raincoat could be seen. For neckwear one or two sported mufflers, the main headgear, where worn, was of peaked caps, although there were quite a few trilbys. There was just the odd one who stood out among us by the wearing of a bowler. Footwear varied too, some boots, but mainly leather shoes with the exception of one pair of patent leather.

What a comical line-up it must have appeared to those Regular soldiers going about their normal duties but mostly so to our squad sergeant (Rodden) and to Corporal Bell who had been given the unenviable task of turning the shambles which stood before them into something like passable soldiers.

We were only the second squad of militia to arrive there for training so that our NCOs were quite unaccustomed to training a squad of the size of ours. It must have been a real challenge for them. It was for them though only the first of many such batches of men which they were to experience in the years to follow.

We ourselves in later months when seeing the incoming squads joked and laughed about their appearance and of the unlikelihood of their ever becoming soldiers and were bold enough to urge them to "get some service in" having by then become old soldiers ourselves, or so we thought.

The following few days we spent drawing equipment and clothing all of which it appeared was in short supply, it was said that our call-up had been delayed for that reason and also due to lack of accommodation.

The fitting together of our webbing equipment caused a fair amount of confusion even with the help of a wall chart, and following Corporal Bell's instructions most of us still found it difficult to sort out. I was never very clever with puzzles, jigsaws and the like. I found the same problem in more recent years when trying to assemble a certain manufacturer's furniture kits. However by assisting one another it eventually all came together.

Another chore on which we spent many hours was the 'beezing' of boots with the use of a great deal of spit and a hot spoon in order to obtain that high polished finish, I am not too sure that all the spit was necessary, probably today in the modern Army there is a plastic tube of a gel that would be just as acceptable, that is if the 'beezing' of boots is a necessity anyway. The other boring duty was the blanco-ing of equipment, another task which was to become all too familiar.

When our training began in earnest we were able to settle into some sort of routine, began to understand each bugle call and became adept at quick changes of dress, everything was carried out at double speed. Time between each parade was limited. It could happen that we may come in from physical training wearing vest and shorts, then to need to change for square drill which meant full dress uniform, or overalls for tank park work, whatever it was the Corporal was always there shouting for us to be 'on parade'.

The number and type of tanks which were at our disposal was far from satisfactory and disappointing, there were a few A5's (light tanks) but quite a lot of Bren Gun Carriers which were actually for infantry work, although useful for us to train on. It was quite exciting too when on the Plain driving them at full speed over varying terrain, on hard surfaces after frosts, or slithering about in all directions after rain or snow; it was quite exhausting too, it was not unusual for men to come in, remove their mud-covered boots only and roll in between the blankets. They certainly pushed us hard and for some lads it was too much for them and they were discharged as 'unfit for service', they had not been able to stand the pace which had been set for us.

When in barracks one of the most looked forward to events was the morning break time when we fell out for a 'tea and a wad' at the NAAFI. If out on the road either driving or on map-reading it was the custom to have our break at a cafe somewhere en route.

It was always a relief when either on a route march or in a class of instruction to hear the NCO command 'fall out for smoke'. It was an order readily obeyed, if however he didn't give the order someone was sure to remind him because with only the odd exception we all smoked, some more than others. I doubt if that ritual is performed today as the habit of smoking is confined to a minority of people. We generally have heeded the warnings regarding the damage to our health caused by smoking and of passive smoking.

I've thought when hearing those warnings, of the hours I had spent in a closed-down tank with crew of four or five in a watch and wait situation, where each of us smoked one after another until the air was thick and heavy as a result. There were many such confined places which most people were forced to have to endure then, but of course were ignorant of the consequences.

My parents smoked Woodbines, Dad bought them in open-ended paper packets of five, Dad would have a fag on when digging the garden. I've seen my stepmother with one in her lips when pegging out the clothes, washing-up, or any other household chore; Grandma smoked as did Grandad, but his was a pipe, and I can still smell that aroma today. Our barber smoked while cutting hair with a long ash hanging before it dropped down his front, and the fag would stay in his lips until it had almost burnt away, the underside of his otherwise grey moustache was rusty colour. Our butcher smoked while cutting and serving meat.

There were other smokers than those of the cigarette and the pipe: some preferred a cigar or cheroot, and there were those who chewed tobacco which they cut off in large chunks with a penknife, that habit was mainly among older men. Apart from the ready-made cigarette, many men

rolled their own, some by rolling between thumb and finger at which they were very adept at producing a reasonable fag. But there was a machine known as Rizla, into which a red or blue paper could be inserted which gave a more presentable shaped cigarette.

Some companies included either coupons or cigarette cards in their packets and those cards formed quite a hobby for us schoolboys, either by collecting as many sets as possible or to play games with them, 'Span' was one game, and another 'Skimming On'. There was a world of information too which could be found on their backs; we learned the history of military and naval uniforms, breeds of dogs, race horses and their stables and jockeys' colours, there were artists, musicians, birds, flowers, footballers and details of their grounds and their club colours. In all quite an education for us young boys. I can remember some of the many brands which were on the market at that time: John Players packet was outstanding because it had the head and shoulders of a bearded sailor on, a real 'old salt'. Black Cat had a red background, Gold Flake was yellow, I've already mentioned Woodbines, others were Park Drive, Senior Service, Ardarth, Deresk, Craven 'A'. Some of them were stated to have cork tips. The high-class tobacconist would display special makes such as Russian, Egyptian, Oval Turkish, Passing Cloud with Gold Spats, Tennessee Whiffs which had a cigar base, there were many more I know but it goes some way to show just how much choice there was to satisfy the habits of the inhaling majority.

My uncle smoked one of the brands which included coupons and it was by saving these over quite a long period that I eventually was able to send away and receive a pair of boxing gloves, they were the ones which I took to Billing. It was in a similar manner in which some years before I became the owner of a football but that time it was by saving 'Oxo' coupons, thousands of them although that was not difficult in our house for at that time we seemed to have Oxo in some form or other at every meal.

The ball was bashed about for a good many years, much sewn, heavily patched, it was made of leather of course, but not like the light plastic balls of today it was sewn round as is a Rugby ball and was pumped up with a bicycle pump. If the teat was not tucked in not far enough it became a little pear-shaped and the lace cut into your forehead if you couldn't always avoid heading it. Being leather, when wet it absorbed water and became like a ton weight to kick and heavy boots with stout toecaps were essential.

After all that reminiscing, it's back to Tidworth and training days; our driving instruction involved the driving for long distances large commandeered saloon cars which were both a pleasure to drive and an experience; for map-reading we used 15-cwt trucks. It was a looked forward to change to be out of barracks for a few hours because the garrison was purely military and one rarely saw a civilian with the exception of a few workers.

'Post-call' was daily anticipated and an eagerly awaited event for us. I received regular letters from Dad and often a parcel containing cakes and sausage rolls from my stepmother; most foodstuffs were still available as rationing had not yet been introduced and those parcels were most acceptable and eagerly received when they were shared around, as was the custom to do.

Mother was an excellent cook, having been taught when she was in service at the 'big' houses when very young; I know that during the dark days of the Depression years that she could conjure up some fantastic meals from almost anything. When parcels of food arrived it was like party time in our barrack room. My brothers wrote, as did my friends and other relatives, often sending fags.

Although coming toward the end of the year 1939 there still had been no general call-up, many men were volunteering. Jane's letters were rare, I looked for at least one each week but was regularly disappointed, it was fortunate that life was so hectic that I was not given a lot of time to regard it or to fret over it.

Plenty of sport was played as part of our physical training programme and in our spare time. When



'Rookie' Soldier, October 1939.



7901259 Trooper F. W. Digby.



*Three 20 year old Militia Men, Tidworth 1939.
Left to right - Frank Abbott, Myself, Skid Procter*

not on guard, cookhouse, picket or any other duty we could draw from the stores any equipment required for a game, whether it was football, hockey, rugby, tennis or any other sport. I drew boxing gloves for use in the barrack room but after a session or so I found my mates were not very interested.

The squad had a football team and we played inter-house matches. There were one or two who were keen cross-country runners and although that was part of our training we usually ran as far as the next village on Sunday afternoons as we been informed that the regiment intended to enter a team in the annual garrison cross-country cup race.

Some confusion was caused for a while due to the fact that there was another Digby in our squad, the other being 'Wingfield' and often when reading the Order Board I would find that I was down for a certain duty only to find that it referred to the other man. It eventually got sorted out when he left us to join the officer cadets.

That most of our squad were ordinary working-class boys was defined mainly by the manner in which they earned their living with such varying occupations. Although we were all drivers not everyone drove for a living, there were one or two long distance drivers as Walt was, van drivers for various tradesmen, one a taxi driver, one a chauffeur, a brewery worker, a fisherman, one a professional footballer and Danny, who was a butcher. There were also three lads from Doctor Barnardo's home who kept themselves a little apart from us. Then there were about a dozen office workers, either Bank or in some other capacity. They could be termed 'white collar workers' Several of these were aloof and didn't mix too well with the remainder of us. It was noticeable that although called up together at the same time, those men who were of management status or in some professional occupation, seemed to have been segregated as officer potential probably at the time of enrolment.

The winter of 1939 was particularly severe. We all disliked those cold, dark mornings when we stood shivering on parade for roll call. Very pleasant though when we broke off, collected our mess tins and dashed across to the cookhouse, banging away with our spoon on them until the Orderly opened up letting us in with a chorus of choice words.

Saturday nights when not on duty were spent sometimes in the NAAFI where we could have a pint of beer and a game of 'Housey Housey' (Bingo), or the Garrison Theatre where there would be a show produced by ENSA - interpreted by some as 'Every Night Something Awful', which I thought was quite unfair.

An alternative was the cinema in the village, there was also a pub and a cafe but our limited funds wouldn't reach that far; our 14 shillings a week were quickly eroded by Stoppages, Barrack Room damage was one - even if there were no damage - after which there were items like metal polish, blanco, boot polish and toiletries - leaving very little with which to really live it up.

The first Christmas of the war came upon us and my prediction that it would by now be all over had to be revised and my new date which I set was to be February, when we had finished our training.

It was a most miserable Christmas, as with a lot of others in the room, I suffered from a bout of 'flu'; if there was a Christmas dinner I knew not of it. We preferred to stay in bed and to try to keep warm. Christmas cards and parcels were received from home, other than that there was little in the way of good cheer.

I had told Jane when I left her that I thought I would get leave after a month but it was early in the New Year of 1940 that we were granted seven days. I don't remember a great deal about it except the feeling of relief I felt to be free for a few days of the daily rush and dash to see my fiancée, Jane, my parents relatives and friends.

Both my brothers had left home and had joined the air force. Dad too was once again wearing uniform as a member of the Home Guard, with the rank of sergeant. Many more men and some ladies were now in uniform and others were daily receiving their papers as part of the general call-up.

One incident which I recall during that leave was that once again Jane's mum brought up the subject of marriage and the allowance that we would be entitled to, I listened but managed to assure her that the war would soon be over and that I preferred to wait until more normal times. There was still no evidence of full-scale war, the newspapers called the period the 'Phoney War' but we wondered what Spring would bring when the weather would make it possible for Hitler to launch an armoured offensive.

After our leave and back at Tidworth our squad 'passed out' on both foot and rifle drill, which was just as much a relief for our instructors as it was for ourselves. We felt that we were beginning to perform as soldiers, having passed out we spent more time with the vehicles and guns. No modern equipment had arrived, we were continually told that they were due any day, or that the regiments in France naturally had first call on any new tanks or guns. It was our opinion though that it was still on the production line; it was disappointing that we should have to train for possible tank warfare on what were little more than First War relics.

There had been a landing by a British force in Norway but it had to be withdrawn after about three weeks because it happened too late. The Germans were already well established there so that the enterprise was not a success. At home the rationing of butter, sugar and bacon began.

In the inter-house football final we played number 4 squad and the winners were to receive a 48-hour weekend pass. I had played in all the previous rounds but for this final I had to play in goal as the usual keeper was not available for some reason. No professionals were allowed to play on that occasion, the pitch was heavy from recent rain with many puddles, each goal area contained a miniature lake.

The match was evenly contested, we went one goal in front early on and it remained that way until a few minutes before time when a penalty was awarded against us. I had the distinction of stopping it. It was pure luck that I got it out, I had to make a dive that took me into a deep puddle, by doing so I earned ourselves a weekend's leave and for a while I was most popular.

We booked a local bus to take us on leave and set off on a morning when the weather could not have been worse for the journey; it was snowing heavily making it difficult for the driver to see right from the start. Those were the days before heated window screens and motorways. He was forced to drive with his both his screen and side windows open, it was a very slow journey and certainly a strain on the driver. However we did eventually arrive at our first drop which was Towcester, the next one was ours at the Clinton Arms, Far Cotton, now demolished to make way for the road (St. Peter's Way). It was late evening and very cold but we had made it home.

There were other lads to be dropped in town and the remainder were bound for Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. If anything the weather had worsened. Throughout the next day, Sunday, it continued to snow, at the appointed time of return we waited at the Clinton Arms and after about an hour the driver phoned through to say that he was somewhere or other and snowbound. Jane had come to see me off so I saw her home, and then took Danny home with me as it was not possible to return to Woodford.

On the following morning we, Walt, Danny and myself made our way up to the barracks in Barrack Road, to do so we were forced to plough our way through high-piled snow where locally-based troops were digging out pathways.

After reporting in we were issued with railway passes with orders to return to Tidworth as soon as possible. The next day, the weather having eased a little, allowed us to begin the return journey.

Altogether that was not a very pleasant leave.

The wintry conditions which we found on our return to Salisbury Plain were even more severe, with power lines down and villages cut off. Deliveries were disrupted so that our coal supplies were used up. There was no coal in the barracks at all, our big iron stove which stood in the centre of the room was always hungry but for a day or so there was nothing with which to feed it. Then we were allowed out onto the Plain with Bren Gun carriers to cut down trees, this we did for several days and apart from providing ourselves with an adequate fuel supply it came as a change from our normal duties. We enjoyed driving the carriers and hauling back the cut down trees on them. Quite abruptly the weather changed and soldiering resumed as normal.

Not everyone in the squad was happy in their new existence as a soldier, but it suited me fine; I really enjoyed what I was doing, not that I didn't find something always to grumble and moan about but that was part of a soldier's make-up. I don't suppose that I was a particularly good soldier but I liked the challenges which we faced, not many of my mates would agree with me but I even looked forward to 'square-bashing'.

The life offered so much and as I was a keen sportsman and loved the open air it was there to enjoy. Very importantly too, although I had many friends at home, the closeness of Army life brought with it much fellowship which I found over the years invaluable in some of the situations in which I found myself.

The regiment was in training for the Garrison Cup cross-country run; I had run in several squad events and was proud to be chosen for the team to challenge for the Cup. I was the only one chosen from our squad so I would on the day have quite a number yelling and shouting me on. The regimental team intended to have a couple of practice runs before the big day and I felt honoured when ordered to accompany an officer and driver to map out a course for the first of them.

I was enlightened to know how the Army measures distances for events such as that; it was a smashing morning for February, fresh, calm and bright. A delight to be out. The intention was to set out a ten-mile course making use of varied surfaces, different terrain, through woodland, over and down hill, muddy or stony stretches, through streams - the officer included it all.

After we'd marked out to ten miles and I had planted the markers, he decided that we should ride on just another mile or so 'just to make sure'. The runners would be under the impression that they had run ten miles but in actual fact it would have been all of thirteen, the phrase used in the Army in those situations was 'that's near enough!' I found that to be the case also when weighing-in for a boxing match, more often than not the 'near enough' attitude was to my disadvantage, the opponent being a few pounds heavier.

The weather on the day of the contest was clear and fine as we set off on the Saturday afternoon. I don't know the distance set for us that day but do remember it being well-chosen. Over four hundred entrants began the race and although it was just the best conditions for running, it was arduous, I felt leg-weary and short of breath a little over half-way round. But the field thinned and I pushed on to finally reach the cinder track of the stadium and that was really hard going but when round it I breasted the finishing tape in position 38.

I was both satisfied and pleased with that; I knew that I had run well, to the best of my ability anyway, a greater satisfaction was to find that our regiment, the 53rd Training Regiment were the 1940 winners of the Garrison Cup and each of us were awarded a medal which I was most proud to own. Back in the barrack room my mates were pleased for me and offered congratulations, I had developed quite a large blister on my heel so it was not too comfortable when having to pull on Army boots.

There was one disappointment as the outcome of that race, and that is that I was only in possession of the medal for a few days as it was stolen. It happened that some of us had been notified that we

were to be posted and were duly moved to another barrack room where it was taken from my locker. The men in the room were a new intake, unfortunately I didn't realise that it was missing until I began to pack my kit to move out, too late to report it. I would have been proud today to have shown it to my grandchildren, I wonder what sort of pleasure whoever stole it derives when telling how he came to own it.

On parade one morning before the cross-country run volunteers were being called for to join the boxing team, I did not make an offer but was pushed forward and was in. It got me out of a lot of duties and was another interest; I had three contests before I left, winning two and the other I lost easily, being knocked all over the ring.

The contests were held in the Drill Hall. Our opponents were from other garrison regiments. They were memorable occasions for me, the hall would be packed to the limit, the crowd yelling and shouting, urging on their own team, all my squad mates would be there. The front rows were occupied by officers, their red tabs bright, seated there with their ladies arrayed in all their splendour. They were nights to remember and cherish.

The comradeship of the barrack room had developed over the months we had spent together, although it was only natural and to be expected that there would from time to time be the odd flare-up, altercations and petty disagreements which led to arguments.

I know that I had my share but none, as I am aware, ever went beyond that stage. Never a raised fist except I regret to say it was me who was engaged in an act of violence. It was nothing serious but nonetheless I was guilty of raising my fist against another lad. In mitigation I could say that I was provoked; it happened within the first few weeks of training and right from the onset this particular boy made a nuisance of himself at Reveille by taking it upon himself to make his way round from bed to bed and to shake each one of us in turn so that he was not very popular as everyone tried to get that last precious minute in bed and not until the last second did we jump out and only partly awake raced down that iron stairway for roll-call.

He was dubbed from the beginning the 'Little Corporal'. I was not over-concerned early on but as he persisted I warned him that he was asking for trouble. Although at the time I had no intention of taking any action, it just happened that one morning as I heard him coming I felt that I had had enough, all the others as he came round were cursing him, I made up my mind that I did not intend to stand for it any more, with that I waited for him. He came to the foot of the bed, he presuming that I would still be asleep, I shot upright, lunged forward and clipped his chin so he fell backwards to a chorus of "Good old Dig, it serves him right" and "he's been asking for it". It was a pity that it had been me who had to act but it taught him a lesson and from then on left us alone.

We were moving fast toward the end of our training and the deadline which I forecast for the war to end approaching too. We had received the results of our tests for driver-mechanic and gunnery and although I thought that I had little chance of passing either I was surprised to find that I had and became mustered in both. I'd just not put my mind to anything very seriously all along, believing that it was only for Six months' and to make the best of it and enjoy the sporting activities.

There were lads who worked hard, worked while some of us played and they were the ones who were kept off any draft for France because with the general call-up then in force Instructors with which to train the new intakes would be in demand. The remainder of us knew our fate, we were destined to join a regiment, probably in France. The British Expeditionary Force had been there since the outbreak, consisting of Regulars, Reservists and Territorials. Their ranks then being increased by militia men.

Actually our training ended in five months and before parting to go on leave we had a farewell evening in the village pub along with our two instructors. We anticipated our fate as we waited for the postings to be pinned to the notice board. What we asked ourselves was, would the regiment to

which we were posted still be in England and somewhere near to home or would it be over the Channel?

I found my regiment was to be the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, and on inquiring discovered that they were in France. There were several of us for that regiment including Wardie, Danny and the 'Little Corporal'. Walt was to join the 9th Lancers, also in France. There was quite a group of us who left on embarkation leave after handshakes all round and a goodbye to Tidworth.

Chapter Three: Springtime in France

It was quite an uneventful leave, Jane was at work and although there were now more uniforms in evidence there was no-one among them that I knew. Everyone had a job. There was now no unemployment. Many women were engaged in war work or were members of the services, even Dad was in full-time employment after so many years of only casual work or the 'Dole' queue.

It had taken a war before work was available for all. The blackout was then complete, I wondered just how many people suffered injuries from bumping into lampposts or other obstacles in the dark especially after closing time.

I was fortunate to have Walt on leave with me, but at long last we were to be separated, for although he was also off to France he was to join a different regiment. We had a pint or two together before returning to Tidworth.

Once returned we were not long delayed before we boarded the train for our port of embarkation (I cannot remember where that was, or little of our passage over). What I do recall quite clearly was the scene on the French hillside just before we docked at Le Havre, in the clear, bright morning sunshine the houses there stood out so clean fresh and peaceful, it all appeared so remote from any resemblance of war in which their country was engaged. I wondered though what their fate might be if the Germans did begin a Spring offensive.

There were others now with me who were bound also to the Fife and Forfars; there was Wardie and Danny, the boy we called the 'Little Corporal' and I think about five others, in addition there was an officer and a couple of NCOs.

For us lads who had not the benefit of travel and certainly not in a foreign country it was an adventure as our train took us through France. Our ultimate destination turned out to be a village near Eveurue, which someone said was about 60 kilometres south-west of Paris. It was a tented camp, there was still the evidence of the winter's snows in the hedgerows, duckboards were laid between the lines where everywhere was mud. Apart from the tents there was a wooden guardroom and cookhouse.

The men in the camp told us how uncomfortable it had been during the winter due to some very severe weather but now they welcomed a little improvement. It was a reinforcement camp and was to be our base until our regiments called for us. When our group inquired where were the Fife and Forfars we were told that they were 'somewhere up the line'.

There in the base depot life was fairly easy-going, there were a few route marches and inspections, guard, picket and cookhouse duties, otherwise we were left to our own devices. There was little for us outside the camp but once a week we went down to the village Estaminet where we soon learnt how to order 'vin Blanc' and 'un oeuf sandwich, s'il vous plait'.

What took our attention there was seeing some of the old soldiers leave their tables to go up the stairs one at a time, and noticing the young girls who came down with them, eventually it caused us to realise that it was also a brothel, it was very much an eye-opener for us youngsters.

The old soldiers in camp, particularly the Reservists, were very helpful, they were men who had served their time in stations in the Middle and Far East, all over what was then a vast Empire. Then after becoming civilians and in some cases raising a family they had been called back into service and had to leave it all behind, although some were bitter about it, most of them were not, and guided and advised us. To us they appeared as father-figures.

Danny, being a butcher, had been ordered to work in the cookhouse, a job which we all thought would keep him off a draft to the regiment. When he had been doing that duty for a week or so he told me to apply for the Mess Orderly position which was available. I did so and began working

with him, cleaning tables, washing-up, peeling potatoes, and keeping generally busy. We worked hard but it was when looking back one of the most enjoyable periods of my Army career.

The extra meals which we cooked in the evening were really unbelievable, with eggs, steaks, tinned fruit, fresh bread from the village bakehouse, usually a bottle of wine, some of it Army rations but much of it we chipped in and bought. He we lived it up!

A base job there, I thought, would have suited me fine if I could have seen the war through from there, but of course I knew that it couldn't last so made the best of it while it was possible. Sure enough it wasn't to last very much longer because my draft came up.

The weather had improved considerably and a sports day was held on the Bank Holiday Monday, I presume that it would have been Whitsun (now called Spring Bank Holiday I believe). I'm not sure of the date but it must have been toward the end of April 1940 I ran in a sprint race and came nowhere. I boxed in a friendly sort of sparring match and made a close friend of a lad who had trained at Catterick, he was Jock McLeod and came from Edinburgh.

We crowded round the notice board when our Draft went up. In all, making for the regiment were seven Bren Gun carriers and their crews; among them were two NCOs and one young officer. I knew most of the crew members slightly, apart from my Tidworth mates. The night before we left there was a get-together, a few days previously there had been a NAAFI truck pull in so that we were lucky to be able to purchase a bottle of beer and a few luxuries. I was sorry that Danny was not coming with us but wished him 'best of luck' at the Base.

Our party began with a sing-song with some of the popular songs of the time such as Gracie Fields' *'We'll Meet Again'*, George Formby's *'Cleaning Windows'*, some of Flanagan & Allen's; then there were the soldiers' old faithfuls like *'Bless 'em All'* and *'Roll out the Barrel'*. There were the sentimental songs especially written for the time, such as *'Somewhere in France with You'* and one very morbid one entitled *'When the Poppies Bloom Again'*. Two songs which we thought were most inappropriate were *'We're Going to Hang Out Our Washing on the Siegfried Line'* and *'Run, Rabbit, Run'*.

As the evening wore on and the beer began to take effect the songs and our singing deteriorated and became crude and bawdy, with some downright filthy. It didn't matter a lot, in the morning we were off to war and perhaps thought we could be permitted to use that as an excuse.

The officer in charge had been given a map reference of where to find the regiment. We travelled about sixty miles and on arriving there found that they had moved on. He obtained a new reference but again no sign of them there, this happened several times; whenever we arrived they had moved out, it was then that we learned that the Germans had made a lightning breakthrough. So it had really started, the war had begun.

It was obvious now that our regiment would either be in action or would be moving up into position in the line. That made it even more difficult to find them, as it was we were continually on the move but there seemed to be less and less chance of being able to link up with them. Eventually Brigade HQ attached us to their staff, from whom we received our orders and rations; we learnt from them that the Germans had occupied Holland after heavy bombing raids and parachute landings followed by the Panzers.

Belgium too had been overrun, both countries had decided to remain neutral but now our assistance was required, which caused the British and French forces to move in and attempt to fill the gap. Unfortunately it came a little too late because the enemy was already in occupation. The German advance had been so swift and backed up by large reserve forces, the word 'Blitzkrieg' to describe it became universally known.

The first action which we were ordered to was in airfield defence where British and French fighters were operating. They were continually being bombed and strafed and there were fears that

parachute landings could be expected.

We set up our guns on the perimeter of the field and dug our trenches inside the edge of a wood. The planes took off and a dog-fight took place overhead, then bombs began to fall. I was not on gun duty at the time but I could see that although the Stukas came in low our Bren guns were not a great threat to them.

This was our first taste of what war was like and had I been more experienced I would have been taking shelter with the other off-duty men in the trenches, but I stood in the open and watched in wonder at the scene being enacted above and around me; so much engrossed in all that was happening that I could have well have been at a cinema watching a film. That is until I was suddenly sharply bawled out by the sergeant, who told me in certain strong terms to get under cover, and that I would soon learn to keep my head down. He was right, it didn't take long to find out that it was real warfare and we were right in it.

Our moves were quite frequent, sometimes by train, we guarded petrol or ammunition dumps or took up positions where it was expected parachutists were likely to land. Local rumour had it that they had already landed and in their panic would direct us to where, but it always turned out to be nothing but the fears of some alarmists.

On several occasions we were given the job of guarding bridges, to keep them open for the movement of Allied troops as it was essential that they got through but were so often hindered by the masses of refugees who crowded the roads, some of them on foot, some pushing loaded prams or wheelbarrows, those who could avail themselves of any form of transport, bikes, lorries, cars, horses and carts. All fleeing due to the rumours that were rife and no doubt circulated by the enemy to the effect that German advance patrols were only a few kilometres away, that in fact was not so. Among those fleeing were French and Belgian soldiers with their families. All was panic and chaos with so many thousands of people on the move, but where to was not apparent to us. It seemed not to matter to them as long as they could put distance between themselves and the enemy. Many times we slept in ditches or in barn or hayricks. In one of the many uninhabited farms the cattle, horses and poultry were all left behind. We saw dozens of bloated and fly-blown animals in the fields.

There was one very pleasant bridge duty which we were given where we spent a day or two in a chateau on the banks of the Seine, with a large orchard and vegetable garden where there were chickens pecking away just ready for catching and cooking.

The cooks excelled themselves and delighted us with the meals which they produced making a welcome change to the limited varied bully beef concoctions. Meals were served up at the large oval polished table with decorative plates and beautiful cutlery. We slept in huge beds between silken sheets. One evening the corporal made his entrance into the dining room resplendent in full evening dress, including top hat and gloves. I am ashamed to have to admit that I was equally as irresponsible as the rest by sorting through all the cupboards for souvenirs. I didn't take anything of any value, just a chain and cross, and some ornate miniature cutlery, the only consolation for any feeling of guilt that I might have had was that if the Germans ever occupied it they would certainly plunder it most thoroughly.

One night while billeted there the guard called us out from our silky beds, they thought they could hear tanks approaching and someone had become jittery and fired across the river. But after a while we stood down and returned to bed with all quiet and panic over. No-one could account for the disturbance in the night but thought it possible that it might have been the herd of cows on the opposite hillside, which was the direction which our trigger-happy marksman fired.

There was another very pleasant billet too in a small village where we were guarding a large ammunition dump in a forest a mile or so away. We were stationed in a wooden building on a

bowling green, not quite a pavilion but served that purpose no doubt. There was a cafe where we could buy ourselves a white wine and sandwich.

I met a young girl but our friendship was short-lived as we were only there for about a week, it was agreeable while it lasted though. When not on duty I was in the habit of sitting on the grass verge in the lane which ran down to the village; she smiled at me as she passed and on her return I greeted her in my very limited French, something like “Bonjour mademoiselle” followed by the usual well-used phrase “Parlez-vous English?” She sat with me and we conversed in broken English and French with many hand gestures and made ourselves partly understood.

I learnt that she was ‘dix-sept’ (17) and that the young girl with her was her sister. Once, I gathered a bunch of wild flowers from the hedgerow, buttercups, cornflower, forget-me-nots and so on and presented them to her with the words “une bouquet pour vous” at which the little sister laughed and was so amused that I had used the word ‘bouquet’ and that we had found a word common to all of us.

The boys of course pulled my leg and talked of her as “your young lady”; her name was Dernice and I to her was ‘Monsieur Fred’. Then sadly the time came to move on, but it was one of those enjoyable interludes in the midst of war, I wondered how she fared during the Nazi occupation.

One morning with our carriers supposedly camouflaged under a hedge in order not to be too easily detected by the enemy, and setting about getting something to eat, silently and without warning from over the opposite hedge and coming in low was a lone Stuka plane, so low that we could see the pilot’s headgear with goggles as he peered down on us. Then off he flew, hedge-hopping on his way; the surprise was too sudden that whoever were manning the guns were far too late to take action and the pilot must have been aware of that. We promptly moved off before he reported our position.

The encounter which we had with Stukas later in the day was so very different. The officer had asked for volunteers to go back to man a bridge where there was a lot of congestion caused by the great number of refugees jamming the road. Jock offered to go and asked Wardie and myself to go with him to make up a crew, that we agreed to do.

It was an important task because it was vital that a convoy of guns was allowed through, we just had time to set up our guns at the bridge when two Stukas came out of the sun with sirens screaming and firing their cannons indiscriminately down the road. Many people dived in ditches but there were bodies flung about and dead and injured lay everywhere.

We had been firing away but with no success, then before there was time to assess all that had taken place in such a short period they were back again, low and screaming, and that time they took us on and our guns.

Hearing a shout we found that Jock had been hit in the thigh and bleeding freely, the field dressings which we applied were not a great deal of use to staunch the flow, but it was fortunate that close by and attempting to reach the wounded people down the road was a French ambulance. We got him aboard and after a long delay we saw him driven off.

Jock was the first casualty that I had witnessed with the exception of those numbers of French who had been gunned down. What we had seen was pure murder, where unarmed innocent people fleeing their homes were slaughtered by Hitler’s Luftwaffe.

After witnessing all the carnage there the road was eventually cleared and the troops were able to get through. Then we were withdrawn. Our next mission saw us deployed further south-west: we passed round Rouen; I’m not too sure what our next move was but I do recall the race-track at Le Mans which was being used by our air force where we gave them air protection until they flew out. While there though I much enjoyed driving around the track in a Bren Gun carrier, all around the

circuit.

I think that it would have been the next day when about noon, I suppose, that we called at a petrol dump to fill up and were shocked at the news which our officer conveyed to us after speaking with the military policeman in charge; that was that after we had left he had been ordered to blow up the dump, because all French resistance had been overcome and France had capitulated.

That in itself was shock enough but he added that Calais and Dunkirk were cut off and the BEF troops were surrounded with thousands on the beach and stranded while the Navy was attempting to evacuate as many as possible.

The advice of the 'redcap' was for us to make for the coast immediately. It was unbelievable that the Germans could have reached the channel so quickly. I remember remarking with my very limited knowledge of Europe that it couldn't be Calais to which he was referring because that was only about twenty miles across from Dover!

According to our officer, who fortunately had spent some time in France after University, we were too distant from the channel ports, and any attempt to reach them would be futile. He thought it better that we try to make Cherbourg by travelling up the peninsula hoping to find a ship there. He of course had to make the decisions but we agreed with his suggestion.

Until that time we had received very little news of the war at large and were only aware of what was happening in our own particular area, all of us were stunned and found it difficult to accept what we had been told. However we set off in haste in an endeavour to reach the sea although warned that there was only an outside chance that we could escape. It depended whether there would be shipping available.

We were so inexperienced of continental travel that it was difficult to comprehend fully the dangers of the chosen route or indeed of the mileage we needed to cover before we even reached the peninsula or the total mileage to the coast.

It was by no means certain that our passage would be clear of the enemy but had no choice but just to press on; we were down to six carriers as one had become a write-off, so needed a lot of luck that the remaining vehicles continued to be runners and see us through.

We dodged enemy columns early on that crossed our front; if they had seen us we would have been no match for them because our weapons were so inferior and inadequate, we were forever diving into ditches whenever planes appeared. Once or twice they were our own. Those carrying the black cross seemed mostly to be on reconnaissance which caused us anxiously to wonder that after they had reported would the dreaded Stukas be far behind?

Our drivers kept to fields as much as possible; we didn't sleep much, it wasn't easy to do so when on the move. We took our turn in driving, there was little food or drink to be had, but our concern was not so much the hunger and thirst but more our chances of escape.

Although there was little to drink one lad must have had the means to quench his thirst because he was found in the bottom of his vehicle frothing at the mouth from having emptied a bottle of cognac. I don't know how he recovered but he completed the journey.

I have no idea how long it took us to reach the coast, or how many days had passed before we eventually arrived in the Cherbourg area, but we did so, very dirty, hungry and exhausted but all in one piece; our luck was in because there before us was a ship partly loaded, its crew hurrying everyone on.

When immobilising our vehicles and before dismantling our guns we had a last pop at a lone plane which came over to make a survey but he flew off without us causing him a lot of trouble.

In the queue to get on board were as many French soldiers as there were of our own troops, some of whom were trying to board by avoiding the queue and climbing up the sides, they were promptly

pushed off by our sailors. Apparently our government had agreed to evacuate an equal number of French as ourselves but that was ignored by the Navy boys who gave us preference. There were quite a large number on board when we set sail.

It was feared that we were about to be bombed as the ship moved off but it was a false alarm, they just flew off without any threat to us. I remember nothing of the crossing because I rolled under a tarpaulin and slept until I heard someone shouting 'Blighty!'.

We disembarked to the accompaniment of a brass band and mugs of tea and sandwiches, served either by the Salvation Army or the Womens Volunteer Service, probably by both. Those ladies performed a wonderful service for wherever there were servicemen in need they were there.

We found out that the evacuation of the last of the BEF from France had ended eight days previously, so that we had even more reason to be grateful to our young officer who led us out and to our Navy for being there.

We posted off the usual Army issue cards just to let our relatives know that we were home, safe and well. The cards were printed so that the sender would need only to delete the wording which didn't apply, for instance, 'I am a prisoner of war/I am well/I am injured' so that our dependants had the briefest of information but enough to allay any fears which they might have had concerning our whereabouts and well-being.

We entrained for Bournemouth and were billeted in a school which I believe was Stourbridge Road School; we received no Army rations and it was the Voluntary Services again who saw to our needs, providing us with toiletries, letter-writing material and food and drink.

It must have been ten days or so before the Army made any contact with us; we were left to do as we wished and thought it strange that having found us a billet that no-one since that time had paid us a visit because we had expected that orders would be given that we were to join the regiment which we should have joined in France.

In retrospect however it was understandable that our small party should be left to ourselves for a while for although we were not aware of it at the time, over the channel the Nazis were preparing barges with which to invade our country and the threat seemed to be serious. So, with the thousands of BEF troops being united with their regiments in drifts and drabs all was chaos and confusion.

I and the others would have welcomed a pay parade and some leave, I would then have been due for around six weeks' back pay. Anyway we agreed that we would should accept the circumstances as they were and enjoy our liberty while it was possible. Our officer and the NCOs had left, we presumed that they knew the whereabouts of their units, we as yet had no unit.

In the meantime, left to our own devices and interests we spent a lot of our time on the beach with plenty of swimming and water sports. From somewhere a ball of a sort was obtained so we played and fooled around like children, unrestrained and carefree. There were families of holidaymakers enjoying the hot mid-June weather, and I overheard one group discussing us and the remark that it was unbelievable that only a few days earlier we who were playing our silly games had been in a war, that of course was true enough but I suppose it was our way of accepting our survival, and for a time at least we were free from fear.

Up to that time the beach there was one of those not yet enclosed, most others had been barricaded, mined and set with tank traps, so that the people then on holiday there were enjoying what no doubt would be their last seaside holiday, at least while the war lasted.

The local people were most kind and considerate, they invited us into their clubs during the evening and provided us with drinks. They also made their snooker table available to us for all of which we were grateful especially as we were broke. One thing which we were able to do was to catch up on our letter-writing.

Often we went on to the Downs and saw some of the early dogfights overhead. It was during one of these air battles that one of our party had what we thought was a fit, but we learned out later that it was shell-shock. I had seen men of the First World War who suffered from it but had never witnessed it happening by my side. It began when he started running around in circles, following the movement of the planes above, moving ever faster until he collapsed at our feet and made no further movement. A civilian ambulance was called and away he went, altogether not a very pleasant sight, he would probably not take any further part in the war.

The term widely used later on during the years of war was not so much 'shell shock' as 'bomb happy'. What happened to that lad affected me more than my mates because he was the boy who in our first weeks of training I hit, the one we called the 'Little Corporal', I felt very sorry for him and more than ever regretted my action.

The day arrived when we were paid a visit by an Army officer, he enquired the name of our last regiment which in my case was the training regiment at Tidworth. When he returned the next day he issued us with railway warrants to return us to there and the others to Catterick. That broke up our little force which had been together all through France, however, our group returned to Tidworth having said a reluctant farewell to Bournemouth.

We were back where we started about nine months before when we began our training but not in the same barracks; there was a newish wooden building set aside for us with some lads already in occupation. After a day or so others came in one or two at a time, among them was my old schoolmate Walt. There was a quite a reunion of ex-trainees all with similar tales to tell of not being able to reach their regiments, all had different stories to tell of their exploits.

There followed medical examinations and reissues of clothing and equipment, there was a pay parade. I was quite well-off even at the same old rate of two shillings per day. There was not much that we could spend it on: there was a NAAFI where we could get a beer and also could afford to eat at the YMCA, otherwise what cash I had would be useful when I managed to get a week's leave. Life was still mainly easy and leisurely, no NCOs being available to bark their orders at us. So we spent most of our days in the games room of the YMCA where there were darts, and also snooker tables in addition to a comfortable reading and writing room.

One duty which we and everyone else had to take part in was the dusk and dawn 'stand-to', so that at first light and after roll-call we filed away to the stores and each drew a pick-axe handle, then were marched over the Plain and took up defensive positions on the edges of the woods. This was a precaution taken due to the fear of a German invasion and it was our task to capture any parachutists landing in our area. Apparently after so much equipment was lost in France no guns of any sort were available to us, hence the reason for the pick-axe staves.

What harm we could have inflicted against an enemy with automatic weapons one could only guess but then such was the threat at the time that any measure and every effort however ineffective it may have appeared had to be taken. The survival of our nation, when we stood alone and with the enemy preparing to cross the channel any day or night, depended on it.

Everywhere there was speculation and anticipation of what the future held for us and what events were to unfold. Prime Minister Churchill made some stirring speeches urging everyone to fight on even though alone. But those of us who had observed at first hand the might of the massive German war machine with its Panzers and their highly-trained crews, plus Goering's Luftwaffe were bound to have some silent doubts as to how long we might survive their onslaught; even so I am sure that there was not one amongst us who doubted that eventually we would win.

When Prime Minister Chamberlain's unpopularity had increased he would have preferred to preside over a Coalition government, but neither of the other parties would serve under him. The country realised that it was necessary to have a change of leadership and Churchill then became Prime

Minister; it was said that the King would sooner it had been Lord Halifax as he was not too keen on Winston. However, they were to serve together and to share many far-reaching important secrets of which no other person would have been aware for five long years, secrets which if the public or some of our leaders knew about the seriousness of the situations at times it might well have caused them to consider, or even to take, what to them was the easy and safer way out and to sue for peace. Since the fall of Dunkirk people were dejected and there was also some defeatism. Someone was needed who could inspire them, someone who could give them hope, to lift them up and cause them to change their attitude to one of determination to win through and fight on whatever the cost or however hopeless or desperate it seemed. It so happened that Churchill was the man who was capable of doing it by his rousing speeches and showing determination to resist any attempt to be conquered as those other nations on the continent had been.

Leave passes were issued in alphabetical order so that I was one of the first to go, that would be about the end of June (1940). Once again I said goodbye to my old training colleagues and most of them I never saw again. I left Walt behind and didn't see him again until about a year after the war had ended, and Wardie came to see me some ten years later.

On my journey home I thought how wonderful and green everywhere was as we travelled through the country and the harvest fields beginning to turn to their full ripeness. All so peaceful, reminding me of Blake's words 'England's Green and Pleasant Land' and gave me a feeling of patriotism, a land worth fighting for.

There was little sign of war until we reached the outskirts of London where the barrage balloons hung over the city. There were many ack-ack [anti-aircraft gun] sites, sandbagged buildings and windows taped against shatter and flying glass during a bombing raid.

It was good to be back in Northampton and home for a few days, I was looking forward to my leave and to see my parents and friends, I just couldn't wait to get up to the Mounts in town at lunchtime to meet Jane our of the boot-and-shoe factory where she worked in St. Michael's Road. The lunchtime hooter sounded as I reached there; I hadn't received a letter from her for some time but she had already explained that she didn't like letter-writing so that it was understandable.

I saw her come out of the firm's gates but she mounted her bike and cycled off in the opposite direction away from me and the place where we had always met before. I thought that she obviously had not seen me so that I walked to her home at Kingsthorpe. I didn't ask had she seen me because I felt certain that she had not, I reasoned too that no engaged girl would leave her intended standing on the pavement; surely it wasn't because she didn't want to see me. It was only later that I had my doubts, I could be called gullible or naive, either or both descriptions would be apt. Anyway, I soon put it behind me and got on with enjoying the week.

I did the usual round of visits, met one or two mates who were still at home and others who were also on leave. In the club one night a lad who I knew came over to talk to me remarking on the fact that he hadn't seen me for some time and where had I been? It's true that I wasn't around much when I worked in Bedford and certainly not since I joined up but when I answered "France", his strange inquiry was "What have you been there for?". I was so surprised that he should ask a question such as that I didn't attempt to enlighten him. Maybe the fact that I was still in civvies caused him to think that like himself I was still at home, so little had the war up to that point affected him.

Toward the end of my leave a telegram was delivered to home informing me that my leave was extended for a few extra days which were to be accepted as embarkation leave. It really came as no great surprise, I would have been more pleased if I could have been posted to a unit at home in England, however I was to join 2nd Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, which was good news. I was thrilled to be going to a regular tank regiment because if I were to have had a choice I could not have chosen better.

It was not difficult to guess where I would be sailing to that time, because recently the Italian dictator's forces (Mussolini's) had advanced in the Western Desert and were threatening to cross into and occupy Egypt which was then a British Protectorate. We had only a small Regular force there, part of which was engaged in Ethiopia. It was estimated that the Italian Army numbered around 300,000 while the whole of our own forces in the Middle East was little more than 60,000 and of those General Wavell had at his command opposing the 'Ities' about half that number.

It was essential that the enemy forces be repelled because if Egypt were to become lost to us the way would be clear for the enemy to occupy both the Suez Canal, all of the Mediterranean and from there the oilfields beyond, gaining for Hitler fuel with which to keep his Panzers on the move and his Luftwaffe in the air.

I am not entirely certain of the date of when I joined the regiment but I think it must have been at the beginning of August (1940), the war then being ten months old; the first eight or nine months of that time was known as the 'Phoney War'. Some of us had found it far from 'phoney', but at times very real. Our sailors for instance had suffered great casualties since the first day mainly from German U-boats while protecting our merchant shipping convoys who were responsible for bringing in the essential supplies which were our lifeline. Our Navy too along with hundreds of other small ships were to be remembered for the heroic deliverance of an estimated 330,000 Allied troops off the French beaches and return us home a few months previously.

So much had happened to me in what seemed to be a short ten months from that time when I thoroughly believed that I would complete my training and return home and resume my civilian occupation just after the first Christmas of the war. Now, though, I was facing the prospect of being overseas for what could amount to several years.

The Germans had begun heavy daylight bombing, airfields and docks were targets for their attacks, some were temporarily put out of action, but most of the population were well aware of the consequences of submission and realised that defeat would mean slavery, exile for some and concentration camps for anyone who dared to object.

What I would be leaving behind would be a Britain and its people then fully committed to a long struggle completely on their own; a country of round-the-clock air-raids, the black-out, Morrison and Anderson shelters, evacuated children, rationing, sandbagged buildings, parks and gardens dug-up to produce vegetables, make-do-and-mend clothing, scrap iron collections, the Home Guard and the Air Raid Warden with his shout of "put that light out". And importantly there was a new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill and with his Deputy, Major Clement Attlee presided over a Coalition Government and most of all the will of the people to see it through however long it would take.

One of the most popular songs being sung in the pubs and which the errand boys were whistling was Judy Garland's *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, those which were appropriate at the times of parting were Gracie Fields' *Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye* and Vera Lynn's *We'll Meet Again*, and *White Cliffs of Dover*.

It was time for me to say my goodbyes which I did; Jane insisted that she would see me off at Castle Station and it was a rather tearful farewell. Before I boarded the train and without compulsion she said that she would wait for me to return, I did suggest that in fairness if she wished we would break off the engagement there and then, because I visualised that from that parting there would be an absence of perhaps three or four years and I didn't wish her to promise something which would be difficult to fulfil.

However she was adamant and with her handkerchief to wipe away the the tears she vowed once again that for however long we were apart she would still be waiting for me. I accepted her sincerity and felt ashamed when I thought of those one or two occasions when I almost accused her of duplicity. As I

boarded the train she gave me her assurance that she would write to me regularly, she was still crying as the train pulled out, and I saw her waving until we were out of sight of each other.

I've never been able to remember from which station I was collected, was it Godalming or Sunningdale, whichever it was there was transport waiting and myself and about six others were driven a mile or so and turned into a wooded area where were Canadian troops under canvas in a clearing. A little further on the driver dropped us off at Headquarters Squadron Office of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment.

One of the first things I noticed were the trestle tables on which were laid out tropical clothing and stacks of pith helmets, so no further proof then was necessary of our intended destination. Among the six of us were two of my old trainee mates, Clarkie from Towcester, and little 'Tug' Wilson, one of the boys from Dr Barnado's but I rarely saw them again as they were posted to different squadrons.

Chapter Four: A Desert Rat

Although there was no official word of our intended destination no-one doubted that it could be anywhere else but Egypt. I was generally made welcome as a newcomer and paraded before the Squadron Leader who hoped that I would soon settle in, that I assured him I intended to do.

Everywhere was bustle and haste, everything being packed and bagged for the voyage. It was then early August and aerial combat was taking place in the skies above. Throughout those days we watched many dog fights before we left by train to Liverpool.

On arriving there we boarded what was in peacetime a luxury liner, the *Duchess of Bedford*, then converted to carry troops. There were other ships of that line, the *Duchess of York*, *Richmond* and *Atholl*; whether they were part of our large convoy I had no idea.

Once on deck we lined the rails and waved to the many people gathered there to see us off, and to take our last look at our homeland. I remember one lad saying that he could almost see his house which he pointed out was near to the Liver Buildings, which could be clearly seen.

When out in the open sea we were able to take stock of our surroundings. It could be seen that it was a very large convoy. The sight of so many ships of all sorts and sizes with their escorts was quite appreciable.

On board with us were the 3rd Hussars who worked closely with us in the desert, the 4th Royal Horse Artillery and the 7th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, all part of the 7th Armoured Brigade which we formed in the desert, one of the armoured brigades of the 7th Armoured Division who were to become known as the 'Desert Rats', whose red rat on black background became the divisional sign.

When at sea there were few duties for us to perform, some boat drill, physical training, lectures and various competitions devised by the officers to combat the likelihood of boredom. The concerts proved popular and revealed quite an array of talent. One sergeant-major with a deep bass voice recited *The Little Yellow Idol* and on that occasion we were privileged to hear a clean version; a trooper sang for us *The Road to Mandalay*; there was a pair who entertained us with a reasonable presentation of Flanagan & Allen's *Underneath the Arches*.

It was usual for the concerts to end with a sing-song which gave us all the opportunity to let ourselves go with some lusty singing of numbers like *Roll Out the Barrel*, *Quartermaster's Stores*, *Bless 'em All* and *Roll Me Over*. Two of the popular dance-band tunes of the time were *Deep Purple* and *Indian Summer*.

During PT one day when we had been at sea for possibly two weeks I noticed that the boxing team trained under their own leader separately. After making inquiries I was given permission to join them and trained with them for the remainder of the voyage. We made a makeshift ring and I had a couple of bouts which gave the lads something different for their entertainment. I found it very easy to settle down with my new mates and felt pleased to be one of their number.

The issue of tropical clothing was a most hilarious occasion, when trying for size the old Army rule seemed to apply 'that's near enough'. The fitting of topis caused the biggest laugh when trying them on for size, the first one handed to me fell over my ears so that I was unable to see while it rested on my nose, the next one seemed to perch neatly on the top of my head. Much swapping and changing among ourselves took place until each of us had something little near to being presentable. The khaki drill shorts were anything but shorts, because when unfurled they let down to reach the ankles and were wide and baggy, the turn-ups were best part of two feet deep and were held up by

side buttons; the idea was that at sunset the buttons were supposed to be undone allowing the turn-ups to fall to cover the legs and thus avoid mosquito bites and of catching malaria. We must have looked like those actors in the television series a few years ago called *It ain't arf Hot Mum*.

To my knowledge those topis were never used, I don't remember seeing a British soldier wearing one, I know the Italians did and some Germans too, but as far as I know none of us. It was not practical for tank men to use them, they were too cumbersome inside where space was at a minimum. Strange to relate but they were never asked for on kit inspections. They probably became a War Office write-off, I saw many of them during a sandstorm being blown away across the desert. Our voyage took us around the Rock of Gibraltar because a passage through the Mediterranean Sea was far too dangerous. The first port of call was Freetown for refuelling, we were not able to go ashore but I will always retain the memory of the brilliantly-lit and colourful scene. Especially bright after the dreary blacked-out country which we had recently left. As the red, purple and orange hues of the wide sunset quickly faded into night the whole town area was aglow and sparkled with numerous lights which were reflected over the sea and caused the sky to shimmer above, a glorious sight. During the day the young natives entertained us by diving for pennies when they came alongside in their many small boats.

The meals on board were quite good, early on in the voyage a few men suffered from sea sickness, we who were unaffected found it possible to eat an extra meal, the ration of the poor unfortunates who were unable to partake of any food at the time. Unless you were holding on to your plate when the seas were any way rough it would slide away from you in the direction of the ship's incline and then as it righted itself you hoped to catch it as it returned, but never being sure that it was your own plate or that of someone else, we soon became adept at grabbing any one that came within reach.

At our next stop, Cape Town, we did go ashore, but only to march round the town. It was said that we did so as a showpiece for the population who until that time had not had tank men on shore. We were disappointed all the same at not being able to have an hour or two just to wander on our own; a few hours leave to see the sights would have been very much appreciated, no doubt there was good reason why that was not possible. We were able to see the Table Top Mountain however. It was in the early hours of a September morning that we docked at Port Said and stood at the ship's rails waiting to disembark, looking down the long stretch of the Suez Canal. We had been at sea almost six weeks. The sights ashore were all new to us younger men, everywhere was bustle and rush, amid the noise of the traffic and the shouts of the vendors haggling with their trinkets, watches, fruit, and lemonade; the traffic noise, the beggars, donkey carts, cattle and garys, they were soon to become an all-too-familiar sight to us.

Our destination Cairo, was reached in the evening after a long hot dusty train journey. We didn't at all appreciate the first taste of sand which had blown in our ears, eyes, mouths and every other crevice that it could settle in, that was something else that we were to become accustomed to over the next few years.

I would estimate that the distance marched from Cairo station would be about six miles to a tented camp at Almarza. We were stationed for two weeks in order to become acclimatised; once there stopping only to drop off our kits into the tents it was off to the cookhouse with mess tins and mugs, and to join the queue.

As I moved along holding out my dixie to the Orderly who served me I had a surprising encounter because as he looked up he said "Hello, Dig, what are you doing out here?" And I found that it was a schoolfriend of mine who lived just around the corner at home, we had played in the street together as kids, he was Doug Driver, a Territorial soldier who had been in Egypt since the outbreak of war.

As soon as he came off duty he found me and as can be imagined we had lots to talk of, he wanted more recent news of home and I was able to bring him a little up to date. We had a wonderful long chat during which he was able to enlighten me on the general conditions which applied and of some of the customs and mysteries of Egypt.

Within a day or two of being at Almarza we were granted leave to go into Cairo and Doug was only too willing to show us around; he'd been there long enough to know of all the places of interest, we didn't on that occasion go out as far as the Pyramids but confined our visit to Cairo itself.

Jock Gorman and Batty, one of my new-found mates, came with us; Doug said that the visit had to include one notorious place for certain, and that was Birka Street - the Red Light area: all was medically-controlled and was patrolled by the Army Military Police. He took us there and we saw it and smelt it, it was all throughout the streets and alleyways appallingly filthy, a place not to be seen a second time, other than that everywhere else was most enjoyable.

The first few days at Almarza were not too pleasant for any of us because I don't think anyone escaped the effects of 'Gippy Tummy' (that was a polite way of describing it). Our days and nights were spent visiting the latrines, in fact that is where most of the regiment could be found at any given time in those first few days; it was not just as the song says 'Sand in My Shoes', it was sand in our food, it was sand everywhere.

An equal menace which was thought also to be a factor which contributed to the upsets was the swarms of flies which descended onto food. In the state we were in at that time it would have been difficult to perform any duties had we been called on to do so. We were soon to recover from it however and were ready to move off again.

It would have been at the end of September 1940 that we went into the desert or as it became known 'Up the Blue'. We made our first leaguer on a piece of scrub just south of the coastal road, shown on the map as Bire Kanyas. Being only a short distance from the sea, swimming trips were laid on; there we were, dozens of us at a time, stripped to our nakedness, racing over the white sandy shore to splash away like children in that great calm blue ocean.

It is one of the occasions which I still treasure, being one of those rare and pleasant memories of that war in the desert. I travelled with what were known as 'spare crews' who were based with 'B' echelon, the supply column of the squadron who were responsible for the replenishment of the tanks and their crews, delivering to them food and water, ammunition and petrol and any other such requirements included.

In its complement were the medical officer and his orderlies, the clerks, fitters, the quartermaster, the cooks, the officers' batmen and us spare crews. I was hoping that I would not have to remain with them too long before a vacancy occurred for me to become a tank man although some of my friends were batmen I still wished to join the tank crews. Some men were quite content to remain with 'B' echelon but I preferred otherwise, even so I didn't expect an early move because there were men older than myself who would probably be sent up before me.

I travelled with 'Chesty' Speller, so called I suppose because he was very thin; 'Chesty' was a Reservist therefore, much older than me. He drove a petrol lorry, a well-used Bedford, the petrol containers in use at that time were very flimsy, thin metal four-gallon cans which easily leaked at the seams, they being unable to stand up to the continual jolting and jarring as we bumped along. They were not at all as robust as those which the Germans used yet even with the leaky cans we still smoked on board, in fact it was common practice when stationary for us to cover the cans in the back with a blanket to form a card table and still we lit our fags there in the interior, it was just something we lived with and no thought was given to it.

While the tanks were out on patrol we had little to do in the day but we would be out taking

supplies at night. Something which did help the day-to-day monotonous routine was the discovery of an abandoned heavy Italian despatch rider's motorbike; the fitters had it in, repaired it and made it serviceable, after which we took turns on it to belt round the perimeter skidding through the soft sand or bumping off the stones and rocks; I had never previously had the opportunity to ride a motorbike.

Brother Ern had always owned one and it was a popular form of transport in the inter-war years, many families used one with a sidecar attached. I had always relied on pedal power so this was something new. I did after many spills learn to ride the big thing and in spite of all the cuts and bruises enjoyed the experience.

One night while in leaguer there I got drunk on guard. I was paired with trooper Leslie for my two hours on. The sentry's duties were to patrol the vehicles; Leslie was quite a lot older than myself, an 'old soldier' and an officer's batman. He had spent much of his time in India and was one of those men who could always be found in the services who could scrounge anything at any time from anywhere.

He would somehow just wander off and bring back something eatable even though one would assume there was nothing to be had. Knowing such men as these was an advantage, especially one who would share his pickings with you, and that is what happened that particular night. I witnessed at first-hand my fellow sentry's ability to produce something and to share it with me, this though was responsible for my later drunken state.

As we circled the trucks he quietly uttered something and suddenly left me to wander on thinking that he had gone just to relieve himself, actually when he reappeared I realised that he had relieved someone else, because he produced two bottles with the words, short and clear, "There you are, get that down you," and with the additional "Come on" we moved swiftly to the outskirts of the leaguer away from the vehicles and sat down on some rocks where I found that in my hand I was holding a bottle of gin. He had one of whiskey. Then we began our drinking session, I hadn't tasted gin before but then had ample opportunity to do so and was constantly being urged to "Come on, drink up".

How long we were out there I had no idea, nor in my case, as the bottle slowly emptied, did I care. The bottles when empty were flung far and wide hoping they would never be found. I was too drunk to fully realise what was happening, I did have though a vague recollection of being half-dragged back to our tent and it was almost light when we got down onto our groundsheets. We had done everyone else's guard for them, and yet no-one seemed to ask any questions or made any enquiries as to why they had not been wakened to do their spell.

I know though that I was very sick, it was indeed fortunate that there were no parades and that discipline was slack. I guessed later that the most likely reason why no-one showed any concern over their missed tour of duty was that over the years they had become accustomed to trooper Leslie and his habits.

The particular friends that I had made at that time were Batty, Taffy Watkins and Jock Ormond. One of the squadron's characters was 'Benjy' Brown, I suppose he would have been about forty-years old, he was not very tall but quite round, more of an oval egg-shaped body. He was a happy man, always singing. I saw quite a lot of him as he busied himself looking after his officer, he had apparently joined as a boy, becoming a bugler and then a member of the regimental band.

When going about his duties he would invariably be seen with cheeks puffing in and out, blowing at some imaginary instrument and the sound emitted could be a passage of classical music, an aria, a piece of opera or a melody from one of the old musical shows, something from the *Merry Widow*, *The Maid of the Mountains* and those sort of tunes, all of which he had no doubt played as a bandsman.

He was such a likeable man, some said he was 'sun-tapped' from too many years abroad, or others that he was 'bomb-happy', but mostly it was believed that 'Benjy' knew what he was doing. He was 'working his ticket', he had throughout all his long service avoided joining a tank crew and any shot or shell. He probably did know what he was doing but I always liked to see and hear him playing his melodies as he went about.

Our tanks were then about fifteen miles forward of us and were equipped with the A9s and 10s. A squadron of the 3rd Hussars were working with us and they had a smaller model, the A5. The Italian tanks were a little superior to ours but of course did not compare with anything the Germans had.

There had been an attempt by the enemy to break through the border wire but they were repulsed. The Australian infantry backed up the tanks; a matey bunch of men with whom we worked closely together, they running behind us clutching the back of the tanks and then made their charges with fixed bayonets.

Also in the brigade were the 4th Royal Horse Artillery, and the 4th Indian division, who were very keen fighters. There had been several minor skirmishes while on patrol but the Italians were forced to retreat and our tanks captured two forts, Capuzzo and Maddalena, after which there was a short period of calm while General Wavell, no doubt was preparing for the right moment in which to go on the offensive.

I was not the only one to go down with a bout of dysentery, most men suffered the experience at some time. It became a usual sight to see a man set off away from the leaguer with a shovel; if it happened very frequently it would be obvious to us all what the man was suffering from. I won't try to describe it further than to tell of its effects, some men had to be sent back to the casualty clearing station, and although I had a bad dose I fought against being moved.

It was debilitating with no desire to eat, and languor and weakness. I was grateful that I was not a member of a tank crew and had the opportunity to bed down in the back of the truck between the many trips with the shovel. It is a disease which causes much suffering and sometimes it resulted in death. I think I was laid low with it for about ten days. It was at that time when one evening just before nightfall an Australian lorry and crew drove into the leaguer having lost their route and stayed with us overnight.

It was our good fortune that it was about the equivalent of our NAAFI and our lads were allowed to purchase from them; I didn't attempt to get up from bed but someone bought me a large tin of apricots and I tasted a mouthful of the juice and then some of the fruit and later in the night some more, in the morning I felt a little better and a day or two later was much improved and credited the improvement to the apricots. Maybe I would have recovered just as well anyway but I like to think that it was all down to that big tin.

To this day tinned apricots take my thoughts back to that time and I still favour them. Although I had lost a lot of weight and very weak, I was allowed to resume my duties, which in fact amounted to little more than helping to load the petrol onto Chesty's truck and to assist again when we reached the tanks. I would have liked to have driven and to have relieved 'Chesty' sometimes but he preferred to do so himself.

As the tanks were at the time stationary, 'B' echelon moved up with them and I was detailed to take the place of a batman who had also gone down with dysentery. I had no idea what my duties were so I had to quiz Batty and the other batmen.

My officer was Lieutenant Duncan. What I had to do was firstly to awaken him with a mug of tea from the officers' mess cook's lorry, and hot water for his shave. After breakfast his bed to be made up, the tent cleaned through, his equipment to clean and during the day any other requirements which he called me for.

After a day or two I found the job easy enough, Mr Duncan pleasant and not difficult to please. I didn't like doing it but of course had no choice, I was lucky really to be looking after him rather than one or two others who I knew would have made life quite a bit more toilsome. One advantage was that it kept me off all other duties.

One morning, when going about my duties round the tent and being lost in what I was doing, I was singing one of Benjy's songs, and it was, I remember, from the musical *New Moon - Lover Come Back To Me*, the words something like: "...the sky was blue and high above, the moon was new and so was love, this aching heart of mine keeps singing, Lover Come Back to Me...."

When in strode Mr Duncan who, upon hearing me, commented that I must be content with life. I don't remember what sort of reply I made but whatever it was it did no harm. In fact, it stood me in good stead because after a few days we were able to talk with one another, and it created a kind of officer relationship. During that time I had let him know that I was keen to join the tanks, I didn't then think that anything would come of it really.

After returning to 'Chesty' and the petrol wagon and working there for about two weeks, I was called to report to sergeant 'Stormy' Rayner for tank training. As there was a lull in the fighting, apart from a scheme or two, the tanks were static so tank maintenance or gunnery training was carried out each day. To me it was most interesting, to the Regular crew members who had done it all before it must have been rather boring, but I got on fine with them and it seemed that before too long I would be one of them.

We received very little mail from home, sometimes a new arrival from England might bring us up to date with the more recent events. We knew of the great air battles that were taking place over our country and of the period called the 'Battle of Britain', also that our RAF boys were bombing Germany by night. There was the story too, of the mysterious landing in Scotland of one of Hitler's henchmen by the name of Hess. Some thought that he had landed on some sort of peace mission. The German submarines were still causing heavy shipping losses, casualties and loss of life.

We had been in Egypt for about two months when the first batch of mail arrived, I received quite a pile. So many ships had gone down that some of ours must have been lost. The newspapers (Chron & Echo) were dated September and I was reading them in November. There were letters from my brothers, one from Sam, and a few more, but there was one from Dad which I was forced to read over several times in order to assimilate its contents and to give it my most serious attention. There was no letter from Jane, but Dad's letter gave the reason why. Apparently she had been down to home and given them her engagement ring, therefore indicating that our relationship was at an end. There were no details of what she had said, no reason given for the decision but just the fact to be accepted that it was at an end. I wondered about the promise given only a few months ago to wait no matter how long, when she had promised through her tears.

I don't think that I was either shocked or upset at the news; as Dad pointed out I had much else to think about without an added worry over something which I could do nothing about. I was only one of thousands who would receive similar news during the long years of war and we would know when one of our comrades received what became known as 'Dear John' letters.

However, as I saw it, all I could do was to 'soldier on'. Although our mail home was censored (blue-pencilled) the folk at home had a good idea where we were and what we were doing, they guessed by our hints what we meant to convey, they read between the lines.

In the early days of the Italian desert campaign in 1940 there were no dress restrictions, anything wearable was acceptable and as the weather began to cool off we were glad even to clothe ourselves in any discarded enemy coats, or anything to keep out the desert cold because we were only equipped with our tropical drill. Someone evidently was not aware that the sands of the desert do run cold. We must have looked a real rag-tag, unshaven, scruffy Fred Karno's Army.

Beards were in evidence everywhere (with the exception of those like myself who couldn't grow one) there being no water pipeline at that time, we relied on the water truck and made do with our water bottle ration per day; that had to be sufficient for all purposes, teeth, washing and drinking; shaving was not then a priority, the washing of clothes was with the use of petrol. We drew water from the wells also which helped out. It was fortunate that at that time there were no press photographers up there with us, the only others who would see us were our enemy the Italians and they ran away from us anyway.

One of the great luxuries was our 'desert brew' and whenever stopped, even if only for a minute or so the ability to produce a brew of tea in an instant and all packed away again to move off was a work of art. For a period that luxury was denied us by the Italians when they salted the wells as they retreated. The Carnation milk in the tea curdled and salted tea did nothing to quench our thirst. It didn't either do a great deal to improve our usual diet of bully beef stew and rice pudding. Maybe they thought that one way to beat us was to hit us where it hurt, knowing of the Britisher's craving for his tea. There came the time though, when they had advanced and once again occupied that same area they then suffered from the very same wells which they had salted earlier.

I'm not sure how it came about but I became a member of 'Stormy' Rayner's crew. My first experience was as gun loader while on patrols. We understood that we would quite soon be moving off into attack as the year was drawing to a close and the days shortening. However, in the meantime, we learned that we were in for a treat, because whenever tank regiments find it possible they celebrate 'Cambrai' Day, to commemorate the first great tank battle of the 14-18 War and this year was to be no exception, we were to have a special meal at the cookhouse when we came in from patrol.

We gathered our mess tins and hurried along to the cook's lorry with its lines of dixies backed by the orderlies, the rumour was that it was chicken, we couldn't wait and got into the queue. As we shuffled nearer with mess tins thrust out we heard murmurings and some in front of us moved out, and then someone passed the word down the line that "he's only gone and left the bloody innards in".

We knew of course that Joe, the cook sergeant, would have no other means of cooking chicken than to boil them but with the insides still intact didn't seem to be a very palatable meal. So that most of us then just took our ration of rice and tea, at least we had tins of bully and biscuits on the tank, and we had our rum ration. It was to say the least disappointing but we didn't openly complain, that you didn't do unless you were very brave and could stand the wrath of Joe when he was in one of his moods. His piercing eyes would set you as you held your mess tins, willing you to dare and complain. No-one ever did.

It is rather difficult to describe him, at least to give a true picture. He was a Regular soldier of many years' service and had been a wrestler. Short and squat with heavy shoulders which seemed to reach almost to his hips, his cheeks and jowl even after a shave were of a battleship grey colour, what little hair he had grew only at the back of his head. But I thought his outstanding feature was his eyebrows which were black and so bushy that they appeared to provide shelter for the rest of his face.

It was not surprising that there were no complaints, the lads were always quietly taking a mickey such as the heraldic shield they drew depicting him mounted on an oversized bully beef tin holding cross ladles. When asked by an Orderly what the menu was to be, his regular answer was "give the buggers rice". That became an expression used among ourselves, it became a sort of catch-phrase, I am sure that he hated every one of us.

Our advance began in earnest at the beginning of December 1940, after leaving the Mersa Matruh area we attacked each coastal town in turn coming in from the south and hitting the coast road and

our targets in much the same manner on each occasion all the way westward.

Here and there the enemy put up some stout resistance but very often hundreds of them were only too eager to surrender and it became a regular sight to see columns of prisoners stretching way back being marched into captivity by just a junior NCO and an escort.

We ourselves suffered some casualties where the Italians had fought fiercely. Their shells had the same capability to maim and kill as any other. I can remember some of the places as we advanced such as, Bardia, Sollum, Sidi Barani, Bomba and Tobruk. The occupants of a tank have little knowledge of where they are or what is happening when enclosed in that steel chamber.

In those early days we were not equipped with wireless so that there was no internal communication, and vision was limited to the visor slits. The driver would have some view but on undulating ground he would probably have a view of the sky for a moment and then as he came down would see the surface which was immediately to his front.

The crew in the interior would be able to see the back, head and shoulders of the driver, and the boots and legs of the commander as he stood on his seat with head and shoulders out. We rarely worked closed down, that is with the cupola cover closed. Outside, in order to signal to other tanks the commanders used flags, for instance to order 'rally to me' he would circle the flag above his head, to form a line 'abreast' formation two flags held out at arm's length would be used and so on. Somehow it worked.

Dust clouds caused by the slightest movement of vehicles were often the reason for us to be called on to investigate, the usual term was to go and have a 'shufti', to check whether it was friend or foe. It did happen that we on occasions found that we were checking out nothing more than a bedouin caravan; they seemed to appear from nowhere immediately after a battle and they had produce to barter, fruit, eggs, chickens.

Apart from the tricks which the dust played on us there were the mirages, the shimmering lakes, always in the distance. However far you drove it was impossible to reach them, they were very tempting to the thirsty soldiers, but did nothing to quench our parched throats because they were only the result of the effects of the heat and the bright sunlight on the white sands.

The vast ocean of sand which came to be the home of thousands of men for several years was for ever changing. So complex and full of mystery. Whole surface areas were changed by even a moderate wind which moved sand from one spot and placed it elsewhere.

One could be travelling over scrubland of thorny low bushes with their colourful flowers in the early part of the year, and then to suddenly be confronted with miles of soft, drifting sands, these caused the men of 'B' echelon to swear, when every few yards they would need to dig themselves out, inserting sandmats (perforated metal trays), accompanied by much pushing and shoving. Then again within a few miles distance the terrain may change to a stony rocky surface, causing whether on a tank or in a truck a lot of jolting and jarring resulting in bumps and bruises.

It was all a great deal better when moving over the salt flats which were baked concrete hard and glistened white. Not many times were my squadron able to experience the smooth travelling of the Via Balba (the coastal road) or to enjoy the fertile and cultivated area there. All so very different, Italians had settled there in the 1930s under Mussolini's 'Land Ownership Policy'. By Christmas we had covered about 500 miles forcing the Italians ever-westwards and Wavell's force had captured all the coastal towns on the way. We became stationary at Tobruk which had recently fallen to us.

For a week or so I had been plagued by several boils which had developed on various parts of my body, one on my behind, one on my belly button, my neck, and of all places there arose a beauty on the end of my nose. There were plenty of suggestions from all around me as to possible cures, I was willing to attempt any because they really ached, pulled and tormented me so much.

The method I favoured was to take advantage of the fact that we were only a few hundred yards from the sea and salt water, I intended to lance them and let the sea cleanse them. An army knife was offered but someone produced a needle from their 'housewife' kit. Armed with that I waded into the water, it was icy cold.

I probed away with much squeezing and afterwards they were easier and I obtained a good deal of relief. They didn't take long to heal and for the skin to repair again. I am sure the salt water method was responsible for the cure. I can readily recommend the sea water at Tobruk and a needle as a sure remedy for boils!

The weather was cold so that I was pleased to find among the heaps of abandoned Italian stores a heavy coat. Amid the jumble of equipment left behind were dozens of bottles of Chianti wine in their wicker cases. There was clothing of all sorts, personal belongings, including letters and photos and large tins of Nivea cream which we daubed on our unwashed skin. Our great find, or so we thought, was a stack of bags of Lire notes. These we stuffed into our pockets having visions of becoming rich when one day we cashed them in but of course as currency they were useless and the last we saw of them was being scattered by the wind across the sands.

I have never intended to dwell too much on the horrific sights of the ghastly outcome of the battles we had fought but reviewing the carnage after one of our attacks the terrible scenes which became more and more familiar to us and came to be accepted as the daily norm, were imprinted on my mind, were there forever; I suspect also with anyone else who suffered those same experiences but perhaps not so vivid as the years pass.

There were burnt-out lorries, abandoned guns with their crews still in their pits and bodies strewn about in all sorts of grotesque positions. All the product of the war we were fighting. In spite of all that it was no good being squeamish because it was a matter of them or us and we were outnumbered by ten to one.

Due to our casualties and the rearranged tank crews I was returned to 'B' echelon and worked again with 'Chesty'; there I found that due to the speed of Wavell's army's advance it was difficult for supplies to catch up with our tanks. When it happened that we didn't find them before they moved on they would be down to basic rations of bully and biscuits and captured 'Itie' fags, water and petrol was the biggest problem and could force them to halt. When replenishment was possible we all fed together, nothing exceptional, just the same stew and rice; sometimes Joe would provide a bowl of curry powder where those inclined could spoon it on and by stirring it in enliven the dish. One of the annoyances at mealtimes as we sat around the cookhouse was that the slightest of breezes would lift the sand to give our food a fine covering which crunched in our teeth as we ate. An added menace were the flies which pursued us everywhere.

I took to hanging around the officers' mess truck whenever possible because there was always a little extra or something special to be had there. Corporal Edwards was the cook and the batmen the waiters, I was always amazed at the meals which he turned out. It was wonderful to see what those little extra ingredients which the officers procured made to a meal. I have a very pleasant memory of the mugs of cocoa which I often scrounged there, absolutely delicious, I haven't tasted any cocoa since to compare with that which Corporal Edwards made.

The enemy were being chased further westwards and we bowled on into Libya until somewhere around the Derna area on the coast we were given orders to turn and take a south-westerly direction, a route which took us through some uncharted desert. It was reported that the Italians were evacuating Benghazi.

The plan was to make as much speed as possible and to try and catch them on the coast road, to cut off their retreat by travelling across country. It was hard going for the vehicles and drivers and there were quite a lot of breakdowns due to the rocky terrain; progress was very slow but we

intercepted the vanguard of the retreating enemy in the Ajedabia area. We had made a difficult march of about eighty miles to do so.

The tanks went into battle immediately against an enemy who were fighting for their lives. They were determined not to be captured if at all possible. They came down the road in all manner of transport in their haste to get away. The tanks and other armoured vehicles made attempts to bypass us by taking to the desert, but even with our much depleted force we were capable of containing them. Masses of prisoners were taken and as small groups of our army trickled in, among them some engineers, cages were erected to confine them. Many fierce encounters ensued right up to nightfall but by then we were in complete control.

The actual spot where we leaguered that night was at Beda Fomm, from where looking back along the road to Benghazi could be seen one mass of blazing tanks and lorries; dazed Italian troops trudged in being escorted into the cages or the ambulances; it appeared that many of those captured were from what we would have termed 'county regiments' as many seemed to be related.

They greeted each other by flinging their arms around one another in an embrace, often crying, it was possible that if not related they belonged to the same town or village. There were women among them and it was said that their vehicle was the officers' brothel. That night the stench of cordite, burning rubber, oil and flesh made me want to retch as the air over the battlefield hung heavy while I was on guard. We had been able to replenish the tanks just before they did battle. By first light quite a lot more of our brigade arrived to give support, there were a few casualties among our men but no-one that I knew.

The next day was one of the worst days of the whole war for me. The effects of the events then have never completely left me. We were divided into small groups to act as burial parties, each group taking a number of prisoners who were to dig the graves and to bury their dead comrades. They dug the graves but persistently refused to handle the bodies so that the loathsome task fell to us while they continued to dig.

The worst part of the stinking job was having to extricate the stiff corpses from the vehicles and so often they would become wedged making it impossible to move them. The most sickly part though was when attempting to remove charred bodies from burnt-out tanks by trying to get a rope round them, when the flesh peeled away. We had to wear face masks.

It was so sickening that some strong men were caused to vomit, we complained and were duly taken off the duty. The engineers took over and set the vehicles alight, this caused the stench to become more repulsive than ever as it hung and lingered over the area all day. I don't think that I will ever forget that time and place, or that experience; I thought that the impression it had on me was because at 22 I was still a comparatively young soldier but that was not so because I saw hard-bitten old soldiers turn green then.

The prisoners seemed to accept the situation quite easily, no doubt pleased to be out of the war. I have a clear recollection of one group sitting around a pile of packages and suitcases singing along with one who was playing an accordion which somehow he had managed to salvage after the battle. Two of the songs come to mind, *Sorrento* and the other *Santa Lucia*.

It was February 7th, when after sixty-two days of campaigning we had concluded with a great victory. The Italians had been defeated, we had taken 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks and 800 guns. Our two divisions under General Wavell had despatched Mussolini's ten divisions ensuring that his forces would be of no further threat. We ourselves had suffered 555 dead and 1400 wounded.

It had been the first important victory on land since the outbreak of war, a victory which our people at home had waited for, something which would help lift their spirits and give them hope. As we were relieved, only a small token force was left behind to occupy the area. Our lines of communication were at that time very stretched; even though more ports had become available to

us supplies at that distance were difficult to maintain. Our own vehicles needed to be replaced so that we left the desert and moved back down to the Alexandria area.

The Germans at that time had invaded Greece and the Greek government made a request for our assistance to which Mr Churchill agreed, causing General Wavell to despatch a large part of his occupying force from North Africa there. This further depletion had the inevitable result of leaving our forces too weak to defend the recently-gained territory; while this happened the Germans being obliged to assist their Italian allies landed several panzer divisions and attacked our meagre defence force which was forced to pull out and were pushed back as far as the Egyptian border.

The German advance by-passed and cut off Tobruk and were also in possession of the other ports. The commander of the axis forces was General Erwin Rommel, who was revered and respected not only by the men of his Afrika Korps but later by the Desert Rats too, for his cunning and ingenuity. The regiment then at Alexandria were camped in tents just some distance along the coast at Sidi Bish, it would have been early in March 1941 then and we were to wait there for new tanks and reinforcements. In the meantime duties were at a minimum and we were issued with regular passes for Alex; we had a week's leave and were able to rid ourselves of the desert grime. Having a pay parade and drawing back pay made it quite enjoyable.

Importantly too, having received a load of mail, we had the opportunity to write our letters and catch up on news from home and of the world in general. Among my letters were two month old Chron & Echos. It was a relief to hear from my family and find that they were all in good health and that there was no bad news to impart of parents, brothers or friends. There was one very pleasant piece of news, and that was that my youngest brother Arthur had married Joan who I had never met. Dad though was not altogether in agreement because he felt like I did about wartime marriages and thought that eighteen was too young to wed anyway, especially as Arthur sailed for India with the airforce immediately and would possibly be away for a number of years. When replying to my letters there was one person less to write to now that my fiancée had thrown me over. We had heard very little news of the war outside our own little theatre of conflict so that there was a lot to learn of what had been happening. We did know that our troops had evacuated Greece and that *HMS Southampton* had been sunk there. Men arriving from England were always a source of information and we plied them with various questions of conditions at home. They told of the heavy bombing raid on Coventry and of the stubborn way in which Londoners were standing up to the Blitz; also how folks were beginning to find that the Rationing of food and clothing was making itself felt.

There, in Sidi Bish, our food was quite reasonable, at least we had white bread, vegetables and fruit, which for months had been missing from our diet. In addition we were in a position of having money in our pockets to sample the overwhelming choice of delightful food and drinks available to us in Alex. When we gave thought to the conditions with regard to the rationing at home we ought to have felt guilty that we were able to indulge ourselves so, but I suppose they would acknowledge that for some months past we had often been without a meal and at best food was lacking in variety. The other luxuries which we enjoyed in camp were the showers or the pleasure to soak in a bath. The camp being only a short distance from the sea made it possible most days to go swimming, usually a group of us, but often just Batty and myself, he was a very good strong swimmer. It was really wonderful to have that long stretch of white sandy beach almost to ourselves and to be able to dash into the great Mediterranean sea. Batty always struck out for a distant rock and not to be outdone I attempted to do the same and succeeded, so that from there on it became regular practice. But I admit that many times I wondered if I could manage it, or had I taken on too much. Having reached it there was also the return to consider, anyway it was a good challenge.



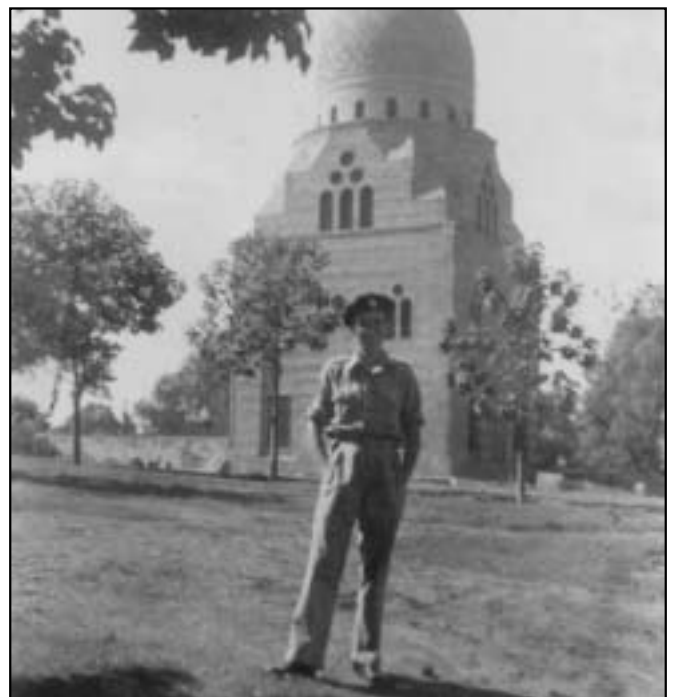
Jock Ormond, Batty and me, after a swim in the Med. at Sidi Bish.



Jock McLeod and Wife, 1938.



Fellow students on a Wireless course, April 1941 at Base Depot, Abbassia, Cairo.



When in Alex we had a favourite bar which we tended to use where we drank brandy in preference to beer; the beer was not up to the standard of that served in the servicemen's clubs and brandy was reasonably priced. One evening when Batty and I were out on our own and going into Alex by tram we began talking to a young girl who we found out to be Greek; we got off at her stop walked along with her to her home leaving her with a promise of a date to take her and her friend to the cinema. She agreed to the arrangements, the time, the place and to bring a partner to make a foursome; she spoke only little English and we no Greek at all, it was evident that misunderstandings could be expected. Anyway, she was true to her word: she was there on time and with a partner but things did not quite turn out as we intended, because the partner she had brought was her mother.

A very nice lady, but our visions were of an eighteen year-old, perhaps we should have been aware that no decent Greek girls would then be permitted to meet strangers alone, it was their custom to be chaperoned. We went to her home twice for tea and at Easter were invited to take part in the celebrations which to us seemed to be a highly regarded ritual. There were many relatives to meet and we were made most welcome in spite of the language difficulty.

I remember that they had a large display of artistically-decorated eggs. After I had moved back into the desert we wrote to each other but I was not capable of deciphering her letters and could not find anyone who could possibly translate. In any case once back up the 'blue' there wasn't time to write with the effect that we lost touch.

We leaguered with our new tanks (A 13s) in the Mersa Matruh area carrying out maintenance on them. They were light and speedy but one of their disadvantages was that they were only thinly armour-plated so there was not a lot of protection which was essential when up against the German Mk IIIs or IVs.

Our firepower was then a little greater as they were fitted with a two-pounder turret gun. One addition was that we had a sun compass fitted. Each tank was rigged up with a canvas-covered metal frame which gave them the appearance of lorries; the whole contraption could be easily released when needed for action by pulling on a wire ring. One advantage was that it provided a shaded area which was welcome, for although it was yet still only April the weather was beginning to heat up.

A number of schemes and exercises took place and there were the usual classes for gunnery and wireless, the latter was an addition and new to us. Now that every tank had wireless communication we had to adjust ourselves to this latest innovation. In that respect we had then become equal to the German panzers which had been in wireless control since the war began. There was a halt in the activities on the Egyptian frontier, our own forces being steadily strengthened and re-equipped in the belief that we could hurl the Germans back as we did the Italians.

We learned that when the 'Desert Fox', as Rommel became known, had advanced and pushed our forces back, among those captured were Lt. General Richard O'Connor, Lt. General Philip Neame, VC and their driver. Rommel too was known to be building up supplies and it was obvious that during the next few months there would be some hard battles to be fought.

Among the letters and newspapers which I received at that time was one letter from Dad which held particular interest for me because it informed me that my ex-girlfriend Jane was expecting a baby. There were no other details, but she had certainly hadn't wasted much time, although the mail might have been a couple of months old. I guessed correctly, as it turned out, for the father was the dancing partner. One thing for sure was that should he have been called up and married Jane she would receive a marriage allowance, that I had been reluctant to do. It was no concern of mine though, it was all in the distant past.

I experienced for the first time a real sandstorm. There had been several minor ones but this was full strength. The prelude to it was the electric storm where the sky was rent across with vivid flashes of jagged light against a many-coloured cloud pattern, then almost sudden darkness accompanied

by a cold wind that howled and whistled, pushing before it a great wall of sand.

The sand carried by the wind bit into you and it was difficult to stand up against it, being forced to lie down covering your head with your arms to protect the eyes. How long it lasted I couldn't tell, but wished for it soon to end. When it was over and all was calm again, ears, eyes, nose, mouth and hair were thick with sand, causing a lot of irritation. It was soul-destroying and lowered morale. While it raged, visibility had been down to nil, our exposed skin was seared and our throats dry, the one thing which we wished for then more than anything else was water, buckets of it but unfortunately that was not available, so we made content with a trickle remaining in the water bottle.

General Wavell had left us much to our regret and had departed to India. General Auchinleck had taken command of the desert army. We were involved in a short sharp encounter in early May, to test the strength of the Afrika Korps, no doubt. The brief battle soon fizzled out after which I received a stripe and as a Lance-Corporal was sent down to Cairo to attend a wireless instructor's course. The promotion carried with it an increase of three pence a day.

The class which I attended was made up of several different nationalities, Aussies, New Zealanders, black Africans but mainly men from other tank regiments. Although based in Cairo there was little time to go there as there was a great deal of studying to do; in any case our pay would only allow for one visit per week. Most evenings we managed a swim in the nearby pool and afterwards to sit with a cool drink and listen to the radio playing some of the latest hit numbers, mostly South American, one of which was *Tangerine*.

Sometimes after study we would wander down to Scot's Corner' where we had a tea and a cake or an ice cream. One Sunday a party of us visited the Pyramids and the Bazaars, the latter I found very fascinating, the noise and bustle, the bartering and haggling for trinkets, watches, silks and perfumes, of which there were an especially large variety. We drank a tiny cup of tea flavoured with one of those scents, it was very nice and unusual but I preferred our 'desert brew' any time.

On the occasions when we went to 'Scot's Corner' in the evening, before strolling out someone would call "Anyone for Scotties?" so that there would often be seven or eight of us, a real mixed bunch including the black Africans. The fact that those Africans came out with us didn't at all suit one white South African officer: he addressed us after morning parade when the black Africans had gone to lessons. He explained to us why we should not become too friendly with them, he said that if we treated them as equals, after the war they would expect the same attitudes to apply at home which would cause immense problems.

Needless to say we were disgusted and felt that we had been insulted, these men were expected to fight at our side to take the same risks and to be killed if necessary; they were our class-mates and above all our comrades-in-arms which in our opinion made them equals. We were of course unable to make any sort of reply and remained mute. Not so the Aussies, or the Kiwis though; they voiced their thoughts loud and clear. We carried on our studies and the relationship with the blacks remained as it had been, they realised what had been said in their absence but made no comment. It was a sorry episode and one which I have never forgotten.

The class was not confined only to the classroom but often we would take a 15-cwt truck equipped with wireless sets and practice communication with another station. We picked a shady spot, usually in the area of the 'Sweetwater Canal'; how it came to be known as that is hard to guess because in fact it was a filthy, muddy, smelly brown colour where cattle drank and the villagers washed their clothes and their bodies.

From there we could see the natives tending their crops on soil that was stony and of very poor fertility, both they and their cattle appeared to be under-nourished. The irrigation system necessary in order that some sort of crop could be produced was powered by the bullock constantly circling

the well, treading its weary way round, lifting the water buckets which fed into the channels. When in class the Morse Code and the Phonetic Alphabet were repetitively drummed into us hour after hour so that even today I can remember a lot of it. There were other forms of signalling besides wireless, there was Semaphore with the use of flags, Heliograph with mirrors and Signal Lamps; the mirrors were effective in the desert; I thought as the course drew towards its end that I might just about scrape through with a pass as I didn't think that I did too well in the tests, however I passed and became a wireless instructor. As it later turned out I became a reasonable operator but not a good instructor.

Chapter Five: The Crusader Battles

Having taking leave of my classmates who had become my very good friends I returned to the Squadron and found that they were geared up for another 'push'. The intention was to relieve the Tobruk garrison which was still cut off, except from the sea. Thousands of allied troops were still confined there, it was an important port for either side to possess for the supplying of their armies.

Prime Minister Churchill was urging General Auchinleck to attack, as he had done to General Wavell, but new men and arrivals were still coming into the line; once they were settled in it was certain that we would again be engaged in the thick of battle, which at the latest we thought would be November because the days were already getting shorter, becoming dark in the early evening when the whole of the desert became black and still.

I became wireless operator on a sergeant's tank, in addition I would be the gun-loader. I didn't know the other two members of the crew but that was soon remedied. We practised releasing the canvas covers and spent some time on the drill for 'baling out': that was an essential exercise because the high-octane petrol was so very easily ignited, and there was little time to jump clear once a tank had received a hit.

We went out on probing patrols trying to locate the enemy positions, their type of arms and their numbers if possible. Coming back eastwards to leaguer after one of those expeditions it was always a delight to look back at those wonderful desert sunsets, appearing so calm and peaceful with so many differing shades of colour almost causing one to ask "what war?"

When in leaguer in the evening we made ourselves comfortable by rigging up the tarpaulin cover to the tank side, ran the inspection lamp through and laid out our bedding there. The cooks were up with us while we were not in action and they served us us from a central position.

It was usually served and eaten just before the blackness of the night set in. The rations were much about the same, just as boring, with nothing to stimulate the appetite whatever. Joe and his team did try and make them more interesting. We found our own way however of making up the deficiency with the aid of a primus stove in our portable shelter. We had hoarded and cadged margarine and jam over a period and there was always plenty of hard tack biscuits. Anyone going on leave or out of the desert for any reason was expected to bring some little extra which could be used to make those meals.

It was fortunate too for us that in our troop was a South African and after he had visited his friends in the South African brigade who were stationed nearby, brought back with him a load of their issue biscuits, bigger and much superior to our own; they were about six inches square and quite half-an-inch thick, these when crumbled could be transformed into a passable porridge or when fried in margarine and topped with jam they were delicious. We did enjoy those meals, afterwards we usually had a sing-song. That was our evening's entertainment. 'Lights Out' would be very early because our day would begin at first light which was about three or four o'clock.

Our brewing up was a very important function, one of the good things of our lives. While under the shelter we used the Primus, outside it was made over a petrol and sand stove. It was simple enough and quite efficient: one of the four-gallon petrol tins was cut in half, the top part was perforated and filled with sand, the bottom in which we boiled the tea was complete with wire handle and was when filled with water placed over the tin of sand which had been soaked in petrol and lit. As the water boiled, tea, sugar and Carnation milk were all thrown in, this produced a rich golden liquid, after each dipping in our mugs the partaking of it was a pleasure to treasure. This brewing-up was a ritual, an art, when or wherever anyone 'brewed' the word would go around and

along they would come bringing their old battered mugs and all would receive a share, no-one was ever turned away. Often in the middle of those tea-making activities the order would come through: "mount - move off", or on occasions shells began to fall, in either case there would be a mad scramble for everyone to get on board, get the kit stowed away and hope that there would still be enough of the brew remaining after spillage to fill four mugs.

As the desert winter drew ever nearer we were anxiously awaiting the order to begin the attack. There was the possibility of course that the Afrika Korps would attack first. We knew that our people at home were counting upon us to produce a victory to lift their spirits as they suffered the might of the Luftwaffe in their nightly bombing raids.

The commandos had made some gallant raids in Europe, Greece and the Desert. A large part of our army was tied up at home so that it was felt among the Eighth Army that we owed our people something to alleviate their distress and cheer them up.

For a reason of which I am not aware our troop sergeant left us. Whether he was ill or on a course was not clear but whatever the reason it had the effect of moving the troop NCOs up a rank in seniority, the corporal taking over the missing sergeant's tank and I to command his.

It took a long time for it to register with me when I was informed of it because it was not usual for a junior NCO, a mere lance-corporal, and in my case of only a few month's standing, to be called on to become a tank commander. It was however no great problem because we were mainly static, or at most only engaged on Schemes.

I thought as I settled down to my new responsibility that I would make the best of the appointment while it lasted as I was certain that the sergeant would soon be returned to us or another would replace him; in the meantime I had the opportunity to get to know my new crew and to familiarise myself with the duties of a tank commander.

Two of the crew had seen little or no action but the driver, 'Ginger' Downing, was battle-hardened; he was therefore most helpful to me and I welcomed his advice as I took on this new challenge. The tanks with which we were then equipped, the 'Christie Cruiser', had a more spacious interior, there was never enough room but it was an advantage if the crew were small of stature which at least gave us some room in which to stretch our legs.

If we were confined to the vehicle whether stationary or on the move for any length of time our bodies could become cramped, and our limbs stiff. The explosion inside the tank when the gun was fired caused the ears to pound and the head to throb, the smell of cordite was sickly. As the shell cases were ejected at our feet they were speedily thrown out which helped to rid us of some of the smell and also to lessen the heat which they caused in addition to the intense heat of the sun beating down on the steel shell of the vehicle itself. The turret gun had a long recoil action of which the crew had to continually be aware of because in that confined space when it shot back quickly it could hit pretty hard.

The driver suffered from the crack of the turret gun which was immediately above his head and also from the chatter of the machine gun by his side.

Whatever were the particular duties of a crew member everyone shared in the general work whether it was refuelling, ammo loading, gun cleaning, vehicle maintenance or any other requirement necessary to keep the tank in a ready fighting condition at all times. The work was tiring but we were proud to be 'tankies' and wouldn't change our lot even if it were possible, certainly not with that of the infantryman for example. Our life in comparison was quite luxurious.

Although we were limited for space, with a little ingenuity we could always find room for any extras such as spare bedding or extra rations, washing kit and so forth. It was much easier for us than it was for the man who had to move into battle carrying all of his requirements while ours were carried for us.

I didn't envy those in the trenches at all, there was an occasion which comes to mind: after I had

taken charge of a tank, of an incident when passing through some lines of trenches where the infantry boys had dug themselves in on our way to meet a panzer force that had broken through, and thinking how exposed they were, and how fortunate we were to have armour plating to protect us, when one of the lads stood up in his trench and shouted to me "f*** your luck, mate". I was so surprised that all I could think of to shout back in reply was "And yours!". We always thought of them as the 'poor bloody infantry' but in that particular case and on that occasion it seemed at least one of them didn't envy us our job.

I attended my first squadron leader's conference and found that what we had expected to happen was confirmed, our offensive was about to begin, in fact we were to attack the following morning at first light. As the sergeant had not returned I had to take my crew into battle, which I had only vaguely anticipated, however I was committed. Although I was not too concerned at doing so I did very much hope that I could stand the test.

I had a good well-maintained vehicle and an excellent crew so everything else was up to me, my only fear was that I musn't let anyone down. All men before going into battle and realising the nearness of danger to themselves and their comrades feel their stomach turn over, but all are determined not to show their emotions. We talked of it as being afraid to show that we were afraid. All commanders had been briefed on the plans and the objectives of the campaign which was called Crusader; the intention was to relieve Tobruk, I believe the morning of the march must have been 16th November 1941. We reached the Egyptian border and passed through a gap in the wire which had been made for us by the engineers and moved on into Libya.

It rained heavily for a time but there was no sighting of the enemy, it seemed that we had caught them by surprise. We leaguered that night just a few miles south of Sidi Rezegh. The drill in leaguer was the same then as at all times when the soft vehicles were up with us, the tanks forming an outer protective screen with them in the centre; everything was normal, and after refuelling we fed at the cook's lorry.

It was after returning and carrying out maintenance that the first of our troubles began; we found that the turret would not move so that we had to call in the fitters who began work on the problem immediately. They were forced to work by the light of the inspection lamp and the make-do blackout was far from satisfactory. The light emitted was obviously seen for miles across the open desert.

It was found that we had an oil leak and it was repaired by about midnight. The remainder of the squadron with the exception of the sentries had been bedded down for hours and with first light, around 3.00-4.00 hours, managed an hour or two of sleep ourselves.

We were awakened by the guards just as the morning sky began to show its early light and then suddenly, through the stillness, shaking us out of our drowsy state came the whizz and whistle of shellfire, it came from our left and at close range.

The German gunners had ranged in on the exposed light during the night and then all they needed to do was to wait until daybreak when we became visible as a target. We were sitting in their sights and they also had the benefit of surprise.

They were in a position to do a great deal of damage, as it was I heard of only a few others than ourselves who were hit. We received an armour-piercing shell on the left-hand side which damaged two of the bogey wheels, the result being that we could not steer to the left, capable only of making a right turn and this we did making a dash to get out of range.

The whole of the squadron had scattered too, in retrospect we were extremely lucky especially then with loss of manoeuvrability to get away. After the squadron had scattered I found myself moving along with tanks of 'A' Squadron and they were able to point out to where my troops were

reforming; when reassembled our orders were to pursue and destroy some lorried infantry.

We set off line-abreast at great speed, charging after them and firing on the move; too late it was found that we had been lured into a trap, because we ran into some dug-in artillery, and I saw several tanks hit within minutes. Then I heard and felt a thud, followed by a shout from Ginger, the driver, and the tank came to a halt.

I jumped off and went round to him, he was struggling to get out of his hatch, when helping him I saw that his leg below the knee seemed only to be hanging on by skin alone. There was a gaping hole where an armour-piercing shell had passed through his compartment taking his leg on the way before it made its exit somewhere inside the chamber, yet missed each of us in there.

Meanwhile, adjacent to us was another halted tank who were unloading casualties, the officer commanding it told me that as his tank was not a runner he would take over mine and his driver would join us. Between us we lifted Ginger onto the other tank along with the other two wounded. They were made as comfortable as was possible until the MO could get to them.

It must have been most uncomfortable for those wounded whom we had laid on the rear of the tank over the engine grills because although the November sun was not terribly fierce that part of the vehicle was hot to touch, apart from the fact that they were in pain. Our driver expressed his anxiety and wanted to be got away quickly to be treated, he said that he had a fear of gangrene setting in; his leg had collected a covering of sand from when we had lifted him. How long they laid there before receiving treatment I don't know because we were called on to move and I never heard of them again.

The officer who took over from me brought his own driver (Brown) with him and I reverted to my own duty as wireless operator/gun loader on my tank. My spell as a commander was short-lived, I think just about a month altogether.

We fought our way to the edge of El Adam airfield which for a short period had been occupied by other squadrons of our regiment. Each time we moved forward we were driven back by the superior firepower of the enemy. To make conditions more difficult was the fact that our driver was finding the commander's orders almost impossible to act upon, to move to the left for instance he was forced to make a right-hand circle.

We were left in observation below the airfield for some time and then suddenly charged away to become involved in several short skirmishes, being called on to lend assistance in one place then onto another, dodging here and there as ordered. It was all quite hectic for a while, we inside the steel casing were only partly aware of what was happening around us outside. I found that continually loading the gun and at speed was very hot and tiring.

It was late afternoon when we were ordered to take up a position in a wadi where we were to form a defensive line against a large panzer force which was reported to be heading through. There would have been about twenty of our squadron lined up there, and possibly later one or two more from our other squadrons joined us.

Due to our lack of full mobility we were stationed on the left of the line making it easier for us to pull out of our lines if it became necessary; we waited and waited, knowing that it would soon be dusk and the sudden darkness of night.

While we waited we wondered had they by-passed us and cut us off, if that were so there would be no way of escaping after nightfall. Or another thought was had brigade HQ made a mistake, a wrong map reference for instance?

Eventually they came into view in the distance, huge dark shapes silhouetted against the dying sun and growing larger as they lurched nearer. They were mostly German Mk IVs which carried a 75mm turret gun, more powerful than our own tiny 2-pounder; their range of penetration was also that much greater.

Our leader's order was to hold them off at all costs, and while they still approached our line, his further and final instruction was that we were to hold our fire until he gave the order, reserve our ammunition as that was all we had and there was no chance of being replenished. His last words before he did give the fire order were that we must all do our best right up to the last moment. Not altogether words of comfort.

I popped my head out quickly and observed for myself how the vicious black monsters still lumbered on, drawing ever nearer and showing menacingly against the slowly dying, multi-coloured evening sky and still we waited.

They could pierce our armour at over a mile whereas our range would be about half that. It seems now that it was reminiscent of those old sea battles which our navy fought against the French and Spanish, where they were usually outsized, outgunned and outnumbered. Of a quick estimate at the time I thought that there were between thirty and forty of them bearing down on us.

We didn't need to be reminded of our duty: it had been drummed into us often enough. Firstly that even if the tank was knocked out but there was still one crew member alive then the gun must be kept firing; it was during those times of waiting when those stomach butterflies began to flutter. Once the action had begun everyone was too busy, the time for thinking would have passed and all thought and effort went into the job in hand.

The Germans finally halted at a distance of only about seven hundred yards and around them infantry set up their machine guns. The odds overall did not appear to favour us. The order was then given "fire" and almost of an instant as if the enemy was waiting for us to begin firing they retaliated, and the noise of the bombardment was terrific. To say that all hell was let loose would be as good as any fitting description that I can think of.

We fired at a frenzied rate, I was loading shells as fast as Jock could fire them; from time to time I was forced to throw out the hot ejected shellcases which lay around our feet and when doing so found the noise deafening. The din from the standing shoot of two lines of opposed guns of over fifty tanks in that small confined area was so great.

Later, I saw that many of our tanks were alight, it had all happened so quickly. It is another of those scenes which has been imprinted in my memory. We ourselves were making an impact on the battle because twice our commander had shouted out when we had scored a hit and there was some satisfaction that we had cleared up some of the infantry with our Besa (machine gun).

How long the battle raged I have no idea, time then did not exist, so much was happening. It was very hot and tiring but there could be no letting up or that would have spelt the end for us. Suddenly there was a blinding flash and at the same time a tremendous thunderous clump - we had been hit.

I remember bright flashing lights and the blackness; it's not possible to say how long I may have been concussed but I would guess for only a matter of minutes. When I did gather my senses I found that there was no movement from my fellow crew. I baled out as we had been trained, anticipating that they had already jumped clear, but that was not so - they were still on board. Both the officer and gunner were slumped in the bottom of the chamber.

It was fortunate that our squadron leader had the foresight to order us to wear our webbing shoulder straps which acted as a harness and made it possible for me to pull them out and onto the rear of the tank. As I was doing so, machine guns opened up and forced me to keep my head down and to shield behind the turret.

I had not seen nor heard anything from the driver so I went cautiously round to the front, I saw him frantically waving and shouting, indicating that it was not possible for him to open his hatch. I tried it and found that it was so jammed that it needed something to use as a lever; until I could

find a tool he was trapped because there was no way out through the main chamber as the gun which was then pointing to the ground had blocked the opening. The whole of the superstructure was severely buckled, we had obviously received a hit from a high explosive shell.

While Brownie was still working away at his hatch lever I went to the rear to find a suitable tool from the toolbox but the two injured men were laid over it and I was reluctant to move them, for one or both of them were losing blood, and yet I needed some sort of tool urgently. I ran back round to the front where Brownie had made no progress and in desperation picked the nearest thing at hand and in doing so made one of the most stupid decisions, of the many that I have made, and that was that what I had picked up was a mis-fired shell which laid among the empty shell cases I had earlier thrown out.

With it I used the tip to prise under the small opening of the hatch and it worked, it was tight, but enough with him pushing and myself pulling for him to come clear, suffering as far as I was then aware only cuts and bruises.

The battle was still being fought with the one or two of our remaining vehicles giving a good account of themselves. While Brownie was trapped I'd had my back to the enemy and I feared that any moment they would pay attention to us and I would receive a spray of machine gun bullets in my back.

It was miraculous that the shell which had served as the desired tool had not exploded on handling but fate must have been on our side; if it had been otherwise the tank, Brownie and myself would have all been blown away. I didn't question Brownie about any possible injuries which he might have sustained, there wasn't time. Our immediate thought was to get out of the firing line as quickly as possible which was a risk in itself because it meant running across the open space of No Man's Land where the ambulance and fitters were and to try to get some help for our wounded.

As we sheltered behind our tank as an afterthought I asked Brownie if he thought that it would still run, he didn't hesitate, stopping just long enough for him to wedge his hatch open he squeezed back in and it started first time.

With a shout from him to jump on I was aboard and able to direct him. He was finding it hard to pull the tank around in as small a circle as possible without showing too much broadside; once round we made speed. Then we were hit again and the blast blew one of our injured men off, I then made another stupid mistake - I jumped off after him. Whatever I thought I might achieve by doing so, I don't know and because of my impulsive action there were then two of us out there with no protection whatsoever, and with night almost upon us with tanks on the move the thought of what could happen thankfully didn't cross my mind.

Our tank had sailed on oblivious to the fact that it would be two crew members short when it arrived at our lines; that tank of mine had then been hit four times.

After jumping off I crawled to the man on the ground and found him to be the officer and managed to pull him into a shallow depression in the sand which although not giving a great deal of protection at least we were not too visible. With his field glasses I surveyed the battlefield where there were many burnt and knocked-out tanks of both sides.

The officer was still alive but made no move nor uttered any sound; I decided that there was little that I could do until nightfall and even if I was able to help him along there was every chance that we would lose direction in the blackness, also it would be then when the German engineers would occupy the area to recover damaged vehicles, both ours and their own.

I dare not stand up and try and signal any of our troops, in any case we were to their rear and they were still fully engaged swapping shell for shell. It was more likely to draw fire from the enemy so there was little I could do then but wait, hope and lay low until some form of escape or relief presented itself.

However we had not long to wait before I heard the sound of tank tracks behind us, even with the

glasses I was not sure whether it was friend or foe but as he came in firing on the move I realised it was ours. I tried to draw his attention by standing up and waving but he still came on absorbed in the targets to his front, he drew level with us and I felt certain that not having seen me was going to pass me by.

I continued to wave but without response, then suddenly they changed direction and veered toward our position, very much to my relief. They helped to get the wounded man on board, I eagerly hauled myself onto the back, in doing so I had pulled onto the gun barrel to help me on forgetting that it had been firing and found that it was so hot that it took the skin off the palm of my hand.

We sped on our way to where the officer could be got away by ambulance, I saw him taken care of and went in search of Brownie. By strange coincidence it was 'Stormy' Rayner's tank which picked us up, on whose tank I first served, they had been out to the fitters for repairs.

There were several ambulances, the MO and his orderlies, and a couple of our out-of-action tanks. As I went round I made inquiries of Jock the gunner and was told that he was on one of the ambulances but I was not allowed to see him. I never found Brownie, I don't know where he went but my tank was there. I never saw him again.

On one of the out-of-action tanks beside my own there, laying on the side, were two headless bodies; on asking who they were I found that I knew them both very well; it was upsetting because only a few days previously we had worked and played together. We wouldn't do so again but at least they would suffer no more fear and pain of war.

I learnt that the Germans had surrounded us and even the wounded could not be got away; there was hope that a new armoured division would soon arrive and either relieve us or at least make it possible for the ambulances to break out because some men were in urgent need of surgery.

I found out that the officer's name who had commanded my tank during the battle was Mr Storey and that his neck was broken, and the same Orderly told me that Jock's chest and shoulder were badly damaged. I realised that there was a shell in the breach when we were hit and he must have taken the full force of the explosion.

I began to get feverish, my right arm felt bruised and heavy, some blood was showing through my shirt sleeve; I had it cleaned and dressed and there was just a small cut visible on the elbow and thought that it was nothing to be concerned about; unfortunately it turned out to be a whole lot more serious as I was soon to find out.

My throat was parched and I was badly in need of water, I'd had nothing other than a few dried biscuits for about six hours. As there was no water on my tank I asked Corporal Brookes if he could spare me some, his reply was "help yourself" and added "it's a white can" - at least, I thought he said white: I found it and took several deep long swallows straight from the can. It was only after I'd taken the can away from my lips that I realised that what I had been drinking was not water at all, but very thin gun oil, a greenish colour, and not much thicker than water. I was immediately violently sick and was so throughout the night, I was very tired but not able to sleep; altogether it had not been a good day.

At first light I was called on to make up a crew, apparently the Germans had retreated and we were to take part in the follow-up. I didn't feel too good and only partly aware of what was happening, everything seemed vague and hazy and my arm bothered me, but thought it was all due to lack of sleep. All I did was carried out automatically and I have little or no recollection of that day or any of the other days before we were relieved.

I remember being transported by truck and having a meal with 'B' echelon and seeing some of my old mates there, I remember arriving at Base depot in Cairo but not the hundreds of miles which it must have taken, and the day or so down through the desert before arriving there.

I had only the personal kit which I had salvaged from my old tank and someone loaned me part of a mess tin, but I don't remember going for a meal. We drew bedding, then paraded in order that the colonel could address us, by then I was in great pain and my arm swollen. I was seeing all around me as if in a mist and feeling faint, wishing his speech would soon end so that I could lay down before passing out.

Since the battle I'd not felt too well but when asked "how are you?" I had been able to say "Okay, thanks" but at that time I felt extremely ill with pain. While I was swaying on my feet the colonel was congratulating us on our performance in the recent campaign.

In the barrack room I got my bed down on the floor while others about me were preparing to go out on pass but seeing that I was not too well and had seen my swollen arm, they and I thought it would be better in the morning after a night's sleep. It was not thought necessary to call the MO, I must have had a temperature and the pain kept me awake; the arm was heavy and difficult to move and swollen from shoulder to fingertips; someone said afterwards that the fingers resembled a string of sausages.

I can only assume that the lads on returning saw my condition or the Orderly Officer, or whoever it might have been, because the next thing I remember was the blur of white coats and a pad of what I learned later to be ether was placed over my nose.

I found later that on arriving in hospital I was operated on immediately. On coming round afterwards I felt quite bright and alert; I was told that they had removed shrapnel from my elbow and that my bursa had been removed. I was not aware then that ether is commonly known as the 'laughing gas', or of its effects but the orderlies who carried me up the flights of stairs to the ward told me that everyone coming out of the theatre were happy and expected to sing; I took their word for it and willingly obliged, I don't know why, it's hardly my favourite song, but I burst out with *I belong to Glasgow.....*, that happened to be my choice and I lustily belted it out, continually being urged to sing it "louder, louder" until I reached the ward where I was greeted by handclaps, cheers and the shouted comments of about half-a-dozen Aussies just inside the door with "Good on yer, Cobber" and "Sing it, Bluey", all calling out until sister came along and called for quiet. I was settled in bed, whether from the anaesthetic or from the singing, I don't know, but I suffered from a terrible headache.

There was then a period of which I have no memory whatsoever and it wasn't until I found that I had been moved further up the ward that I was informed that the reason for the move was that I was then off the dangerously ill list, which accounted for about four days. The move saw me bedded next to another young 'tankie' from the 3rd Battalion. We had a lot to talk about and a lot in common, both being the same height and aged 22. We were favoured by the nurses and sister called us her 'little twins', that caused a lot of comment all round and many remarks from those rough tough Aussies, all in good spirit though because they respected tank men. We had shared many battlefields together.

Letter-writing became difficult, although I tried with my left hand I was not very successful so someone else wrote them for me. I didn't have any love letters to write so there was no cause for embarrassment.

When I was fit again I did the same for other poor unfortunates, many times I wrote to a man's wife or girlfriend while he dictated, sometimes I could even make a few suggestions. We had many laughs when compiling these letters; it was funny to have to write on the envelope one of the fashionable abbreviated codes such as SWALK, (sealed with a loving kiss) or GUTS (get up them stairs) there were lots of them but at the moment that's all that come to mind.

Life on the ward assumed a pattern, which of course is the way with hospitals. My dressing was attended to daily and patches of my hair had been cut away where a nurse probed away removing

tiny splinters of metal from my scalp. I had my leg pulled over the fact that my hair being quite long there were those round patches of skin about the size of a penny.

When I was on my feet I attended the eye department because it was feared my eyes were damaged but it was not too serious, small pieces of metal dust had caused some slight abrasions, and I was informed that I would eventually receive glasses.

Boys from the regiment came in to see me in small groups bringing me news of changes back with the regiment due to the losses we sustained in the last campaign, and the new intake of men. All of them wished me well and hoped for me soon to be back with the them; soldiers do not readily or easily dispense praise on another, but each and every time one of these groups called there was always something said which surprised me coming as it did from men that I knew, most of them hardened by war and reticent in the manner of soldiers, such things as “wonderful job you did, Dig”, or “what a good job you did” or just “well done, Dig”. I was very touched, but at the same time couldn't understand what caused them to express themselves in such a way.

Then, on one occasion, one of them said “we have come to tell you something, we've been told of your action - and it's good news, you have been put in for a Military Medal”. I don't know how I received the information, I suppose with some disbelief because it was certainly not any thought of mine that such a thing could happen to me. I knew that I had carried out my duties as well as I was capable. The praise and approval of my mates was ample recognition and something I treasured above any award, although at the same time I would be proud to be the recipient.

There were I am sure many others who fought at Sidi Rezegh, deserving and worthy of recognition. The battle itself unfortunately has found very little cover in the many writings of the historians of the Desert armoured war, but up to that time it was the biggest armoured battle of the war, one where two lines of tanks fought out to a finish.

I celebrated my 23rd birthday in hospital, the 63rd General, at Heliopolis, just outside Cairo. That was the day that the Japanese had bombed the American fleet in Pearl Harbor, destroying most of it and causing America to enter into the war. It was at that time that I was allowed to get up and I was able to assist in the kitchen, serving the special diet cases in the next ward to the yellow-faced men suffering from jaundice.

An old soldier of the Service Corps seemed to have control of the kitchen, he had been a patient earlier but although fit again appeared to be so settled in that he could be mistaken for one of the staff. He was performing an essential service there and I don't think he had any desire at all to be 'returned to unit' I enjoyed working with him and wondered whether he reigned there throughout the war.

When being much improved I was allowed out in the evening to the hospital cinema along with some of the other patients and one one occasion while there, without warning, I slumped down unconscious and was carried back to the ward. It was found that I had a blood clot so it was back to bed and the wound was reopened. It was quite a setback after recovering so well, however I was soon well again.

According to the news in my mail my photo and details of my wound were apparently published in the local newspapers, and the other news of the family was that brother Ern was in the Shetlands with the RAF and Arthur had arrived in India, and my parents assured me that they were well.

**M.M. FOR
NORTHAMPTON
SOLDIER**

**NORTHAMPTON MAN
WOUNDED**

Mr. and Mrs. W. Digby, of 4, Eastfield - road, Northampton, have received official news that their eldest son, Lance - Corporal Frederick William Digby, serving with the tanks overseas, is wounded.



L-Cpl. Digby.

Lance - Corpl. Digby, who joined up in October, 1939, has two brothers in the Forces. He was previously on the staff of the Midland Co-operative Laundries Association, Ltd.

**GALLANTRY IN
MIDDLE EAST**

A 23-YEAR-OLD Far Cotton man, one of three serving brothers has been awarded the Military Medal "in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East."



L-Corpl. Digby.

He is Lance-Corpl. Frederick William Digby, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. W. Digby, 4, Eastfield-road, and he is serving with the Royal Armoured Corps.

Called up with the "20's," in October, 1939, Lance-Corporal Digby served in France, was safely evacuated and went to the Middle East last year. He received his promotion shortly afterwards.

A "Chronicle and Echo" reporter was the first to tell his mother of the news, and her comment was: "That is good news. He has beaten his father—he got the D.C.M. in the last war."

Mr. Digby won his D.C.M. in the Dardanelles and the Belgian Croix de Guerre in France. He reached the rank of R.S.M. in the Machine-gun Corps.

The last time Mr. and Mrs. Digby heard of their son was a week last Monday, when they received a wire saying he was out of hospital, to which he was admitted on November 22 with an injury to his right elbow.

Before the war Lance-Corporal Digby was employed as a roundman by Midland Co-operative Laundries Association, Ltd., and was a keen swimmer and footballer.

Two younger brothers are serving as aircraftmen in the R.A.F.



R.S.M. Sgt. Major W. E. Digby
D.C.M.



Brother Arthur in India, 1942.



Brother Ern, 1941.

Chapter Six: Life with the Cavalry

About the second week of the New Year (1942) I was discharged from hospital and returned to the Base depot at Abbasia. The last time any of my mates from the regiment had visited me they told me that in all probability the regiment would be going to Burma, and I presumed that by then they would have sailed.

I had taken it for granted that as soon as I was fit I would naturally follow them, but once at the depot I found out differently. It appeared that I was to be posted to a regiment in Egypt, to join one whose ranks had been depleted during the last battles. Although I had no desire to go to Burma I was sad to lose my friends and I had a very great respect for the regiment. I considered that as the position was I must make the best of it, and if I had to fight anywhere then the desert was as tolerable as anywhere else.

If it had not been for that blood clot I might well have been on my way to Burma with my regiment. What had happened apparently was that there had been a purge on the hospitals to release anyone that it was possible to, anyone thought fit enough for the coming campaign. My arm was still bound up as it was not completely healed.

I kept my eye on the notice board to see if anything had come up for me, but a week passed and there was no posting but in the meantime I was involved in a little local excitement. I was recruited to make up the crew of a Bren gun carrier as part of small force which surrounded the palace of King Farouk because it was rumoured that he was making an attempt to flee to Italy. However, after a few hours the alert was called off and we were stood down. Apparently it was too late: the bird had flown.

I had a surprising meeting one evening when on my way alone to Scots Corner, after saluting an officer as he passed I heard him call me "Corporal," and turning saw that he was beckoning me. As I went back to him I was wondering was I in some way improperly dressed or was my salute not up to standard? Because some young Base officers were strict on that sort of thing. As I approached I noticed that his head and neck were bandaged, even then it did not register with me at first that it was my recent tank commander.

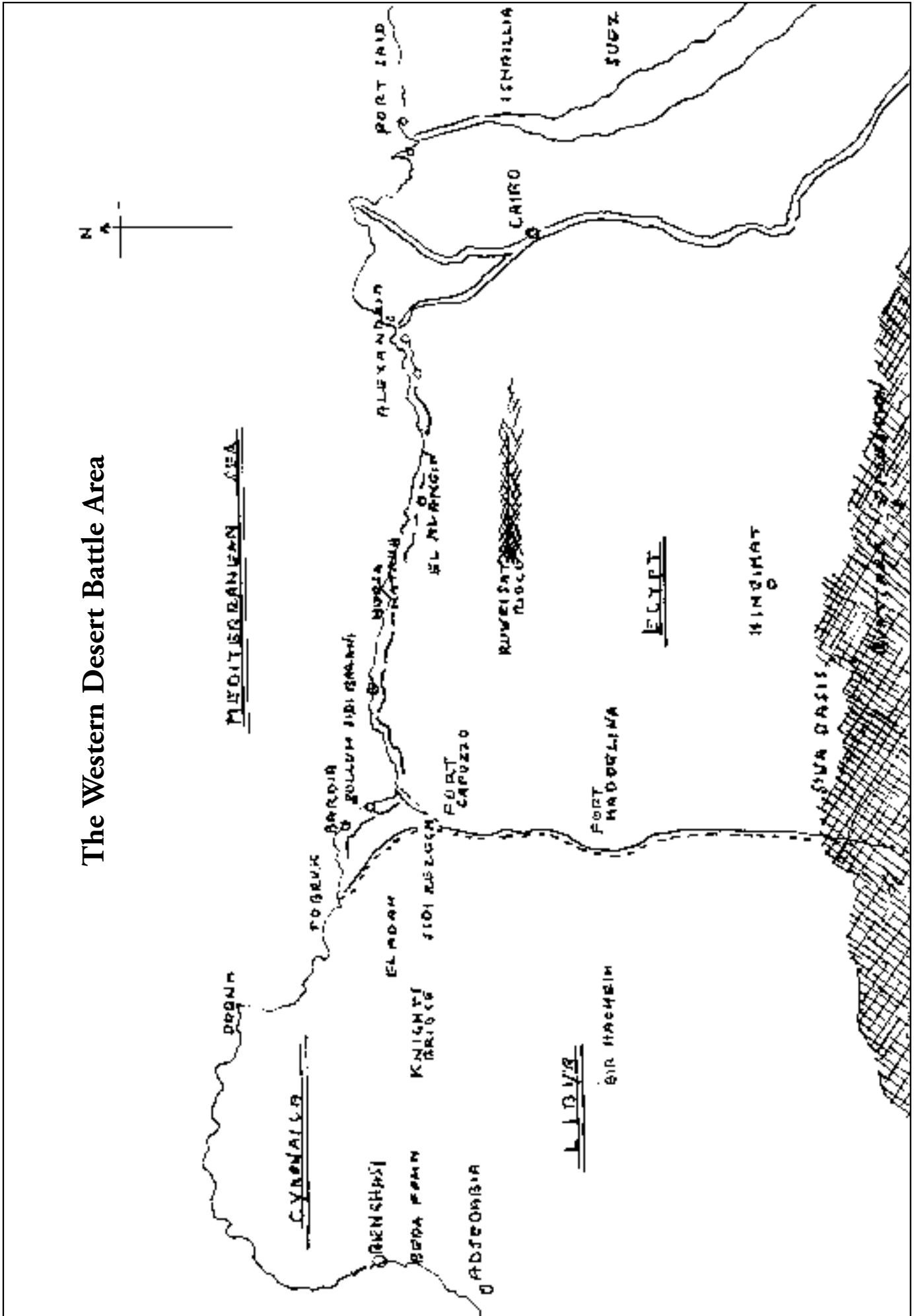
On coming closer I recognised him, it wasn't really until he spoke to me that I was certain that it was Lt Storey; my earlier disbelief was then dispelled and I believe that he was as surprised to see me as I him. We inquired of each other's progress. It was considered that he would make a complete recovery; his broken neck was the most cause for concern apparently as his other wounds had then healed. He was also waiting for a posting although in his case it would not be until he was fit.

During our conversation he remarked on what a good team we had made and that it was such a pity that it had to be broken up. He thanked me for saving the life of himself and the crew. Before he left me he wished me luck and added that wherever he was posted he would immediately put in a transfer for both of us to be drafted to our own regiment in Burma. If that failed he would put in for me to be posted with him and on that note we parted.

I reflected on what he had said and realised that there was only a remote possibility of being able to join my mates and the regiment, but I relished the thought. However if that did not happen then he would try and get me posted to him. It was not ingratitude on my part, in fact I rather appreciated the interest which he had shown in me but I knew that if I was to go along with him I would forever be just an operator-loader and not again have the opportunity to command my own tank.

As regards promotion also, that would be limited. I had assumed that I would automatically be made full Corporal because I had as a lance-Corporal commanded a tank in battle, if only for a few days. I had no wish to spend the remainder of the war down in the innards of one of those steel chariots and not to know what was happening all around. I would too prefer to control my own and the

The Western Desert Battle Area



crew's destiny as far as that was possible, I wanted to make the decisions.

There were some officers and NCOs who were out for glory, I had seen the evidence, and the results of some of those foolhardy adventures which should never have been undertaken. There was one sergeant for instance who openly boasted that he would win the VC before the war's end. In fact he had etched it out on his turret cover "Sgt.....VC". It was little wonder that his crew were always trying to transfer.

After careful consideration I decided to badger the Squadron office for a posting at the earliest possible moment; I guess they thought that "we're got a keen one here, just out of hospital and he wants to get at 'em again". That was not so at all, it was far from the reason, anyway it certainly advanced my posting because within two days I was on my way to a cavalry unit, the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars.

They had been in the Middle East for many years, certainly prior to the war, and had suffered a severe mauling in the last desert scrap. I was one of many of their new intake necessary to build up the regiment to full strength. They were camped at Beni Hussif, about four miles from the Pyramids and were waiting there for new tanks.

The driver set me down at the squadron office where I was greeted by Sergeant-Major 'Topper' Brown, MM, he informed me that with effect from that day I was promoted to full Corporal, and also that I had been 'Gazetted' and therefore entitled to wear a Military Medal ribbon on my parade dress.

It was all a little overwhelming with so much happening in such a short time; I felt that I had joined a regiment with which, although no replacement for the 2nd Tanks, I could adjust and make a contribution. The promotion then assured that I would again resume as tank commander.

My abode for what turned out to be almost a month was a tent in 'C' Squadron lines where I was accepted readily enough by those who were to be my new mates. Some of them had been abroad as long as the regiment, almost as dark-skinned as the natives. Each morning at Reveille when the 'char-wallah' shouted "char" and we dipped our mugs into his bucket, there before us stood one of those great world wonders, the Pyramids.

There were several other regiments in camp, not all armoured but all in various stages of re-equipping, ready for the next push which everyone agreed would begin in early May. Toward the end of February our new tanks arrived, American Grants, Shermans and Stuarts. 'C' Squadron was allocated the Stuarts ('Honeys') - a light tank with a 37-mm turret gun, little greater firepower than our previous 2-pounder.

The Grant and Sherman had a 75-mm gun; of the two the Sherman was most popular, the disadvantage of the Grant was that its gun was set so low down that the whole of the tank had to be exposed when required to fire, also it only had a traverse of 28°.

Overall the men agreed that the new vehicles were superior to any we had been equipped with previously, and about equal in firepower to what Rommel had at his disposal. Our approval and confidence however was somewhat shattered when the American technicians who delivered them and who were instructing us on them assured us that "...our boys wouldn't fight in those god-damned salmon tins" - that was their opinion. It was rather a set back but we still believed that they would do a job for us.

I suppose the camp held about a thousand troops in all and apart from the occasional Cairo pass there was little in the way of entertainment. There was a NAAFI and a cinema, the latter owned by an Egyptian. It was not at all reliable and broke down at regular intervals, we spent time looking at blank screens, or the film would be shown upside down; whatever the failure it was not possible to see a film through completely

The lapses in the programme when readjustments and repairs were carried out caused great choruses of boos and comments, and the longer the breakdown, so much greater was the uproar; as the shouting and noise increased it probably gave us more entertainment than the film which we expected to see would have done.

The medical officer dressed my wound and decided to arrange with the fitters to make me some form of protective cover for my arm, to guard against the bumps and bangs which are the lot of the tank men because however experienced a driver may have been it was inevitable that the sudden lurches would throw you against the steel interior; bruised and banged heads and bodies were a normal result. The cover turned out to be a covered sponge pad secured with metal straps, quite a work of art which I found very beneficial and continued to wear for a month or so until I was completely healed.

While in camp there I was able to witness how an Irish regiment celebrated St Patrick's Day: it began as a sports day, which of course included a football match and then a donkey polo game (no horses being available) drinking lasted all day, beer glasses were in such short supply that pint bottles with the necks cut off were in use; what amazed me was that there was an issue of shamrock, however that was acquired in wartime Egypt is hard to guess.

The battle line had settled in an area of a line from Gazala to Bir Hakim, and the Afrika Korps there had been building up supplies chiefly from the port of Benghazi, preparing for their next attempt to capture Egypt. So once again, two great armies were heading towards the onslaught.

When we returned to the desert we dug ourselves in on the southern sector of the line in the area of Bir Hakim, just south of us were the Free French Forces. The regiment had leaguered on a large expanse of salt flats, miles of gleaming white level concrete-hard surface. The glare of the May sun made the effect more intense and mirages of great lakes shimmered in the distance.

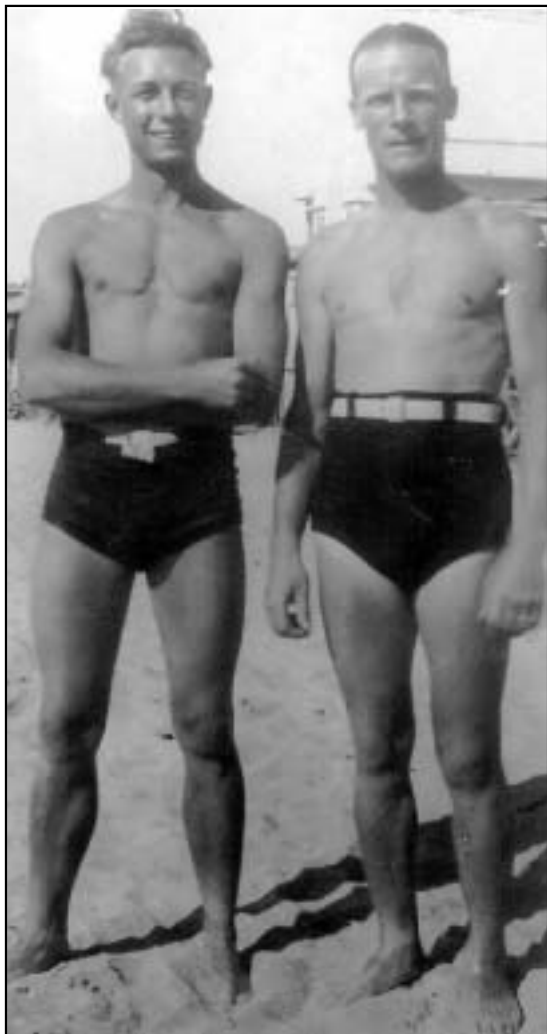
Into this surface we dug pits large enough to sink our tanks and when covered with camouflage netting were hopefully invisible from the enemy spotter planes. The front line was composed of a number of fortified 'boxes'; in front of us was a minefield and with the Indians patrolling our forward area we felt fairly secure from any surprise attack. In the meantime we finalised our preparations for the assault which we expected we would launch within a matter of a week or so.

We were so settled and content that a sports day was arranged and was thoroughly enjoyed; I played in a football match, but declined to put on the gloves; I was not yet ready to chance my arm as much as I would have liked to.

As it was thought that there was no immediate fear of an attack by Rommel, 'B' echelon were up with us and we therefore fed at the cook's lorry in a centre position of the squadron leaguer: in the case of my troop about a quarter of a mile distance; the morning of 2nd June 1942 was no different from any other morning as we sauntered over to partake of our breakfast of what we guessed would be porridge, tinned bacon and tea.

It was a beautiful morning as they usually are at that time of year; we chatted on our way, with at that moment no particular thoughts of war, when suddenly shells rained down upon us. In a second everything had changed, there was a general stampede, everyone making for their vehicles, and over the ridge and bearing down on us were a mass of panzers, firing as they came on.

Our first problem was to get the tank out of the pit. It wasn't easy because we had dug ourselves in so well. We did get out, pulling the nets behind us. There had been prizes given for the best camouflaged tank, and some of the Grants and Shermans which had dug themselves in so deep didn't get out and were shot up where they were. In our case, after the crew had leapt aboard our driver after repeated attempts managed to pull out and away and then, believing we were clear, received a hit in the rear. We baled out and as we ran it blew up. We, like many others, had no opportunity to fire a shot and taking a quick look back there was a sorry sight because it seemed that the majority



With the 2nd R.T.R. at Sidi Bish at the end of the Italian Campaign, 1941.

(Left) Myself and Batty after a swim.



Sgt. Major Tommy Atkins with Troop leaders in conference.



Troop leaders at the Officer's Mess tent. Major 'Shan' Hackett is in the peaked hat. High Point Himemat is in the background.



The American 'Honey' Tank with Troop Officers.

of the squadron tanks were already knocked out.

We had placed much hope in those new vehicles that were then ablaze or were a tangled mess; it was chaos all around where soft vehicles were trying to get out of range, myself and crew jumped aboard one of them and learnt that most of the others of 'B' echelon had been captured when elements of Rommel's 90th Light (infantry) had filtered round to the flank to take them in the rear. It was a full-scale attack and afterwards we learned that they had forced a gap in the minefield.

Every vehicle now as far as could be seen was moving in an easterly direction, although some sectors were able to hold on and put up a fierce fight. It was the prelude to a full-scale retreat. Our losses in armour were colossal and over 20,000 of our men had been taken prisoner; the breakthrough coming in the main in our position in the line put the whole of the army in peril, consequently there was a general dispersal.

Somehow we received word that Bardia was our reassembling point; elements of the regiment who, like ourselves, had become scattered before the rapid German advance, gradually came in. There were many different versions of what had happened, none of them too clear, but it was said that the Indians out on patrol during the night sent back messages to the effect that there were enemy troop movements, and again at first light but it appeared that for some reason they were ignored. Consequently we were caught totally unprepared.

There had been retreats in the past, as many as there had been advances, but none as thorough and disorderly as that one, but for all the disarray, and coupled with the swift advance of the Germans, at no time did any one of us think that it was possible for us to lose the war in the desert, but rather believed that we would get it right and end victorious.

There were lots of names bandied about to describe these dashes-back, such as the 'Gazala Stakes', the 'Benghazi Harriers', the 'Mersa Handicap' - one which was directed at us and our regiment was 'Rommel's Delivery Section', this was directed at us when joining our leave truck one night in Cairo, it caused a good old punch-up with some infantrymen.

We were not situated in Bardia itself but in the bay, this was surrounded by steep rocky cliffs which were littered with caves. We had not much in the way of arms but what we could muster was set up against the possible invasion by parachute forces. Whether as a punishment or not we thought that it could have been when we were forced to drill for an hour or so on the top of the bay in the sun which was at that time of year very hot and to say the least uncomfortable.

We grumbled among ourselves and considered that we were being held responsible for a serious mistake by someone of high rank and we were being made to suffer. It didn't do a lot to improve morale which was at a very low point anyway. Due to the unstable position of the army during that period the distribution of supplies was understandably disorganised, and our rations were down to a minimum, with little variation. What I drew for my crew was the inevitable tins of bully beef and biscuits, usually jam and sometimes sardines, and one water bottle each per day.

The advantage of being placed where we were was that we had access to the sea and the opportunity to bathe and rid ourselves of some of the sweat and grime of the desert. Everyone's hair was far beyond regulation length with little hope of having it cut; our barber hadn't turned up so we presumed that he must either be dead or captured. With the heat our matted lankey hair became uncomfortable and I thought before long someone would have to wield a pair of scissors and cut some off, however badly and whatever the result. I thought that I would do something about my own because it was becoming a problem and I devised what I thought was a brilliant way to ease it. It was when drawing rations one day that the remedy was there at hand: sardines in oil, and so decided to use the oil to smarm my hair down much as the airmen used their Brylcreem. I was sure that it would be the meantime solution. Having done so it gave some relief, at least I could keep my hair out of my eyes.



Replenishing the Shermans.



The Fitters.



Crusaders going into battle.



Members of 'B' Echelon.



A knocked out German Mark 3.

The scheme unfortunately had its drawbacks though, I had for one thing overlooked the fact that fish oil would attract the flies which were numerous, one of the scourges of desert life; it was a constant battle to be free of them so that it was not very long before they paid attention to my oily head, and everywhere I went swarms of the pests followed me.

When I visited the other outposts in the caves I took them with me and I became most unpopular. After my first visit men would only speak to me at a distance and when seeing me on my way they would shout to one another “hey up, Digger’s coming, bringing his bloody flies with him” or other less affectionate terms such as “bugger off, Digby”.

After a while and not being able to be free of them I decided to go into the sea and to remove the offending oil, but it wasn’t a remedy at all, because after a good soaking the hair became matted, set in one solid piece. I could shape it pyramid-fashion, flatten it out so as to resemble a mortar board, do anything with it apart from washing it out. Eventually I settled for someone with a pocket knife who brought about some relief by hacking chunks off.

We received orders that we were to assist in forming what were called ‘Jock Columns’; these were independent units made up of tanks, lorried infantry, artillery, signals - a real mixture of all sorts. Their object was to harass and hinder as much as possible Rommel’s headlong dash to Egypt.

Our method was to attack supply columns making quick sorties to attack and get out and to attack again, our priorities were the fuel and ammunition transport; often it was found that the German advance was further east than we were in retreat.

At no time were we pursued, we were shelled and machine-gunned. They were no doubt mindful of the distance at which their supply lines were stretched, and of the need to conserve what they had. As long as we continued to surprise them we got away with it and if we did hinder them a little we felt that it made our retreat appear a bit more dignified.

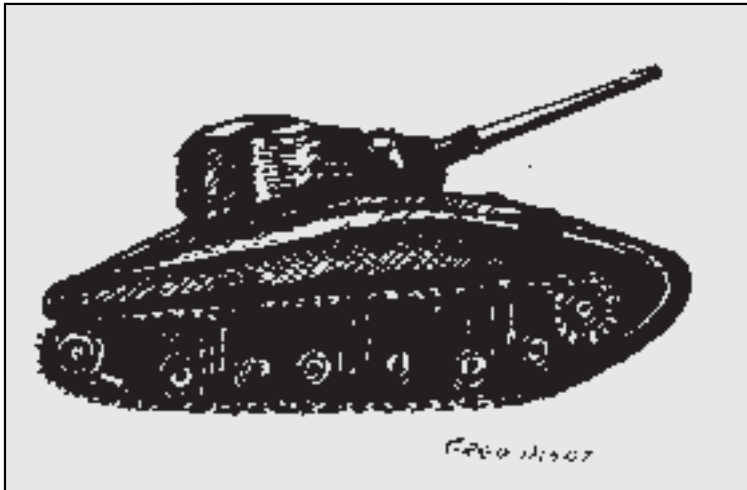
The greatest fear we had in these columns was the regular visits of dive bombers which brought back memories of the havoc which they caused in France in 1940. The difference then being that the desert has no hiding places such as ditches, woods or buildings, just a large expanse of nothingness. They came without warning but then as they dived the sirens screamed, they skimmed the tops of the vehicles as they came out of the sun. We got away as far as possible from any vehicle as time would allow and dropped down breathless, trying to find the smallest of depressions, or to scratch away some sand. Too bad if the ground was stony, even the smallest piece of scrub to lay behind helped to make you feel that little more secure, while trying to become invisible.

On the occasions that I lifted my head the cannon shells could be seen piercing the sand in a straight line always certain that they were heading for you, it seemed that they couldn’t miss. They came several times in a day and having learnt from our experiences of their tactics we lay where we were for a time as it was their habit to come round again and again. When we did rise it was with heaving chests and dry throats.

Then it would be a matter of checking our losses, there were always some casualties; when doing so on one occasion a truck carrying injured men was hit; they had travelled some days with us so to give them as much protection as possible some of them had managed to scramble out and lay under the vehicle but they were all hit as were most of those who stayed on board.

They were all in a terrible state, we did what little we could for them. How many of them lived it is difficult to guess; there were no Medics in the area, but shortly after leaving them we reported their position to some South Africans who promised to take care of them. We tank men were not very brave when outside our steel cases, but nor were we brave enough to stay in them when Stukas were about.

After a day or two of skirmishes my tank broke down, so it was put on tow by Corporal Wilson’s



The American Sherman Tank.



The monthly wash day!



Brewing up.



The Stuart Light Tank (Honey) and crew.



8th Hussar Officers.



M.O.'s lecture on sand flies and general hygiene.



A Desert burial.



A crew bailing out.



At Bardia after a swim in the Med. I am second right, front row.



crew, intending to get me to the workshops. When we arrived at the map reference which we had been given we found that they had moved out, going east as was the remainder of the army.

Another day on and still no sign of them, we decided that as my tank was impeding progress and also that it was heavy on our meagre fuel supply we should dispense with it. We had by that time lost contact with our 'Jock Column' and were completely on our own

There had been rumours of a prearranged defence line which was being set up in the Mersa Matruh area, we reasoned that to have any chance at all of reaching it my tank had to be ditched and we would travel with Corporal Wilson; as none of us had any desire to be taken prisoner speed was essential.

Having salvaged what kit we could and siphoned off the petrol, Corporal Wilson, who was my senior, carried out the duty of blowing up my tank and we all boarded his. We were by then lagging well behind the advancing Afrika Korps, so we set off, the eight of us, as fast as possible intending to use every minute of daylight. How far distant that suggested defence line might be we had no idea, we knew that we had the soft sands of the Depression to the south of us and the enemy to the north. Travelling was cramped and uncomfortable but we pushed on determinedly, hoping that the tank would keep running for us. There had to be strict control of our meagre rations. We all were grateful at the end of each day to be able to jump off and lay at the side of our conveyance for an hour or two of sleep.

Our nerves began to get frayed, and everyone's tempers easily flared; I myself was involved in an incident which concerned the division of rations. One big Geordie of Corporal Wilson's crew thought that he was entitled to more biscuits than the others which caused me to take it up with him, after shouting one another we came to blows and were belting each other until being separated. I normally would have avoided any entanglement with someone of his size but it had to be done; I'd made the point and it was settled.

Until then we had always been good mates, in fact he was one of the first men I met when I joined the regiment. I remember seeing him in the local pub at Great Missenden when we returned to England and were out on our first pass, he came over to me bought me a drink and asked in "do you remember our set-to?" Of course I remembered.

There came a point in our travels when we agreed to cautiously venture northwards because for two days we had not seen or heard any enemy activity, we had seen nothing of our own forces for a day or so.

Some miles further on we did see the outline of vehicles, on investigation they turned out to be British trucks and we wondered were they part of the rumoured 'defence line'. As it turned out they were part of a newly-arrived division from England. So it seemed that we had arrived.

We made our way through them, passing masses of dummy tanks on the way. As we continued northwards, and as we thought to the coast road, suddenly a group of huts and buildings could be seen and then some larger buildings, we had reached a small railhead. There was a notice nailed to a post which read 'Alamein'.

I hadn't heard of it before, it had no significance for us at that time nor did we think that from there in a few months time we would be involved in one of the greatest land battles of the war. The battle which cleared for all time the whole of the Axis forces in the Middle East and which gave the Allied forces and our people at home a long overdue and deserved victory, and perhaps the hinge on which the fortunes of war began to swing in our favour.

There was train in the siding with steam up and many allied troops of all sorts seemed to be boarding it, so we passed our clapped-out old tank over to some recovery people and made some enquiries concerning the train, and learned also from all the tales and rumours that our regiment was at the

Base depot and that the train was about to move off. The Egyptian driver was not going to hang about any longer than necessary so we jumped aboard.

On seeing men getting aboard loaded with tins of foodstuff our men found that there was a carriage opposite that was full of NAAFI stores, apparently abandoned by its Egyptian driver; we hastily plundered as much as we could carry. It couldn't have happened at a more appropriate moment, having lived on only a few biscuits for some days it was 'manna from heaven' indeed

All the troops, Indian, French, Kiwis, were taking advantage of the bounty. I had tinned bacon, tinned fruit and chocolate. While tucking in to our looted goodies the train pulled out with men hanging onto its outsides, it was all part of the disorganisation of the Desert Army of that time.

On the journey I inadvertently insulted an Indian soldier, I had opened my tin of bacon and offered some to him as he stood near, I ought to have thought, he being a being a Sikh, I had insulted his religion by offering him the meat of the pig. He almost ran to get away from me. If ever the train stopped anywhere near one of those stagnant pools of filthy muddy water those Sikhs jumped off, unbound their turbans, ducked their heads under, their long black hair hanging over their shoulders. After they had reboarded, the cattle would then return and resume their drinking of the same water.

The journey was quite slow with many halts on the way; on arriving at Abbassia we were driven to where the regiment was reforming at El-Hammam, just a few miles inside the desert where they were waiting to once more re-equip. While there I was ordered to report to a Cairo hospital to collect my glasses which were prescribed eighteen months previously. The reason they were so much overdue was that a ship containing medical supplies had been sunk by torpedo.

Once I had left the hospital I was free for the remainder of the day. I had a leisurely meal and a drink, walked around the shops, and generally took in the sights before making my way back to the pick-up area where I could get a truck to return me to the holding camp which I had left that morning. Most of the soldiers there were Indians and I inquired if that was the correct truck for my destination and the driver assured me that it was, by saying "tek hie sa" (excuse the spelling) which I assumed was 'yes'. I jumped aboard and the crowded truck with everyone standing, set off. After we had journeyed some miles I began to feel a little apprehensive because according to my reckoning we ought to have already reached the camp but still we travelled on. We eventually stopped and on looking around I knew instantly that I was not where I should have been but I was undecided in which direction to begin walking; I knew for certain that we had driven too far so reasoned that my direction should be east.

But north-east or south-east I had no idea; I was stranded with only Indians around me who were most friendly but spoke no English. There was one other though who looked lost and did speak just a little English; he said he was Senegales and it was he who pointed out the railway line to me, and I remembered that the line ran along the edge of the camp.

I checked the sky for the position of the Plough and we set off plodding the railways sleepers; after doing so for some miles we came to a sort of station, just a halt really, a branch line and a shed, and this gave me the assurance which I sought because I recognised the name of the halt and was then certain that I was on the correct course and estimated that I would still have to plod on another sixteen or so miles. How far my companion needed to go I am not sure.

What a relief when at last I saw the boundary wire of the camp. I looked out for sentries before I ducked under the wire and made my way to the tent which I had been allocated. No-one challenged me, so much for security but at the same time I felt grateful that it was so, otherwise I would have had some explaining to do.

I crept warily into the tent which was empty and slept for an hour, I attended roll-call and had breakfast as if I hadn't been away, no-one seemed to have missed me. Back at the unit I told no-one

of my story for fear of being ridiculed for making such an error.

At Hammam the squadron took delivery of Stuart tanks again and we were to work independent of the regiment and under command of our sister regiment the 4th Hussars. We took our place in the defensive line at the southern end on the edge of the Quattara Depression (the Great Salt Lake) and leaguered at the high point of Hemimat, which was used by the artillery observers. There we began daily patrols into the foothills of the Depression.

For this I found my glasses to be very beneficial, because our job often was just to stay and scan one particular given section, never deviating from that small area for hours at a stretch. The white glare of sun on sand was a considerable strain on the eyes. Rommel had halted his forces, possibly due to the supply problem of being so far from a port, and no doubt as we were building up for another clash.

Our patrol were exercised in pinpointing troop movements and gun positions, all that we observed had to be reported. A new General had arrived and General Alexander was in command of the Middle East. We had seen so many changes at the top that another one was no great surprise, although this one seemed to be capable of mustering enough men and material sufficient to make a substantial challenge to the Afrika Korps, or maybe to even completely finish off the desert war.

In the past we men thought that our commanders had always been pushed by Churchill to begin a campaign before we were sufficiently equipped. Consequently the ground gained was usually lost when we ran out of impetus, and the Germans counter-attacked, resulting in the loss of trained men and of armour.

The line we were operating from was known as the El Alamein line; little did I think that the area of those few huts where a few months before we boarded a train would eventually be marked as where one of the world's greatest battles was fought. The whole of the line was barely 20 miles long, a formidable defensive position bordered to the north by the sea, and at its southern end by the sea of sand; the latter only navigable by certain groups such as our Long Range Desert Group who used the oases at Siwa and Jalabud. It had been navigated during the inter-war years but very little of it remained passable.

In the evenings when not on patrol, a few of us would meet at the fitters' truck where George, one of my closest mates, worked with their team; they somehow had acquired an old wind-up gramophone so that we gathered round to hear some of the radio and filmstars of the time such as Bing Crosby, the Andrews sisters, the Mills Brothers, Ella Fitzgerald and to us, new boy, Frank Sinatra and of course to the accompaniment of a 'brew'. That was our evening's entertainment.

Those gatherings too were times when various subjects were discussed: anything ranging from our home lives, news from families at home and on the world war fronts. We considered our own position. Our hopes and fears, what of our chances of coming through it all, when would it end?

And we talked of our dreams of what we would do when it finally was over. Around us were new faces again, replacements for those lost comrades. To those of us still seeing it through (I was then in my fourth year) it seemed to be a process of elimination, so many of those lads I started with were no longer around.

In the last battle it was the operators who suffered mostly and so we openly contemplated whose turn it might be next time. There was nothing morbid about our discussions, for although we did consider our future seriously, a lot of it was light-hearted banter.

Our new squadron leader was Major 'Shan' Hackett; he was greatly respected both as a gentleman and because of his reputation in the field. He had served with raiding parties of the Long Range Desert Group. Later in the war at Arnhem, in that ill-fated parachute landing, he was seriously wounded. There he was sheltered by Dutch families who also assisted his eventual escape. He wrote a book as a tribute to them and depicting his exploit; 'Shan' became a general and appeared on

television as a war historian.

Life in the line was all haste and there was great urgency to build up strength of regiments and for the new ones to be brought into the line. There was an overwhelming amount of equipment such as we had never seen before. The area to our rear was littered with dummy vehicles, tanks and lorries, constructed of wood and canvas and very deceptive they appeared too.

To add to that deception we ourselves charged up and down our sector at first light and again at dusk, churning up as much dust as possible so as to appear that there were more vehicles than there actually were. Our drivers had a great time while doing those dashes.

Prime Minister Churchill came out to Egypt and into the desert where some officers went back to meet him as representatives of the regiment. A new general also came to visit us, General Montgomery, he inspected us while in leaguer. As we stood 'crews front' he stopped in front of each man and here and there asked "how long have you been out here?". The answers varied from a year to "five, six or seven, sir". His remark that he understood that "the first ten years are the worst" didn't go down too well with those who believed that they ought to have been considered for home leave. Overall, our first impression of him was not favourable; he was not as readily accepted as were our previous commanders which we had served under. Actually we had not really recovered from the removal of Wavell, who in the early stages of the desert campaigns was greatly respected and admired. After the Crusader battles of 1941 the whole of the desert army was known as the Eighth Army. Within it at the Alamein line our duties changed from that of static observation of the past few weeks to that of patrols, advancing cautiously into the hills of the Depression with the purpose of drawing enemy fire and then pinpointing their positions. By showing ourselves it meant that we were usually subjected to a rain of shells but were constantly told to 'push on'.

On one occasion when one tank had either been knocked out or had dropped out for some reason, we were instructed to 'keep moving' and that we could afford to lose no more than two more 'horses'. I hoped that mine was not to be one of them.

I had a mishap one day when through my own recklessness I and my crew thought that I'd had it.' I disobeyed orders and suffered the consequences for doing so; it was during a spell of inactivity and stationary in a defile in the hills with everything quiet when my sergeant waved me indicating that they had brewed up so I immediately set off with two mugs - a distance of a little over a hundred yards.

I collected the tea and was halfway back when shells crumped around me sending up a shower of dust and stones which made it difficult to find my direction. I felt a blow on my shoulder and as the dust cleared hurried and clambered aboard, still clutching the two mugs with a little left in them.

The crew really thought I'd been killed or badly injured and showed their concern; blood was seeping through my shirt but my biggest concern at that moment was the angry voice of the commander inquiring who the "bloody fool" was who had dismounted. So I had reason to believe that I would be on a 'charge'.

I had sustained a gash about two inches long but not very deep and the lads quickly stayed the bleeding; I decided not to report sick in order that no more questions would be asked, because nothing happened immediately. When reaching the leaguer it caused me to think that maybe it would be forgotten.

But it wasn't so, because Sergeant-Major Tommy Atkins warned me off, with a grin on his face which as good as said "You're in for it now"; I was to report to the leader. He gave me a good talking-to, reprimanded me for disobedience, that I made our presence in that place more obvious which could have put lives at risk, and resulted in the loss of machines.

After he had finished with me he told me to get my injury dressed and I was dismissed, I got off

reasonably lightly; I did suspect though that what I did enabled some enemy guns be pinpointed and helped make a successful day's observation. It gave the men something to talk about that evening; other crews who saw it all felt that I would not emerge from the cloud of dust in one piece.

The wadi in which we were leaguered was enclosed except to the east side so that we were well concealed, apart from the air, and it was a regular practice of mine to crawl to the top of the ridge behind us where I could observe any movement because I hadn't forgotten how, some months before, we had been taken by surprise when German tanks came over the hill.

I had seen German panzers a few miles west of us and once when doing so I called our new young troop officer to take a look at what I thought was an astounding sight. There appeared to be what I described as a large gun with a tank attached. He explained to me that they were an 88mm anti-aircraft gun which had been adapted for tank use. I called my crew to take a look, also we were to know a good deal more about them during the coming battles.

As we were feeding independently on our tanks I drew rations daily which were much the usual biscuits and bully, jam, margarine, sardines, tinned bacon, tea, sugar, Carnation tinned milk, but one new item had appeared that was the Soya Link sausage. Our rations of cigarettes were Victory V's. It was generally thought that they were made in India of camel dung and it was quite believable too. At no time was it possible to draw fruit or vegetables or bread; there was on an odd occasion the opportunity to buy certain luxuries from a NAAFI lorry such a toiletries and chocolate.

Once, when drawing rations, I noticed that there was a bag of flour no doubt destined for the cookhouse which I managed to scrounge a little of, enough I thought to make some pastry; I had it in mind to give the crew something for a change, making use of the sausages to make some sausage rolls.

I rolled the pastry out on the driver's flap of the tank, a spindle out of the toolbox became my rolling pin and the oven was a petrol tin dug into the hillside behind us. The baking tray too was cut out of a petrol can. While busy at this I heard the remark "what's Digger up to now?" but when they were cooked and served up even my men all agreed that they were acceptable, and coming from them it was praise indeed, they did add that the other two crews of the troop were envious of them..

In early August 1942 I was granted seven days' leave; it had been a very long time since I last had a leave and not having had a pay day a lot of money had accrued to me, resulting in a fairly large accumulation of back pay. Four of us went together and we decided that it would be Alex.

While sitting around the fitters' truck one night my mate George having then just returned from leave offered to loan me his khaki drill kit, slacks, shirt, shorts, stockings, trousers and shoes, as it would save me unnecessary spending and which in practical terms, as they were seldom used sharing them seemed to be a good suggestion. I accepted his thoughtful offer.

On the way down through the desert we changed trucks at changing posts and it was at that one of those changeovers that I failed to pick up one of my packs, and when I discovered my loss it was too late. That truck had already moved off. Worse still was the fact that the pack which I had left behind was the one containing George's kit.

It was not difficult to replace, he being similar in size and I had money, although the purchasing of the replacements would make a dent in what I had and certainly limit my spending, also I had to give up some of the first part of the leave to go shopping which was not altogether a favourite pastime of mine. However, it was done.

It was always a wonderful feeling when we were able to leisurely bathe, have a shave and haircut, and to rid ourselves of the sandy grime, to wear clean clothes, and to sleep in a sheeted bed. What luxury, what indulgence! We drank at the Fleet Club at the invitation of some of our sailors, also at the KIWI Club, where we found our New Zealand comrades to be good friends; while there it was our

privilege to hear the Maori choir sing *Now is the Hour*. In all it was a most enjoyable seven days.

When we returned to Hemiemet I explained to George what had happened, he understood and we had a laugh over it. Shan put us in the picture as to our future role in the coming offensive. What he had to tell us gave us a feeling of confidence in that it was we who would take the initiative with the massive build-up of strength it made us superior to the Afrika Korps for the first time.

It was anticipated that the coming battle would be the greatest of the war up to that time; 'Monty' had predicted that it would be the last battle. We would clear all Axis forces from the Middle East for all time; he said that we would "knock them for Six".

Desert sores were then the prevailing problem, most of us suffered from them somewhere or other on the body, and when we stood 'crews front' for one of Shan's frequent inspections he showed concern for our plight. The MO treated them with a purple dye; we must have made a colourful sight resembling more a painted jungle tribe than British soldiers.

Apart from this ulcerous condition we were lean, bronzed and otherwise fit. Probably some fruit and vegetables in our diet at times might have staved it off. They formed whenever a graze or punctured skin was exposed to the germ-carrying sand and flies, and festered.

As our dress was minimal, most of our bodies were vulnerable, my sores were on my neck and legs, particularly the ankles. It became a cause for concern that dressed as we were and with the possibility of becoming a prisoner of war and being transported to a country with a somewhat cooler climate, we would be at a disadvantage; yet it was too hot and uncomfortable to dress against such a possibility; it being about the hottest part of the year we wore shorts, socks and canvas shoes and accepted the risk.

The feeling around the men and officers was that any day we would be embroiled in another campaign and then one evening commanders were called to the CO's conference and briefed on plans and intentions regarding the part which the squadron was to play in the early stages, and I came away feeling that for the first time I fully understood our aims and the methods which were to be employed.

Shan made everything so plain and simple and down to the last individual each knew what was expected of him, whereas in the past the crews knew little of the intentions but just obeyed the given order. On that occasion when we informed them of what Shan had imparted to us I am sure that it gave them a feeling of involvement and complete awareness of what we were asked to accomplish.

Late on the next night (August 30th, 1942) patrols out to our front reported that the enemy were lifting mines and that a large force was on the move. It was a clear bright morning when at first light we were ordered to deploy to the Ruweisat ridge to our north to a position in front of the minefield.

The reported 'large force' failed to put in an appearance and there we sat and waited until about mid-day when the sun was at its height and inside the tank it was furnace-hot and its outer shell seared the skin of any exposed part of the body which happened to make contact with it. The glare from the whiteness of the sand caused eyes to ache and water as the waves of heat gleamed before us.

Then, after waiting so many hours, they were coming towards us and it was without doubt a large force. There must have been about twenty or thirty Mk IIIs and IVs lumbering on: they came, ugly black shapes with the sun behind them. Our orders were to let them come on, to exchange fire with them and to steadily retreat, to stop and fire again, and again retreat drawing them ever nearer the minefield to our rear where were the dug-in 25-pounders of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery.

As we moved forward I was pushed onto the extreme left of the line which took me to the edge of the escarpment and as we were on 'wireless silence' I was continually being flagged to move even further out to my left where I could see infantry setting up their machine guns, which brought me to action on two fronts - the oncoming tanks and also the guns.

He was forcing me into a position in which I would find it difficult to extricate myself. He had been my troop sergeant for only a few weeks but I was well aware of his reputation. He was known for the manner in which he would push others into situations which he would not enter into himself and on this occasion I believe he was using me for his own protection.

He was not liked by his fellow NCOs, his crew were not happy to serve with him and I certainly didn't trust him. He was the man who had boasted that he was out to win a VC. I intended to do my duty, to adhere to the battle plan, but I would not help him achieve it.

Our firing disrupted the endeavours of the machine gunners and we were then able to give full attention to the main targets. The oncoming tanks were those of the 21st Panzer division, old foes of ours; we caused them to halt with our fire and we repeatedly fired and retreated, reversing our way until our backs were almost up against the boundary wire of the minefield. Slowly, as we reached it, the first of our tanks turned and sped through the gap already cut, and we were almost halted waiting our turn to pass through.

The shells began to fall heavily around us. I was among the last to go through due to being pushed out on to flank so that when I turned to go through the dust churned up by the previous entrants had obscured the exit so that neither myself nor my driver could find the opening and to do so drove up and down the length of it several times before we eventually made it after what seemed ages.

By then it was getting a little too hot for comfort because the enemy tanks drew nearer and the shelling quite close, however we made a swift exit through with still a few behind me having the same difficulty. I believe we completed what we set out to do without as far as I knew any dead or serious casualties.

As the panzers then fastly approached the limits of the minefield they rained shells down on us but still the artillery held their fire and let them further advance, then with a terrific barrage caused havoc among them, palls of black smoke began to billow all over the front from those who had been hit. Others were hurriedly turning about leaving a battlefield of destruction.

It came as a complete surprise to all of us that within a day or so we learned that we were to be relieved, and we handed over our tanks to another regiment. Being really delighted to be out of it for a while although kept in reserve for the possibility that if needed we were there available. It was the general opinion that the action in which we had then been engaged was the prelude to the great battle - the battle of El Alamein.

Footnote:

Division and the 4th Light Armoured Brigade were to delay the main encircling movement.

They were not to run their heads against his [Rommel's] armour but to withdraw, let his tanks through and then concentrate on destroying the motor transport which would be following up.

Entrenched infantry and gunners would meanwhile take the make weight of his armoured attack, and the rest of the British armour occupying favourable hull-down positions would operate as mobile artillery.

Chapter Seven: Farewell to the Desert

The battle began with a terrific barrage which lit the sky and shook the earth, the prelude to the long march to push the enemy out of Africa. It was as Prime Minister Churchill said “...not just the end of the beginning but the beginning of the end”

We in our situation having recently been relieved, the usual rumours began their rounds. There were those who thought that they knew; they had heard it from someone who was in the ‘know’, that it was ‘definite’; 7th Armoured division was going home.

So many times had we heard it before and yet at that time I myself thought that it might possibly be true, it was not to be though. We had fought our last desert battle but our destination was Sidi Bish, Alexandria where I had been with the 2nd Tanks in 1941. I wondered where those lads were who were my comrades then; ‘Batty’, ‘Chesty’, ‘Stormy’, ‘Vini’ and the others - were they in the jungle? How many of those lads who set out from Liverpool were still alive?

The tented camp there at Sidi Bish was only a stopover, a temporary base obviously, so that once again we contemplated what they would do with us. Having heard of a ‘Second Front’, ‘Blighty’ did seem to be a reasonable possibility, maybe we would be needed there. Then we thought that we might be used in Italy - it was all conjecture and as always it was a matter of wait-and-see.

In the meantime we were able to enjoy a shower to get ourselves cleaned up and to appreciate our improved diet, with the welcome addition of bread. Our desert sores were attended to, the healing treatment was not very pleasant but it proved to be a sure cure and in a very short time.

A black orderly cleaned away the tops of each ulcer with a soap-laden toothbrush, dabbed them dry with cotton wool and then pressed a lint pad soaked in peroxide on them. It was only a matter of days before the sores began to heal and new skin appeared.

There were lots of parades and sports, also reinforcements arrived to fill the gaps in the strength of the regiment. One special parade was called, where everyone whoever they were - no-one was excused, clerks, cooks, fitters, batmen, mess staff, all attended and formed up into a square. The exercise was to reallocate among the squadrons, each as his name was called would march to his newly-designated squadron.

I didn’t have to move, but I lost a lot of mates who I had been with for over nine months; I also had to settle with a new crew and almost a completely new troop. The reason for such drastic changes and so much upheaval was never made clear to us but we suspected that it had something to do with the poor showing of the regiment in the previous May at Bir Hakeim. If that was the reason then it appeared that the rank-and-file were the culprits and were required to take blame for the decision-makers, if indeed there was anyone to blame.

The RSM took all of us junior NCOs away into the hills beyond the camp where we could shout words of command at one another. He would from a distance have us shout such orders as “Quick March, Order Arms, About Turn” - dozens of others, for about one and a half hours or when he decided that each individual’s standard was to his satisfaction.

One duty that I was called on to carry out and which was new to me was when I was detailed to be a member of a Guard of Honour for a lad who died while in camp, the RSM drilled us for that. A very respectful drill, carried out as in peacetime with an armed guard to fire a volley over the grave. That lad at least was given a burial more fitting than some of those men who copped it in the desert.

During one of those dashes back in retreat our squadron office went missing, whether captured, blown up, or whatever, the result was that all of our records went missing with it which meant that

the record of pay of each individual had gone. It was a difficult situation and a problem which had to be solved.

There were those men who for months had drawn no pay while there were others who had no credits at all. The outcome of it was that the whole of the amount was divided equally giving each individual an average payment, taking into account one's rank. It was probably the fairest decision although it did hit those thifty men who possibly had forgone a leave in order to save cash, on the other hand there were probably those who gained by it. Nothing changes very much, some you win and there are other times.

When off duty there were passes to Alex. but the frequency in which we were able to take advantage of them was governed by the amount of cash which we could draw on pay parade. With that in mind Dave, George and myself devised a way in which we could sample some of the culinary delights offered there without spending what little cash we had. We chose the best restaurants, those where we had dined when on leave, usually around Mohammed Ali Square; what we intended to do was to order a meal and drinks and after having eaten leave one at a time and jump on the nearby tram at a distance of about a hundred yards away, leaving just one of us to pick up the bill and pay if he couldn't also leave.

Choosing a table near to a door we ordered drinks, making sure that our berets were on show, either on a chair or the table, and ordered from the immense choice of dishes available; we ate leisurely and ordered more drinks. We tipped the waiter early during the meal which discouraged him from hanging around then, when our appetites were appeased, first one would leave followed by the other, leaving behind a part of their drink and their berets with only one of us remaining. After an interval he gathered up all three berets and himself made for the tram. At the time when we carried out these ventures we always made certain that the dining room was at its busiest so that not too much attention was paid us.

It was always a relief though when reaching the camp to find the others waiting there because there were patrols of Redcaps in Alex. and to be seen minus headgear was to invite trouble, certainly in the form of a charge of being 'improperly dressed'. It was not possible either to pass through our Guard Room where our own Regimental Police would be on the alert. We avoided being caught for about half-a-dozen times but thought that we ought not to push our luck too far; if ever our cap badges had been recognised when at one of those restaurants and traced to the regiment there is no doubt we would have been severely punished by the CO for bringing disgrace to the regiment.

One night Dave was almost caught, when being 'last man' and about to leave, found his way through the door blocked by an Egyptian waiter; fortunately for him and for us there was an open window which he dived through. To the lads in camp it was quite amusing and they applauded us on getting a little of our own back because we knew that we were always overcharged, and in some cases especially the new men, they were fleeced.

Most of the men in the squadron having heard of those winings and dinings were keen to know where and how we fed, making their mouths water when we explained and described all the dishes. They were pleased to know that there had been some recompense for the way we had been cheated in the past especially as many of the population were hostile to us, and among them were Nazi sympathisers for certain.

After those wonderful feasts it was back to Army rations which including a new addition, new to us anyway, they were the Yams (sweet potatoes). Piles of mail arrived, months old of course, some dated early June, it then being September. There were letters from friends and relatives and lots of newspapers but among the letters there was one which although I was not aware of it then, was to change my life, it was from the girl I was friendly with who worked at the laundry office and who I hadn't seen or heard of since I left home three years before.

She apparently had seen my name on the Works notice board and details concerning myself which she had read in the local newspaper. She had written and visited my parents who encouraged her to write to me. It was quite a 'newsy' letter telling me of boys and girls who I had known and about life at home. She had joined the Land Army. Her own engagement had broken off as mine had. I was pleased to reply to her and that first exchange of letters was the beginning of a further four years of correspondence.

Our quartermaster was not a well-liked man, although in the past I had managed to avoid his disagreeable manner I should have expected that by the law of averages it was bound to happen and it did; he put me on a charge of Negligence. I was fully aware that I had broken the rules, I was definitely guilty but if he had admonished me the result would have been the same - I would have learned my lesson. But he didn't work that way, it seemed that it had to be the Charge Sheet.

It came about one morning when the whole troop was almost late on parade; we all had to scurry to make it on time, consequently between myself and the lance-corporal we failed to secure the chains holding the rifles to the centre tent-pole and the quartermaster had made the point of coming round and checking.

We were all aware of what a necessary precaution it was as a safety measure against the local arabs who were always on the look-out for an opportunity to steal them. Normally I relied on the lance-corporal to see that it was done and I would then check. Anyway, being senior, I was at fault and had to take the blame, that was fair enough, hence the charge was made.

Sergeant-Major Atkins marched me in before the squadron leader who gave me a severe lecture on my misdemeanour with particular regard to safety, and was marched out to begin seven days 'confined to camp'. No great hardship really, I felt that I had been treated leniently.

The camp in the evenings was quiet with hardly anyone about with the exception of the Duty men, and one or two in the NAAFI. I felt that I would be in for a week of lonely evenings, I was surprised therefore when after pay parade Sergeant-Major Atkins said "Get yourself ready, stay in your tent, "I'll pick you up", and he did just that.

He backed a 15-cwt truck up to the tent flaps and unseen by anyone I jumped in the back. He took me to a Warrant Officers' club in Alex. where we had a meal and a quiet drink of a few brandies; he took me again once more during the week. When he referred to my being charged he considered that I ought to have been given a warning, he thought that might have been sufficient.

It was obvious that he had little respect for the Quartermaster; Tommy, a regular soldier was known for his easy-going manner, for his fairness and his judgement; his calmness and awareness of situations in the field was well appreciated.

I found him to be good, enjoyable company, I knew that he had put me in for a sergeant's stripe on several occasions; in taking me out of camp he took a considerable risk because there was every chance that we would be seen in Alex, or I might have been missed in camp. He had in fact been assisting me in disobeying an order, the consequences of which if caught out could have been severe. Apart from any other punishment he could have lost his rank at least.

There had been an old 'unfit for service' football thrown out with the waste from the stores, and I fished it out. The case was in need of sewing and the inner tube wanted a patch or two, but with the help of the fitters I was able to make it usable. That ball stood up to a terrible amount of punishment while it lasted, it was first used in the soft sand at Hemeimat, before Alamein.

At Sidi Bish we belted it about between the lines of tents; whenever there was an occasion to do so someone would be bound to call "Put the ball down, Dig" then there would be a mad rush of Army boots kicking up sand in all directions resulting in many bruised ankles. Whenever we were on the march that ball was either packed flat in my pack or it was tied to my backpack, then it was used



8th Hussar's Corporals George Gilgrass and me.



George Gilgrass.



Dave and Mick.



*(Left)
Jock McLeod.*

*(Right) In
Cairo with
school mate
Doug Driver.*



whenever it was “fall out for a smoke” time until it was “pick up your kits”.

The news from the desert was that the battle was proceeding well and the Afrika Korps was on the run; part of our regiment was still with them, once again we heard that a move was imminent, the rumours were once more rife. The one most passed-on was that the Desert Rats were no longer needed in the Middle East and were going home to fight in Europe.

It seemed the most feasible of all the many stories doing the rounds, but wrong again. We were definitely not homeward bound, not yet anyway, and that was assumed to be official because it came from what was known to be a reliable source - a squadron clerk who was reckoned to be the first with any news.

So it became time again for speculation as to where the next move would take us, Italy was always a thought and there was the possibility of a posting to the Far East where Singapore had fallen and the Japs had advanced into Burma. Several other suggestions were discussed but all were well wide of the mark, because no-one had foreseen that our destination would be Syria.

Apparently the Vichy French there were being troublesome and threatening. Although we were minus tanks we were to sort of ‘show the Flag’; it was a lengthy train journey and we were based in a tented camp in Beirut where we marched from the station, once there there were many parades and lots of ‘bull’; smartness of dress and bearing was essential.

We carried out numerous route marches in order to let the dissidents know that the Desert Rats had arrived. After a few weeks the problem became less serious and seemed to be resolved, for the time being anyway. So it was ‘pick up your kits’ time again.

No-one had a clue, no-one came up with the intended destination, but a long dusty train ride deposited us at Port Said, on the same dockside where we had disembarked in September 1940. We were based in another tented camp where it was thought we must be waiting for a ship and more thoughts of home.

In camp there were the normal duties, guards, pickets and cookhouse, but during the day most of the men were on duty at the docks, unloading ships. After they had been so employed for a day or two at this work I began to wonder why my troop should all be volunteering to do it without waiting to be detailed for it. Knowing them as I did I guessed that there was something not quite as it should be, there was something suspicious in their behaviour. It was all revealed one evening when I found several bottles of wine inside my blankets.

It was then that I learned that there had been a cargo which included a consignment of altar wine destined to be supplied to padres and clergy throughout the Middle East. I supposed I had been bribed although I found it quite palatable. It began to get out of hand and a bit worrying, when they came back worse for the drink, singing and as merry as if they had been in a bar all night.

I feared someone would take notice, and if what they had been doing came to light there would be some punishment meted out, I also would be involved. I warned them to take more care, to take it easy. It appeared that they did heed my warning because it went unnoticed, maybe they had had their fill, I don’t know but there was no further problem.

Our Christmas was spent there at Port Said and we sat down to a traditional Christmas dinner served by the officers. The last time I had eaten Christmas dinner was at home in 1938, five years earlier.

In the New Year for about two weeks we were left to fill in our time as we wished and were told that we were to board a ship to Cyprus, where we were to train and accustom ourselves to the fighting conditions similar to those we were likely to find in Europe.

The period prior to sailing offered a good opportunity for letter writing and to reflect now that we were saying good-bye to the Western Desert, on that land which had been our home for the past



With my Troop on a night scheme in Cyprus.



Cap badge, Royal Tank Regiment.



Cap badge, 8th Kings Royal Irish Hussars.



Divisional sign of the 7th Armoured Division.

two and a half years. There were many things which I would miss and there were other things which I would gladly miss, of the latter there would be the dusty, stifling sandstorms, the disease-carrying flies and what a relief to find it possible to eat a meal without a film of sand settling on it, causing you to feel the grit grating on the teeth.

Those things apart, there were others of a more pleasurable nature, among them the freedom from dress restrictions, where a pair of shorts and canvas shoes were all that was necessary, where any clothing could be quickly washed in petrol laid out on a thorn bush to dry and wearable in ten minutes, crisp and bleached as white as any of mother's washing.

As far as I was concerned the weather was ideal, even at its hottest I found it acceptable. Many men yearned for the climate of home, longing for the ice and snows of winter, even the unpredictable summers. There, too, were those 'pea souper' fogs to contend with; I could remember the nights when people were reluctant to venture out because it was difficult to breathe that heavy air. As much as I wished to be home I much preferred the land of the sun.

I would remember, too, when coming off guard the cool greyness of the mornings which quickly gave way to the sun's heat, when in spite of thousands of vehicles revving up prior to the day's action the air seemed clean and pure to breathe; that was particularly so in Springtime when the desert roses, the tiny flowers of the thorn bush shone their dewy brightness to colour the sand.

The evening skies I would especially miss for their unforgettable painter's palette colours before the darkness of night descended. In the darkness, when on sentry duty, men would count the paces away from the vehicles so as not to venture away and wander off into that eerie still blackness of the desolate and featureless landscape.

So many memories in a land where such terrible scenes have been witnessed of carnage, death, and destruction, which due to the time that I was born caused me to be involved with; totally involved in the killing and destroying, for which those of my generation were taught and trained to do - to kill or be killed.

Then after leaving the desert we had been given to understand that we would be transported to take part in a war in a different type of battlefield, one to be fought over the fields, villages, towns and cities of Europe, so different from the desert where we were able to assess at a distance, much like ships at sea; there was no fear of what waited around the corner or behind a hedge or haystack.

It all caused me to wonder why I should have to be part of this abnormality: it was not the sort of life surely that any young man should be forced to endure. We ought to have been able to be free, to do all those things which men of other generations had been permitted to do. Probably it is better if one does not have the time to ponder and reflect but just to 'soldier on' because 'ours is not to wonder why'.

About the time that we were withdrawn from the desert, the Americans with an Allied force under General Eisenhower (the First Army) had landed in North Africa.

News arriving from home told us that the Germans had made a massive assault on Stalingrad and the American Air Force in Britain had taken part in their first heavy bombing raid over Germany; also, there had been a daring but unsuccessful raid on the coast of France at Dieppe.

In the New Year (1943) we boarded the long-awaited ship which taking into account its size was not intended for a long sea voyage. It certainly wasn't capable of transporting us home. It did however carry us to where we disembarked, at Limassol in Cyprus. The village of Kondia became our base.

The billets were whitewashed farm buildings, minus windows and doors, we very soon began to feel the cold. It was more comfortable after hanging blankets over the openings. The football field became our barrack square, devoid of all grass, due no doubt to the many hundreds of feet which

had marched and stamped there in the past. Our vehicles were ancient Mohammed Harrington armoured cars as it was intended to train us to fulfil a reconnaissance role for the future; also while on the island we strengthened the garrison there, because there had been and there still was a chance that parachutists could put in an appearance.

Training tactics were entirely different; we needed to accustom ourselves to working in built-up populated areas, close-wooded country, with hedges and fields. There would be street to street and building to building fighting. There were schemes carried out across the island and map-reading was an essential part. At the same time there was loads of 'bull'. Full Dress Adjutant's parades, parades for visiting brass hats, kit inspections, vehicle inspections and the inevitable route marches. The vehicle inspections were ludicrous, we gave them the spit-and-polish treatment after which they looked sparkling new, but only about a third of them were runners, relics of the first war and of many years' service in the Middle East in the inter-war years.

There came the day of an extra-special inspection for the benefit of some high-ranking officer, and our cars looked resplendent as they were lined up on a grassy field with their polished front wheels touching a white line and us crew members standing in line at their fronts, waiting for ourselves and the machines to be inspected. I wasn't the only one on parade who was disgusted with the amount of effort which we had put in for the show to make the vehicles appear roadworthy when clearly about a third of them were not and many of them had to be towed into position.

Although all around grumbled about the farcical exhibition, I was the only one who was misguided enough to show my resentment by refusing to whiten my equipment; I should have known from experience that you cannot beat the Army and that ultimately I would be the loser and suffer the consequences. When the inspecting party stood before me the RSM told me that I was to report to him after the parade, which I did.

He didn't hesitate to tell me what he thought of me in quite plain Army language, so there was no mistaking his order to get my 'filthy something' kit cleaned double-quick and to report to him with it. I had never actually been what could be said to be the 'apple of his eye', far from it, and I knew that he had blocked my promotion on more than one occasion; then the present action had worsened matters and his opinion of me was as low as could be.

Unfortunately for me the cleaning of the kit was by no means the end of the affair, for while scrubbing away at the ablutions I managed to get myself further involved. It was my intention to make a good quick job of the cleaning so as to create a favourable impression with the hope that by doing so I might avoid being put on a charge, but obviously it wasn't my day because alongside me having a wash day was a trooper who had just come off sick parade where he had been due to partial loss of hearing.

He asked what I was doing and I told him that the RSM (and I described him in a most offensive, derogatory manner) had told me to get "cleaned up". Unfortunately for me, the trooper being hard of hearing, I had to repeat it which meant that then I had to raise my voice and while doing so the man in question came round the corner of the hut.

I thought for sure that he would have heard every word including the defamatory words I had used to describe him. He came and stood close, towering above me and proceeded to give me a further lecture, a real dressing-down using the ripest of language.

He informed that he was giving me my last chance and if there should be any more trouble from me "your feet won't touch"; evidently he hadn't heard all I had said about him for which I was most grateful; if he had then I think I might have been put away for a long time.

My kit passed inspection and without further comment, but a few days later I thought that I knew why no more had been said because names had been put in for promotion, mine among them and

as I might have expected, it was rejected. Sergeant-Major Atkins told me his recommendation for my third stripe had once again been refused by the RSM, and he intended to turn down any further applications on my behalf until such time that I had smartened myself up and that I would never be permitted to enter the Sergeants' Mess until it was evident that there was an improvement in my attitude. My refusals for promotion were a well-known event and I had my leg pulled after each refusal and men would shout to me "Beecher's Brook" because I had been 'jumped again'.

The padre had reformed the regimental choir and I joined, we used the Greek Orthodox church in the village for our practices and the Sunday Service. We performed at concerts too when we sang pieces of music such as *Jerusalem* and *Ave Maria*.

There was plenty of opportunity for sport; Football, Cross-Country running, Boxing, and other sports too, but they were the ones which interested me. Those taking part in all or any of those activities excused them from many parades and drills.

Boxing was my first choice, although due to my arm I had not been able to box even on the rare occasions when it had been possible. I was keen to try it out. It hadn't been a problem, so I joined the boxing team. It was under the guidance of a captain who it was said had been a University Heavyweight champion, he took an interest in me and at times gave me individual instruction.

I rigged a punch bag up on a tree about half a mile from camp, a kitbag filled with sand. Each morning as Reveille sounded I jumped out of bed, ran to the tree, gave the bag a good thumping, returning to camp in time for the cookhouse and breakfast. It was a sure test for the arm, there was some swelling after exertion but nothing more.

I fought for the squadron in a regimental competition in the Featherweight division. My opponent and myself were evenly matched in both height and build. The bout turned out to be a real ding-dong slog swinging punch for punch, wildly lashing out in all directions, both of us lacking in skill.

I won but merited no praise or compliments from the captain, who pointed out that I had ignored all he had tried to teach me; from the moment that I had stepped into the ring I had been drawn into what he called a brawl; he went on to tell me that I could have beaten him much easier if I had boxed him, applied a little skill and I wouldn't then have ended up so bloodied.

I was pleased with my showing when I ran second in the regimental cross-country run because I had competed against some extraordinarily good long-distance runners and apart from a few runs for the squadron it was my first serious race since the Tidworth Garrison Cup race in 1940. Several times I played football for the squadron but couldn't hold a regular place and was certainly not good enough to play for the regimental side, which was of a very high standard and included several professionals.

Some Saturdays were set aside for map-reading schemes and the method adopted was for a truck to drop us in the Troodos mountains in the morning and leave us to map-read our way back to camp. Any troop failing to make it back to base before the leave truck left for Nicosia would not be able to take advantage of leave passes. It was an ingenious means to make everyone conscious of the importance of being able to understand and to interpret their maps. It was in the interest of all of us to make our return as soon as possible, but there was one particular occasion when our troop made a false start, getting our bearings wrong at the very beginning, so that before long we were totally lost.

Neither the troop sergeant or myself were able to assist the officer. We were forced to make many backtracks after selecting what we thought was the most likely route. Eventually it was at a small village bar where a number of old men sat outside smoking, chatting and drinking their coffee that we were able to pinpoint our actual position with their aid. From then on we were able to make headway, arriving in camp in mid-afternoon. This was the cause for much mickey-taking and ridicule for our misadventure.

The date had been set for the island boxing championships to take place, therefore our regimental team put in extra training. It was hoped the team which was entered would have a contestant in each weight so we were all keen to get through the preliminaries. I fought two bouts and won them fairly easily, a third one was more difficult but I just about scraped through which secured for me a place in the finals. There was then the suspense while waiting to find out who my opponent would be on the big day. The tournament was to be staged at the Wolseley Barracks in Nicosia and was open to every regiment on the island.

In due course the details appeared on the squadron notice board and I read with interest through the list of finalists; I found to my dismay that I had been drawn against a man in my own regiment, a boxer whose reputation was a legend across the Middle East. He had held the Featherweight class championship for years, he had boxed since being a boy soldier under the name "Boy Metters". I believed that he had retired but it appeared that he was to have at least this one more bout, maybe thinking that he had easy pickings.

I was assured by all those around me also surveying the board that "he'll slaughter you Dig" or "I should go sick if I were you". It soon got round with everyone learning who I was up against and they all wrote me off with "no chance". Up until that time I had suffered very little physical damage from boxing with the exception of bruised thumbs and split lips, but I had to admit that it seemed, as the lads predicted, that I was in for a bashing.

It was due entirely to the Army's method of weighing-in that he became my opponent because he had boxed in the preliminaries as a lightweight, but it appeared that the organisers had difficulty when pairing off and solved the problem by making the most suitable bout; it was my misfortune that I was forced to box someone above my weight. I didn't see my opponent before the contest, the lads continued to do their best to scare me. There were others though who sympathised with me and whose advice was something like "just do your best".

'Meters' I thought was about 32 years old and at the weigh-in his stature alone suggested that he was well above the featherweight limit. From the organisers' point of view a mis-match of that sort helped to make the competition more exciting. A lot of my mates were present at the ringside on the football stadium; I had a good first round, at least my seconds thought so. In fact they advised me to "go for him" in the second round. I did that and no doubt it was my undoing, because he was never there where I put my punches, consequently he countered time after time and caught me some punishing blows.

I lost the contest of course but it must have been an entertaining performance, according to the applause which we received. I felt, and my mates confirmed, that I had put up a good show and although the odds had been against me it was important that I had a good fight. Even those who had previously thought that I would get thrashed went out of their way to tell me that I had done well. As no medals were available we were paid and my fee was thirty shillings, more than half a week's wages.

We had changed and weighed-in in a large marquee and after the prize-giving ceremony and the speeches were over, I met a professional boxer who I had seen fight in the Northampton Drill Hall before the war, Harry Ainsworth; he was the Northern Area Welterweight champion at the time, and on the occasion when I saw him he fought our local champion from Far Cotton, Norman Snow.

I was pleased too to meet with 'Lofty' George Jennings who fought in the same contest as myself at Tidworth in 1939, he was also a militiaman. We immediately recognised each other and had many tales to swap.

My mail brought me the sad news of the deaths, within a few weeks of each other, of my great aunt and uncle, Emma and Joe. Two of the most wonderful, loving, old-fashioned, country people that

anyone ever knew. Loved by all for the simple kindly beings that they were, they were known generally as 'Darby and Joan' and as the 'salt of the earth'. They had lived in a cottage in Mills Row in Quinton since the day they were married, Joe being just a farm labourer.

The reason why their deaths affected me so much was that they had the responsibility of my early upbringing on the death of my mother. I regretted very much that no longer would I be able to make my usual visits to Quinton, particularly as it had been my intention to tell them in some way or other how much I was in their debt for the care they gave me in my first years.

I had made up my mind that if ever I returned home again to purposely go over and thank them, which I had not been able to do previously because it was only after I had left home that I learned of their devotion, then it was too late. It was another of life's regrets, it was not to be.

Early Spring came in gently and was most agreeable. We revelled in the lush greenery of the island. The local inhabitants had readily accepted us and we were sometimes invited into their homes. Several houses in the village opened up part of their homes where they could provide food and drink for us and evening meals in those places were most looked-forward to. Our mess rations were by previous standards quite adequate but the food those villagers set before us was very much of a contrast. There was an abundance of fruit and vegetables, meat and fish, and of course wine, the most popular of which was Commanderia.

Our lockers in the barrack rooms were crammed with grapefruits, grapes, oranges and eggs. We cooked snacks too on the iron stove there. I was pleased to find that we were served real potatoes rather than the yams; goats milk seemed to be plentiful but I did not much care for it.

When I was in training for boxing or running I used to make a cocktail of raw eggs, goat's milk and orange juice beaten up. I didn't like it, it tasted awful but someone suggested that it was a good body builder, which admittedly I was in need of, so therefore took it in spite of the taste.

Food was very cheap as was the wine, so much of it was being drunk that the Medical Officer became alarmed and informed us of the possible damage which excess quantities of it could do to the liver.

Several schemes lasted for three or four days. It was then when we were out that we fully appreciated the beauty of the island, the wooded mountains, the orchards and vineyards of Kyrenia, the gently flowing streams of such clear water which we found to be cool and thirst-quenching when we dipped our mugs in. At night we cooked our rations there using its sparkling water and heard it babbling on its way during the night.

Once when drawing rations I found that there were some joints of meat, whatever it was I had no idea but decided that although optional to take some which was the cause of an amusing incident. My crew didn't think that it looked very fresh, they thought that it would be unpalatable and they suggested many things, mostly in favour of throwing it away. I had to admit that it had the appearance of being tough and leathery, and I agreed that there was a greenish tinge all over it, but one know-all pointed out that it could be made more supple if it were put on the side of the car and whacked with a piece of wood. This seemed to be a popular solution, so arming myself with a length of broken fence posting proceeded to do that, thinking that in any case it would do no harm; then suddenly it happened, as if often did, the order for crews to "mount, move out, follow me".

I had been so engrossed in my bashing away that I was caught completely unaware but jumped on board and we were away, it was then that I realised what I had done in my haste; I had thrown the meat away but still had the piece of wood. They gave me a terrible time after asking "how's the meat?" and I had to tell them that there would be no meat on the menu that night. It was generally agreed though after all the leg-pulling that it was probably for the best, because they had taken a dislike to it from the beginning.

We moved camp across the island to Kati Trimmathia (?) a tented camp this time, and took in further reinforcements from the Gloucester Hussars. One evening when going into the troop's billet I heard a voice and the accent seem familiar, a Northamptonshire sound, and I thought correctly as it turned out that he must be a 'townie'. He introduced himself as Corporal Tommy Scarret, who came from the town centre. That was the beginning of a long friendship. His regiment had suffered a great loss of men, and we received quite a number of the survivors.

Some of us were due for leave which would be taken at Famagusta and Tommy joined myself, Dave and George. It was a rest camp, nothing there really just the bare essentials necessary to make an enjoyable leave possible. It wasn't expected to compare with any of the leaves we had experienced in Alex. or Cairo, but it suited us fine and we had a lot of fun.

We travelled there by means of the island train service. It appeared to be little more than a miniature railway, rather narrow gauge lines, and moved at a speed even when flat out which any one of us could keep up with. That is a fact because I was one who had to do it a couple of times. When one of the others would say something like "hey Dig, you're a good runner - catch that", then grabbing my beret from my head threw it back along the track. Each time that it happened I managed with much puffing and blowing to retrieve it and breathlessly reboard the train, after running to reach it with their shouts of encouragement urging me on and comments like "we thought you could run" and "see you in Famagusta", the schoolboys' games of grown men.

In the camp there was a large NAAFI with a wide selection of goods; there were also two restaurants and a dance hall complete with hostesses. Most of our time was spent either in the water or on the beach. Several nights we swam there at midnight after we had been out drinking. It was possible to dive from the edge of the shore where the depth of the water fell away sharply, by stacking up a few sandbags to give more height.

Back at camp I had acquired a pair of brown shoes which were the cause of much envy because not many of the others owned a pair. But mine were of particular interest while on leave and again when we had returned because they all knew the history concerning them. I had picked them up out of some waste deposited outside the Officers' Mess; actually they were not much to look at and were a rather heavy type, but it was not important because they were about my size.

The soles had long parted from the uppers but I knew that I could rely on the assistance of my friends the fitters, my mate George was one, and armed with some wire and a bradawl-type tool I was convinced that I could 'mackle' them up. To begin with I wired the two parts, uppers and soles, together and with a good deal of spit and polish it was agreed that those once-discarded shoes were then fit to be worn on leave, not for me those heavy army boots.

I wore them on the night that we thought we would give the dance-hall a try. None of us were dancers but after a few beers that was not a problem. We began making fools of ourselves, generally messing about when we ventured onto the floor; I suppose that we had made a couple of circuits of the floor when it happened, the uppers of my shoes hung loosely around my ankles and the soles began to flap until they came away completely so that I had to bend down and pick them up from the floor.

There I was standing in my socks holding two separate parts of what were a little earlier in the evening my footwear, my pride and joy. Everyone else was doubled up with laughter at my plight as I stood there. I hobbled off the floor reduced to walking in my socks; among the hilarity which the incident had caused were many comments such as being "soulless" and something about "upper class".

The lads were still laughing when we decided to leave and as I had no footwear it was thought that we should order a garry to take us to our billet; Tommy was still full of laughter when we were about to board the conveyance, so much so that his teeth fell out and landed under the horse where we all

ended up groping in the dark until they were found and restored in their rightful place. That night was part of what turned out to be a most enjoyable leave, different maybe but one to remember.

There had been little in the way of entertainment but we were not short of fun even if of our own making, we knew that apart from the drink that our antics were perhaps stupid and often childish but I believe that it was our way of shrugging off some of the memories that didn't seem to easily go away; memories of young mates who had fought and played with us but then sadly left behind in cold desert graves.

At the same time we wondered if our turn might soon come so it was that for a short while we felt free and relieved that there was no imminent threat of death. There were others of our comrades in various parts of the world who were still in battle involved in the madness of war.

Back at camp there was quite a lot of interest shown in the story of the shoes, the fitters seemed noticeably concerned; it was then that I realised that it was a prearranged affair: they had deliberately set me up with copper wire which they knew would not stand up very long. George knew about it, they made great fun of it. Anything for a laugh, I suppose.

The whole squadron were out on an exercise so that apart from a few men on duty I had the camp to myself because I had been ordered to take the place of the Orderly Sergeant. Why this was so was quite a mystery to me unless it was more important that sergeants should go on the exercise than us of lesser rank; actually I wished to think that in spite of the episode with the RSM a few weeks earlier that he was testing me out to check in order to see if there was any improvement in my behaviour. I wondered had he had a change of mind and my long-awaited promotion could be a possibility?

I knew nothing of the duties of an Orderly Sergeant therefore before they left I had to seek out one or two of my friends to be briefed. I did the rounds with the Orderly Officer, the Cookhouse, Tent Lines, Mess Room and such like; I had to contact the other squadrons which were some miles apart and this I did on a bike. It was quite an interesting and enjoyable change from the usual daily duties.

On coming into my own tent one evening I found a new sergeant waiting there to see me, it appeared that he had arrived from Base Depot where for years he had been a Drill Instructor; I had to find a tent in the sergeants' lines for him. When having done so he introduced himself and I stayed and chatted to him for quite a long time, glad to have his company because the camp became a very lonely place during the evening while everyone was still away.

He was Irish and therefore known just as 'Paddy' (I forget his surname). He was a Regular soldier of over ten years' service and I guessed that he would have been about thirty years old. I didn't learn why he had returned to us from the Base but I could well accept and realise why he had been a Drill Instructor for so many years, mainly because of his bearing.

He was a six-footer, lean, sun-tanned and upright. He had dark curly hair and a sharp pointed moustache, in all a fine specimen of a parade ground soldier. He was no lover of tanks and I found out later that he had never been a crew member and had certainly never commanded one. I imagined that he still retained a feeling for the days of the horse and the cavalry regiments. Over the weeks I got to know him rather well and had many long talks on a variety of subjects, either when we were on duty together or over a beer, so that we formed quite a friendship.

Most of us junior NCOs regarded him as a soldierly example and one which we should attempt to emulate especially in his physical bearing, his dress and drill. Unfortunately though not many of us had been created with the sort of attributes necessary and had to make the best of what we had been given.

On guard with him one night I noticed that he was reading the Koran, the Muslims' sacred book, and by him he had a copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. I still have read neither, but even then with



The Regimental Team in Nicosia.



The Squadron Team (I am second from the right) with Sergeant Major Tommy Atkins.

my limited knowledge of them I realised what he was reading was certainly a little above the ordinary soldier's literary material.

When I told him of my surprise and how I thought it unusual reading for him to prefer he told me that he had only an Army education but that gave him enough to urge him to learn more. He said that he thought that it was so very easy to accept the norm but that he wished to strive and rise above that which most of us felt was acceptable. Most who knew him looked up to him and listened to his philosophical advice, we listened but sadly did little about it. I remember him as I am sure many others would have done for the fine example to us which he was, I don't know what eventually happened to him after we left the island.

It was strange that when we did leave at the end of May, 1943, that there was the absence of 'going home' rumours. I believe that the men were beginning to feel that it was never going to happen especially as our destination then was a return to the desert which we thought we had already seen for the last time. The long journey to Tripoli was carried out in several hops, stopping at Port Said and Cairo on the way.

It was Paddy who first introduced me to the writings of Rudyard Kipling and although I couldn't now recite the words I remember two of his poems; one is 'If' and the other 'Tommy'; I have a great fondness for both of them and have recently been able to obtain a copy of each; I will write just a couple of verses of each here:

IF

If you can keep your head when all about you
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
 If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
 But make allowance for their doubting too;
 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
 Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
 Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
 And yet don't look good, nor talk too wise:
 If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
 Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If all men count with you but none too much;
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

TOMMY

I went into a public-'ouse to get a pint o' beer,
 The publican 'e up an' sez, 'We serve no Red-coats here'.
 The girls be'ind the bar they laughed an' giggled fit to die,
 I outs into the street again an' to myself says I:
 O it's 'Tommy this', an' Tommy that, an' 'Tommy go away';
 But it's 'Thank you, Mr Atkins,' when the band begins to play.
 For it's 'Tommy this', an' 'Tommy that', an' 'Chuck him out the brute!'
 But it's 'Saviour of his country' when the guns begin to shoot;
 An' it's 'Tommy this', and 'Tommy that', and anything you please;
 An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool - you bet that Tommy sees!

While in Cairo our mail caught up with us and one of my letters carried the information that one of my old trike-riding workmates had arrived in Egypt, Gilbert Gibson. On making enquiries I found that he was at Almaza at the camp which we had arrived at in 1940. I and two others made our way there and were informed that we were too late as their detachment left at first light all 'blacked-up'. From that we assumed that they were taking part in the invasion of Sicily.

When back in the desert our duty in the Tripoli area was the guarding of airfields, we were issued with one-man bivouacs. The weather had hotted-up and the sand there was a reddish-brown and as there were some fairly strong winds it stuck to our sweaty bodies giving the effect of having been sprayed with cocoa powder, or as chocolate soldiers perhaps.

We had not been there for many weeks when I was ordered to go on a gunnery course at the Cairo Base Depot so that I travelled again those dusty desert tracks back to Abbasia. Taking into account the amount of time which I would be travelling there and back again it was estimated that I would be away for at least two months.

The Depot was little changed from how I remembered it from my previous course in 1941; I knew what to expect in the way of 'bull' that is the way of all such places. I wouldn't want to be at Base for any length of time certainly not as a 'Base wallah'.

I was to study the guns on the American Sherman tank and hoped to return to the unit as an instructor. If I passed I would receive an extra sixpence per day, unfortunately though I would lose out because I would then become liable for Tax.

Reveille at the Base was at 0600, when the 'char-wallah' brought his bucket of tea, then after parade and roll call we marched off to our lessons returning at 0800 for breakfast; morning lessons lasted until 1230 hrs when it was 'tiffin', mainly a salad meal with white bread and usually melon. Our schoolday ended at 1600 hours and then dinner followed by evenings of study.

My barrack-room was near to the gymnasium so I made a point of going there, making myself known because I had heard that the Garrison Annual Boxing Championships were due and I intended that if I were still there to enter and wanted to do some training in preparation.

I had a message over the grapevine carried to me by one of my classmates that someone called 'Jock' hearing that I was at the Base would like to see me; he was at the other end of the Base. I wondered who Jock might be, there were so many of them and finding that this particular Jock was in the Staffordshire Yeomanry I was further confused and hadn't a clue as to who he might be.

I was given a time and place where he could be found and set off in anticipation or at least to satisfy my curiosity; when there someone called out to me, I knew when I set out that I was in for a surprise and it couldn't have been a greater one than seeing that the caller was the Jock who when I last saw him was bleeding badly and was being taken away in a French ambulance.

He was not much changed so that I recognised him instantly. It was wonderful to have met up again, he had such a story to tell of what had happened to him after his spell in a French hospital and of his eventual escape to England. Apparently he had suffered little effect from his wound, he wished to know anything which I was able to convey with regard to any of our comrades who we had trained with and it was a sad recital of events which involved the maiming and death of quite a few of them. Apart from all that we enjoyed our evening in each other's company.

He was a very special friend and on parting we renewed our promise to one another first made in 1940 that if we both came through the war safe and sound, then we would meet at his home in Edinburgh. It was quite extraordinary how meetings such as that came about for in spite of censorship and other restrictions on the passing of information everyone seemed to know at least which theatre of war a man was serving in; various hints were made in letters to home and they to us and a lot of information was gained by cap badges. How Jock, for instance, would have known

that I was at the Base and yet my regiment was in the desert I have not the faintest idea or how it came about that it happened to be one of my class-mates who passed the message on. It never crossed my mind when with him to ask him how it was possible for him to find me. After we had met we exchanged letters so that we knew that each of us had taken part in the invasion of Europe. The last time he wrote he was in Germany and that was his last letter. I had seen him for the last time because I learned again via the grapevine that a few days prior to Germany's surrender he was killed. Having seen someone from his regiment by noting the cap badge I made enquiries of Jock and I was most shocked to hear of his death. It appears that he was talking to the padre when shells began to fall and he received a splinter in his head; what rotten luck after all that he had been through.

I know that this was happening all the time but that news was particularly upsetting; I grieved for the young wife who he had married before the war. I still have their wedding photo with me. There would be no meeting for us in Scotland after all. What a mad world which allows young lives to be taken in that manner.

There was another chance meeting about the time that I had met Jock but of an entirely different nature and not at all a pleasant one. It occurred one afternoon as I was on my way to the Mess Room for dinner when a prisoner passed by being escorted by two Military Policemen, and as they marched abreast, the prisoner shouted something to me which I didn't understand but on looking I found it to be none other than my old adversary, the school bully. I was told that he was very rarely with his regiment but continually absent without leave so that he spent a great deal of time in the 'glasshouse' rather than take his place in the field.

The course was going along fine and I had the feeling that I would pass easily enough when suddenly I was struck down with sand fly fever and that is not an exaggeration, it did strike me down. For a day or so I did feel a little unwell but not ill enough to report sick, in any case I wanted to complete the course. Finally I had to submit and was taken off sick parade and immediately admitted to a hospital in Cairo.

I must have been in some sort of hypnotic state throughout because I have very little recollection of what happened during the ten days which I spent there. The condition is similar to Malaria but without the recurrences; when I left hospital I had lost quite a lot of weight and it left me very weak. When I resumed the course I thought that any chance which I might have had to obtain a pass had gone as I had missed a substantial part and couldn't see that I would be able to catch up. However, as events turned out it was not possible to complete it anyway because a week or so later the news reached me in its usual roundabout way that the regiment was at last going home.

I didn't readily believe it and before accepting it as fact I needed confirmation that it was not just another rumour created by someone's wishful thinking. There had been too many disappointments in the past so that until then I treated it with scepticism.

I had quite recently seen members of my regiment about the Base but none of them from my squadron and thought them to be perhaps like myself on a course or probably on leave; it didn't then occur to me that they might be there for any other reason. I was soon to find out after being told that there was a caller in my room wishing to see me, I was most surprised therefore on meeting him to find the visitor to be none other than my old protagonist of the Cyprus Boxing Championships 'Boy Metters'.

He informed me that he and several other long-serving men were being repatriated and that the advance party of the regiment were already at the Base with the whole of the regiment due to arrive in a week or so.



George Gilgrass and myself.



*Me, November 1941,
two weeks before I
was wounded. Notice
the brown knees.*



*(Above)
Myself and
Jock
Loveday.*



*Jock
McLeod.*



*Abbassia 1943 prior to coming home, with Doug
Driver and Tommy Skarret.*

Chapter Eight: Home and Away Again

After what Meters had told me I really had to believe that we were going home. This was no rumour, but even at that late time I decided to keep just a wary eye open knowing that things could always change before we actually boarded that ship; anyway we went out for a drink on the strength of his good news.

He had deliberately looked me up before he left because he wanted to explain the position with regard to the Boxing Championship in the Middle East which on going home he was about to relinquish. He pointed out that as he vacated the title it then had to be adopted by the chief contender which happened to be me and therefore I automatically became the champion, but of course I would have to put it up for contention.

All that would have been fine if it were not for the fact that it seemed I too would no longer be in the area and would be in no position to defend it, however I basked in the glory that was mine for what turned out to be about ten days. Then the title became vacant and powers responsible would sort it out. I did much regret that I couldn't just have had a few more fights if only to prove that I deserved the title, maybe too I could have withstood all the leg-pulling from my mates when they came down from the desert and continually addressed me as "Champ".

I never saw Meters again after we had parted, wishing each other good luck; I would have liked to have known him earlier because we became quite good friends. It is strange when looking back to think that although we were in the same regiment although in different squadrons we had never met. He didn't train with the boxing team but separately. I had heard him talked of so very often but we didn't meet except in the ring; that was a pity really because I might have learned a little of his skill.

Tommy Scarrat came down with the advance party and sought me out, bringing me all the news of the lads back with the squadron and of the preparations for our voyage. One evening we went along to where we were told that we could find Doug Driver who was said to be still at the Base. Having found him we had a night out in Cairo; three Northampton townies having a farewell drink and talking of home-sweet-home, Doug was also due to leave and I did meet him in Far Cotton during our leave.

When the regiment arrived I rejoined them even though I hadn't completed the Course. Whether I deserved it or not I got a pass; we drew khaki serge battledress from the stores which gave us a feeling of being on our way, at least to a cooler climate. There was still a feeling that we could even yet be diverted and wouldn't be sure of anything until we had docked in Liverpool.

It didn't go down too well when we found that we had to draw Yankee denims in exchange for our tank overalls; all of the clothing from the stores was coated with smelly yellowish delousing powder. A lot of time was spent bashing each garment against the wall in an effort to disperse as much of it as possible. No doubt it was a protection against the bugs while in store. We had experienced these pests in the barrack rooms where the evidence of their existence was smeared on the walls where their blood which they secreted when squashed formed a reddish pattern.

When on the Course we were allowed Friday afternoons off for 'Operation Debugging'. Tin lids containing paraffin were set under the bedlegs and blankets were hung out; it appeared that they were not so active in the cooler air so most of us slept on the verandahs. Most soldiers at some time or other have sung "*there were bugs, bugs as big as bloody dogs in the quartermaster's stores*".

We set sail at the end of October 1943 and our destination was definitely England. There were just a few duties on board ship, on the guns or look-out, otherwise when activities were not arranged for us we read, played cards or took part in quizzes and competitions. Most of our time was spent

on deck especially in the early part of the voyage because the decks below were so very overcrowded. It gave us ample time for reflection and for conjecture as to our future role in the War and how much longer the conflict was likely to last. We gained some news of the world at large, of the progress in Italy being slow against some stubborn opposition, there some of our 7th Armoured Division were then engaged, and news of the defence of Stalingrad.

We wondered how we would find our people at home and how much conditions might have changed with Rationing, Bombing and all the wartime restrictions. I remember being asked one time during our discussions "What will you tell your grandchildren when this lot is over?" I don't think I gave a very satisfactory reply because then I hadn't contemplated anything that far ahead.

The voyage on the whole was quite restful apart from once or twice receiving visits from the Luftwaffe, and there was the continual fear of enemy submarines, but as far as I was aware our large convoy docked at Liverpool without loss.

After disembarking we boarded a train and noted the stations as we travelled down the country, and Tommy, myself and the other Northampton lads were wondering would we stop and be set down somewhere near to our homes, but there were groans when we passed through Castle station from where I could almost see our road. We carried on but not too far because we halted in Buckinghamshire, the next county, and were billeted in Nissen huts at Great Missenden just a comfortable distance away.

Everyone was speculating on how much leave and pay each of us was due to receive. Leave was calculated on how much time each individual had spent abroad; my own total would benefit by the addition of those months which I spent in France before going to the Middle East. It was about a week before the pay parade took place and our passes issued, then we were able to let our people at home know that we were on our way.

We felt the cold December very much, especially in our beds, it was far from pleasant also when we were forced to stand on parade for some considerable time waiting to be inspected by some 'brass hat' who was unpunctual and kept us in line shivering.

We passed an evening in a nearby village pub where it was warm, friendly and homely, the kind of place and atmosphere which we often dreamt of in those sun-parched days of the past. It was there that 'Big Geordie' who I had battled with prior to Alamein came over and bought me a drink.

It was rather late in the day when the five or six of us Northampton men had received our passes and set off for Castle station and home, arriving there a little before nine. Before parting to go our separate ways we had a drink in the pub opposite (was it then called the 'Green Man?') then arranged to meet up during our leave; only one lad came my way but he left me after we had walked through what is now St. Peter's Way and on entering Bridge Street he turned into a yard at the side of the brewery. I've forgotten his name but it's strange that I never saw him again when back with the regiment.

From where he left me and walking home alone towards Far Cotton was a time that I have never forgotten; it was all so quiet there was no-one about in the black-out, no air raids, or sounds of gunfire. As I passed over South Bridge I had that wonderful feeling that comes over one when returning home, which is especially poignant in times of war. I left there as a boy and was returning as a man of many experiences. I remembered as I neared home the time when I couldn't leave home and get away from Far Cotton soon enough. I was so keen to get away when the job in Bedford was offered me, now I was to be at home for six weeks. It had been five years since I had lived at home. I reached Eastfield Road and turned in the gate, I was home.

My parents were in reasonably good health and pleased to see me. Arthur's wife Joan was there so I met her for the first time; it must have been a considerable worry for parents such as mine who

had three sons in the services, apart from all the other hardships that civilians had to endure.

The day after I had arrived I met the girl with whom I had corresponded, she had apparently been a regular visitor to my home. Our letters had brought us close together so that I regarded her as my girl friend, that was as far as any understanding went, it was a sort of courting by mail.

Hilda had been a member of the Land Army for a number of years and was based at the village of Stanwick. She had managed to get time off in order that we could meet. She was expected to arrive at the bus depot in Derngate (where the theatre now is,) but actually we met in Guildhall Road, her bus had arrived early.

It was nearing Christmas and brother Ern was on leave. For Christmas dinner Dad had procured a couple of rabbits and had killed a hen so that we had quite a banquet, leaving only the pickings for Dad when he came home from work. Being home for Christmas was simply wonderful, the first time in five years and a time I have never forgotten.

Over at Irthlingborough I met Hilda's parents and her sister and I think that those weeks were the beginning of our courtship. We were seeing each other regularly, she staying at our house at the weekends and I at hers during part of the week. I made the usual round of visits to friends and relatives; there were not many young men about with the exception of those who were classed unfit for service or were employed on work of national importance.

Dad was proud to introduce me to his Home Guard colleagues most of them men who had fought in the First World War, all of various ranks, Dad being a sergeant. They took their role most seriously and were keen to show off their armaments to me. I was convinced that if they had been properly armed and were called on to assist in the defence of our island they would have given a good account of themselves.

A satirised version of the Home Guard has been a very popular television programme for some years now but it contrasted greatly with the efficient dedication I found in Dad's force. Their headquarters were conveniently at the 'White Hart' pub at Cotton End and their guardroom one of the Bridge Street railway buildings. In the pub darts were played by the men not on duty and we all joined in, Hilda, Joan, even Mum sometimes. In those days every house owned a dartboard and any caller usually stayed for a game. We had a board pinned to our door in the living room for years and the door and the surrounding area showed the evidence of many badly-aimed darts. In the pub which seemed always to be crowded teams were formed and competitions played.

Our next-door neighbour was a regular drinker but his local was the 'Clinton Arms' (which was demolished when St Peter's Way was made), and he asked me to go out for a drink with him one Saturday lunchtime. I accepted his offer and it turned out to be quite a binge. On introducing me to his drinking companions everyone wished to buy us drinks, he began by showing me off as a recently-returned local man who was a Desert Rat and a Military Medallist; I was embarrassed and was pleased to get away. When I told Dad where I had been he didn't at all approve and said a few choice words about our neighbour.

Again I was asked out and that was by the man who owned the General Stores in Delapre Crescent road, Mr Bains, who had been a good friend to our family over a good many years. He wanted me to spend an evening with him after the shop was closed, I did so and it turned out to be a very pleasant time.

The fact that he opened a bottle of whisky, a drink that I had not tasted for a long time certainly added flavour to the evening, whisky was almost unobtainable at that time, or so I thought and was a great luxury.

Anyone acquiring a bottle then would be sure to only indulge on very special occasions, I therefore felt that I had reason to feel honoured. When I left he gave me a miniature Military Medal. Another

neighbour who lived down the road who I knew only by sight, never having spoken to him, had made a house-to-house collection on my behalf after reading in the local paper of my exploits in the desert and of my injuries, with the result that he presented me with a beautiful large cut-glass fruit bowl which I still have and treasure. I expressed my sincere thanks to him.

When in Irthlingborough Hilda took me to visit many of her friends and relatives and one of those happened to be a local boot-and-shoe manufacturer in the town, and a town councillor. At his home we had a most enjoyable evening where once again a whisky bottle was produced and I was able to partake of a glass or so. It began to become apparent that businessmen knew how to acquire this rare commodity.

Toward the end of my leave Hilda and I decided to become engaged. We had been in each other's company a lot during the past month or so and we had grown to know one another. We made the decision in spite of my earlier opposition to such ties in wartime, it was because of my belief that it was unfair to risk being killed and leaving a partner. However I eventually came to accept that if the other person was willing to take that chance then I would be content to go along with it.

A further reason was that although the war had then moved a little more in favour of the Allies we were yet to invade the continent and force a German surrender so that the conflict appeared then that it was some years from a conclusion and could possibly last another two or three years which was too long a period to ask anyone to wait.

We set off to shop for a ring. The first jeweller which we called on was Samuel's at the bottom of the Drapery and Mercer's Row. Here we encountered some misunderstanding regarding the price of the ring which we had selected. The salesman said that it was "thirty-five" which I knew I could afford being less than my weekly pay. I said yes, that was fine, I could manage that, but when I offered him my hard-earned 'thirty-five' he looked aghast and with a disdainful look politely told me "It is thirty-five pounds, Sir, please."

Needless to say that we then beat a hasty retreat. I should have informed him that I was a British Tommy, not an American. We found another salesman whose prices were more suitable to our means, I would need to have saved my Army pay for about three months to meet the thirty-five pound price.

While writing on the subject of rings I am reminded of the ring which Dad had passed on to me which belonged to my ex-fiancee and it was my intention to sell it, so in town one morning I went into a jewellers in Abington street; as I came out pocketing the cash I saw a lady a few yards away watching me. It took me a moment to realise who it was, then knew it to be Jane's mother. She would no doubt be surprised to see me, believing me to be still overseas but she would have guessed of my purpose at the jewellers.

I regret now to say that I didn't approach or attempt to even speak to her but let her go on her way without a word while appearing not to notice her. I should have at least had the decency to say 'hello' and acknowledge her, why I didn't I cannot say.

Neither she nor her husband had caused me any harm and the broken engagement was long over and almost forgotten so I bore them no ill feelings. What I ought to have done was to arrange to meet them at the Club but I let the situation pass. It was one of those things which I ought to have done which then became too late to rectify.

In January (1944) instructions came for me to report back to the regiment who were in "West Toffs" deep in the heart of Thetford forest among the pine trees. The nearest station was Brandon. The immense depth of woodland hid the Nissen huts of thousands of soldiers, armaments of all sorts, tanks, guns, ammunition and masses of various war supplies. It was fortunate that the Luftwaffe was no longer anything of a threat because all this material was part of the massive build-up for the invasion of Europe, the "Second Front" as it became known, which everyone knew was imminent.

One of the first things which came to my notice on returning to the regiment was the information on the notice board that I was promoted to sergeant from 1st January 1944, unpaid of course for nine months when I should then become a full sergeant.

We of the Desert Rats thought that on returning to take part in the attack on Europe that we would play only a secondary role because there were enough trained troops in the country ready and available who had been waiting years since the fall of Dunkirk in 1940 to play their part, and were keen to do so. Also we considered it would give us more time to receive extra training for a role which was so much different from that of the desert.

When we were out on a pass or on duty and meeting men of the Home Forces they were wary of us and of our reputation, we being easily recognised by our bronzed and leathery appearance. They knew that we were battle-experienced, had been in combat longer and to a greater extent than any other land force since the outbreak of war and were responsible for the only victories achieved from the Italian campaign through Alamein to Tunis.

It was said about us, unfairly I thought, that we appeared to be conceited, cocksure, using such words as 'shufti', 'buckshees', 'maliesh', 'ackers', 'bint', 'sayeda' and suchlike and wearing the Africa Star medal ribbon with the Eighth Army clasp. None of us agreed that we were in any way aloof; in my opinion it was more likely to be a calmness brought about by nearly four years' of fighting a war often against greater odds and with inferior equipment and learning how to survive and shrewd enough to know when to take chances. We had witnessed a great deal of death and accepted that war was a bloody awful business.

We were not very pleased to learn that our division after all was to spearhead the attack in our section of the coast when we had landed in France. Our leaders when addressing us told of the great honour it was to have been selected and given the opportunity to be in the vanguard of such a great enterprise, a momentous occasion which would be recorded in history as the greatest invasion ever to take place. We were also reminded that just as a good man will be used time after time to serve so would a good regiment.

It was said that we were Churchill's favourite division and the great man once reflected that one in five servicemen never heard shot or shell and ran no more risk than a civilian. Some men however return again and again while the great majority are kept out. We still asked ourselves "is anyone else fighting?"

Our new tanks arrived, far superior to anything with which we had previously been equipped; we were eager to get acquainted with the monsters, they were called the 'Cromwell'. We and the tanks were transported by train to Kircudbrightshire in Scotland to fire the guns. With the result that we all felt that at last we had a fighting machine comparable to whatever the enemy might oppose us with, perhaps with the exception of the German Tiger. We took part in several exercises; I remember the names for two of them, one being *Shiver* and the other *Shudder*.

For some reason unknown to the rank and file there came about a further reorganisation within the squadron, and it affected myself and Sergeant Robinson in like manner. 'Robbo' had been a good mate of mine over a number of years, he was a Brummie and sported an outstanding pointed wax-like moustache. Both of us were far from pleased when we found that we were to be transferred to HQ Squadron and to become members of the leader's crew, 'Robbo' as gunner and I as operator-loader. We thought the change as it affected us was disruptive, it was annoying that we should lose control of our our own tanks and the crews with which we had trained and to have to serve within the confines of the commander's machine.

Also the particular leader was not one I would have served with if there was a choice, of course there was not; it was said that he had a record of recklessness and neither of us wished for that sort of gamble. So we conferred and conspired, Robbo and I, to conceive a means by which it might be

possible to reverse our movement order; we decided that we must not make ourselves too efficient and when on the range not to have a good shoot. If the result was a poor one then perhaps he might part with us in exchange for another pair more suitable.

When on the range our shots either fell short or were wide of the target, consequently we had a poor shoot. He said nothing at the time which was disturbing for us because if he found that the resultant poor showing was deliberately planned then we would have been in very grave trouble.

We quite possibly could have been court-martialled, however nothing came of it except that we were returned to our own tank troop and crews with not even a reprimand. Some months later though and just prior to D-Day in fact both of us were transferred once again to Headquarters under the control of the same leader and reduced to commanding Honey tanks. That was a particular setback because we had set our hopes on our Cromwells. It did appear very much that this was some sort of punishment meted out to both of us for our previous lack of co-operation.

I agreed with Hilda that we should set a date for our wedding with the possibility that we could be married before I went away again. It wasn't easy to set a date though, the timing was difficult. I knew that I was due for a week's leave in April but there were repetitions of 'panic stations' with everyone confined to camp. There was never an explanation given for those situations but whichever date we chose seemed to have to be cancelled.

I made a call at the squadron office daily to obtain a definite date for my leave pass so that Hilda could proceed with the arrangements at her end but each time after a date was assured there would be a curfew then I would be caused to send a message to her in the form of "wedding postponed".

Not many households in those days had the benefit of a telephone, so to get in touch with Hilda I would ask the landlord of the nearest pub which was the British Arms to pass on a message.

Bill Smith must have been kept busy passing on messages from absent servicemen, eventually a date was given and Hilda arranged everything for us to be married on April 13th 1944 which after so many anxious moments turned out for us to be the day.

I was only granted just the five days' leave, so allowing for travelling there was not a very long honeymoon period. As there was no truck going anywhere near Brandon railway station I walked the five miles there and then had better luck as there was a transport lorry which gave me a lift as far as Peterborough from where I caught a train home.

On the wedding morning my parents and best man set off from Derrigate bus station for Irthlingborough; I didn't know my best man and Dad introduced him to me as one of his workmates, but I was grateful to him for accepting the duty.

We were married at St. Peter's church and the reception was held in the lounge of the British Arms. There was quite a large gathering mostly of old people and no males with the exception of the older men. Everyone it seemed had made a contribution towards the food and in spite of Rationing they presented a very nice tea. The cake itself was little more than a sponge, nevertheless it was a happy gathering and Hilda and I expressed our gratitude to them all for making it such a great day.

A small group saw us off on the bus at Irthlingborough Cross which took us to our honeymoon hotel - a flat in Burton Latimer High street which belonged to a girl who was the daughter of the family at the farm where Hilda had her meals. She had lost her husband in the early days of the desert war. We have always been indebted to her for her kind offer; we had such a short time together but were grateful for it. I suppose we were lucky really because there were many cases where after getting married some couples would have to part and the serviceman board a ship to some foreign land for what could be a number of years.

On my return to West Tofts I found that until further notice all leave was cancelled and everyone confined to camp. It was the general opinion that any day we would be on the move but it was over

a month before we actually did so, which was towards the end of May 1944. Then, we took our tanks by road to Bognor Regis. Once there Robbo and I made our transfer and took over Honey tanks.

It seemed to us both that our earlier conspiracy had failed and had now backfired. The move must have been by design, a subtle act of revenge because we were the only ones to have been affected on this occasion and only involved the two of us. Anyway, however disappointing it was, we had to take it and make the best of it.

Our role with the lighter Honey tank would be a more dangerous one as we would be pushed out in front on reconnaissance to make contact with the enemy. We would be told frequently to 'push on' to which we usually added "regardless".

We used a leap-frog method of advance, one tank overtaking the forward one. If you happened to be that lead tank you hoped when having a corner to negotiate that there wasn't a big Tiger tank just waiting for you. But it was as the soldiers of the First War said when going over the top: "If there's one for you, you'll get it".

Schemes took place over the South Downs and a lot of our time was spent on the waterproofing of the vehicles. Every garage in the area was commandeered for the purpose; days and hours were spent under and around them, sealing every joint with a pliable compound, I believe it was called Bostik, making sure that it was impossible for any seepage of sea water to enter when we hit the water on leaving the landing-craft before we rolled up onto the beach. The exhaust too had to be extended with a vertical chute standing clear of the water. We had had no training for a beach landing and were not sure of the depth into which we would be put down. As it happened it was quite an easy landing with no problem at all.

There were lots of photographic sessions. Firstly the whole of the regiment, followed by each squadron, then all the officers, all the NCOs and numerous other permutations. The reason for it all was probably for the regimental history records which would be a register of all those who were to take part on what was thought to be the greatest show on earth: the biggest invasion ever attempted, an enterprise which no-one ever doubted would be anything other than successful. Every member of the regiment who took part in the historical event would therefore be captured in those photos in the regimental archives.

One Saturday afternoon I had a very pleasant surprise when my brother Ern turned up, so together with one of my mates we went along to a little teashop where we sat and talked over a pot of tea and a bun, a bun then being the only thing available - no cakes or pastries. But that was not a problem because we were able to pass an hour or so in conversation.

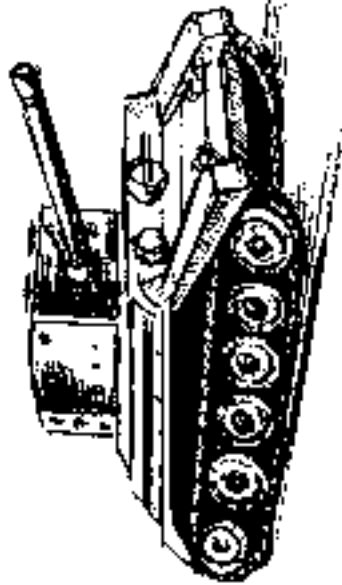
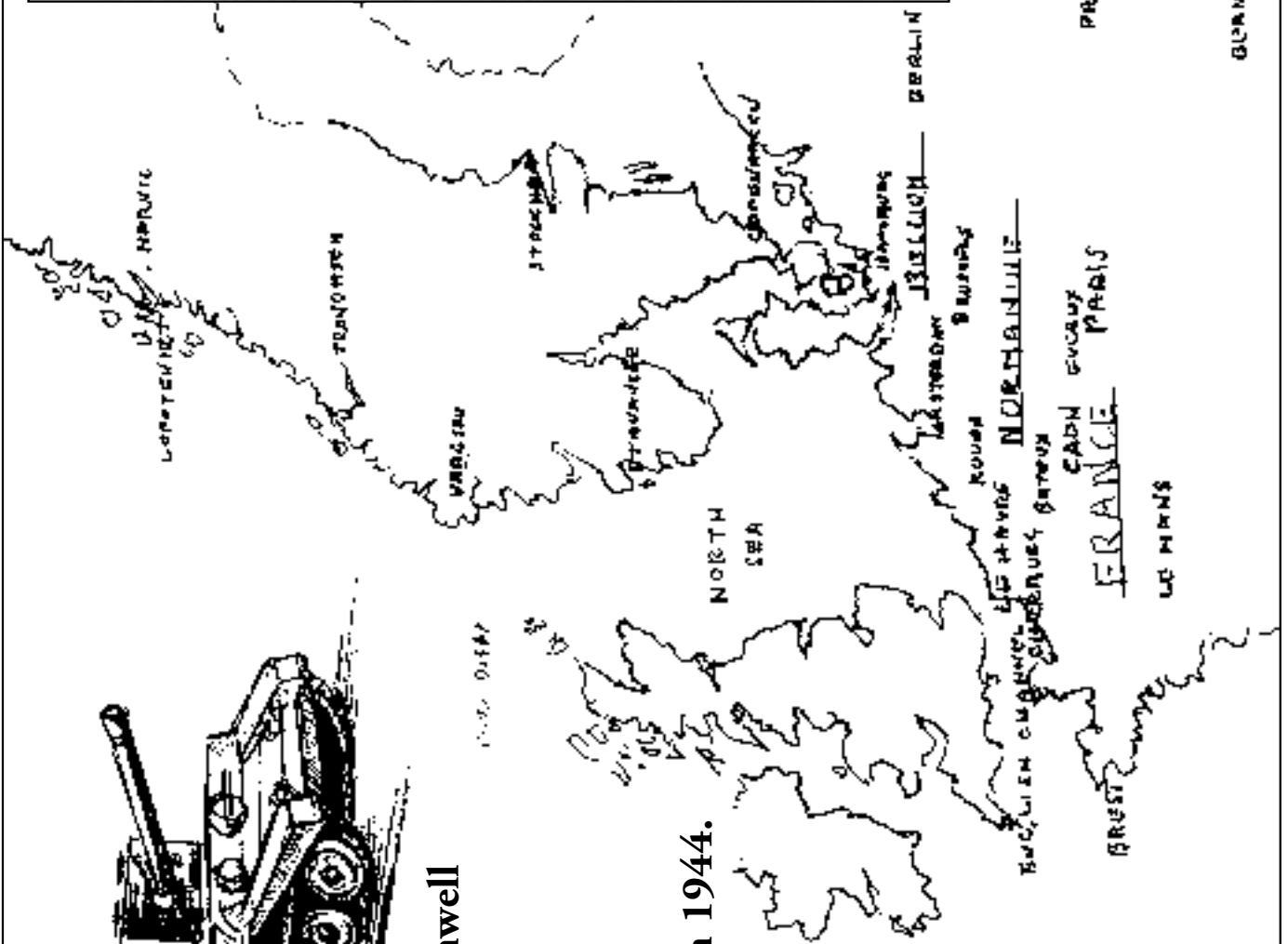
Ern being a member of the RAF Regiment told us that he had been informed that they would very soon be following us into Europe. I didn't know when I would see him again but it was great that we should have met at that time just prior to the big event.

All officers were called to a briefing conference and when they returned, that information was passed down to us NCO tank commanders. We then learned where we would leave from, where we would land and which area of the beach we were to occupy, the times and dates, and all of the plans for the role which we were to play in the invasion. It gave us all a clear picture what our intention was when D-Day and the hour was announced. It was all very secret because the element of surprise was essential and would give us a considerable advantage when attempting to form a bridgehead. All passes from then on were cancelled but not confined to camp but allowed out locally.

That being so it came as a great surprise to me when I was called to the squadron office and given a leave pass to London to attend an Investiture at Buckingham Palace where next day King George VI was to confer honours, in my case I was to receive the Military Medal.



N.C.O.'s of the Kings Royal Irish Hussars at Bognor Regis in June 1944, prior to the Invasion of Europe.



The Cromwell

The Invasion of Normandy, June 6th 1944.

BRITAIN
 IRELAND
 FRANCE
 GERMANY

MILITARY MEDALLIST AGAIN WOUNDED

Sergeant Fred Digby, of Irthlingborough, who was recently decorated with the Military Medal for bravery in the 1941 Desert Campaign, has been reported wounded in France. His wife, Mrs. Digby, of 8, The Parks, Irthlingborough, has been informed that he is now in hospital in England, and that the wound is slight.



Sergt. Digby.

Sergt. Digby, who was wounded in the right arm at the time he earned his award for bravery, is the eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. Digby 4, Eastfield-road, Far Cotton, Northampton.

MARRIAGES

DIGBY—FREEMAN.—April 13, at St. Peter's Church, Irthlingborough, by the Rev. R. S. Sleight, O.C.P., Sergt. F. W. Digby, M.M. (R.A.C.), eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. W. Digby, 4, Eastfield-road, Far Cotton, to Hilda Freeman (W.L.A.), eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. F. Freeman, 8, The Parks, Irthlingborough.

BAYES—BODSWORTH.—On April 8, at St. Andrew's Church, John Charles, eldest son of the late John and Mrs. Bayes, of 53, Baring-road, to Elizabeth May (Betty), second eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Bodsworth, 145, Kingsland-avenue.

IRTHLINGBOROUGH TANK HERO

Proud Young Wife at Palace Investiture

A short time ago Miss Hilda Freeman, of Irthlingborough, was married to Sgt. Digby, 8th Hussars Regt. of Northampton. Recently she had the



A HERO AND HIS BRIDE

honour to accompany him to Buckingham Palace, where he was presented with the Military Medal.

The act of bravery for which the medal was awarded was performed during the Western Desert campaign of 1941 at Sidi Rezjeh. Sgt. Digby, M.M., was one of the crew of a tank which was badly hit, and all the crew, including himself, wounded. With great courage and determination, Sgt. Digby—who at the time held the rank of corporal—brought his officer, the crew and the tank to safety.

Sgt. Digby, who joined the Army in October, 1939, was previously employed by the Co-operative Laundries. Mrs. Digby resides at 8, The Parks, Irthlingborough, and is a member of the W.L.A., working on the farm of Mr. Williams of Stanwick.

2300 BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

Admit one to witness the
Investiture

(at 10.15 o'clock a.m.)



Lord Chamberlain.

The ceremony was to take place at 10.00 hours and the date was June 6th 1944. That date was significant because it was the date we had received for the D-Day landings. The first thing which I did was to get a message through to Bill Smith at the pub in Irthlingborough and to Mr Bains at the shop in Far Cotton to inform them that I would be home in Northampton that same evening and explain the reason for it.

Whatever made me imagine that with all the tight security and cancellation of troop movements that with a pass made out only for London I would be permitted to travel as far as Northampton I don't know but I took it for granted that I could get away with it in spite of the invasion alert.

It was fortunate that I did because otherwise Hilda and Dad would have been at a loss to know what to do and where to meet me as I had invitations to admit two into the Palace. As it turned out I had no difficulty whatsoever and boarded the Northampton train without question.

On the morning of the 6th the London train was late arriving in Castle station. At Euston we were really fearful of not being there on time, however thanks to our taxi driver who made excellent time we arrived at the Palace with just a few minutes to spare. Those allowed to enter through the Palace gates were just the three of us and the others waited outside.

I was directed to a side room where we service personnel gathered and were able to smarten ourselves up and where we were inspected for correctness of dress. When the ceremony was about to begin we were formed into service order with the Navy personnel leading, and entered the hall in single file. Here, on a raised platform an orchestra was playing, it was a splendid ornate room with elaborate red curtains and chairs, other furnishing were of gold and white.

As we filed in I noticed where Hilda and Dad were seated among the other visitors. When it was my turn, I faced the King who stood on a slightly elevated stand; I remember thinking as I stood before him that he was heavily made-up. When he pinned on the medal he asked me if I was off to fight again and when I affirmed that I was he said something like "good man". Then we sat until all recipients had been likewise honoured, when all the assembled were then dismissed.

When we had left the Palace and had met the others waiting for us, the news vendors were shouting and the billboards were telling us that gliders had landed on the coast of Normandy; the news was that following the gliders there had been a very heavy support attack by the airforce and the first wave of assault troops were ashore and had established a small bridgehead.

I and those with me realised that when I left them I would soon be landing on that beach. Even so I felt fortunate to have been granted that opportunity to say goodbye once again to my newly-wed wife, my Dad and my friends before being once again involved in the appalling business of war.

To pass the time until boarding our respective trains we had a meal, went to the cinema travelled on the Tube, all of us a little subdued over what was happening over the Channel and then we made our partings. A few hours after my return to Bognor we moved out and drove our tanks down to Gosport harbour. On our way down to the coast hosts of people lined the route and through every town and village they stood, waving and cheering us on our way, enthralled by the terrifying spectacle of unprecedented military might, a great cavalcade of machines of war.

It was all so different from the atmosphere and attitude which I noticed of the people in London where they seemed quite subdued and appeared to me to have an air of everydayness about them, without a hint of anything out of the ordinary taking place. They went about as if to invade a continent was of no great importance to them.

We were unable to board the landing craft because the weather had deteriorated and it was unsuitable to set sail. We slept in the streets and front gardens of Gosport where the residents were most hospitable and plied us with food and drink. The following day we were able to embark and were on our way through calm waters, in spite of that there were some who suffered sea-sickness.

We all had a silent fear of what we would encounter when we drove off the barges because of the unknown depth of water which we would drive into; death in a submerged tank would not have been at all pleasant; it caused one to have a thought of those brave men who daily risked their lives in submarines.

There was no cause for concern at all, the water we set down in was no more than half-way up the superstructure and we drove through and onto the beach with comparative ease. Our beach went by the code name of Gold Beach.

The first town which we drove through was Bayeux which was almost completely destroyed and clear of the enemy. Some miles further on we made leaguer in a field. Overnight and all the next day the rain poured down continuously soaking through our clothing and dampening our spirits a little.

The downpour was cause for concern as the attempt to enlarge the bridgehead depended on more men, machines and supplies arriving and the weather hampered those plans. The territory which we were holding could not be expanded or defended against a German counter-attack if supplies failed to keep being poured in. Then the situation could become critical and there was always the possibility that we could be pushed back into the sea.

After a day or so we moved forward a short distance and later pushed into the *bocage* country where we found that there were miles of narrow roads and tracks running through the orchards; everywhere a dense growth of trees and as we moved on we passed by a column of cheering Americans hanging around their vehicles and urging us on, their guns being parked under the trees on the roadside.

When we halted they called us to take from them some crates of foodstuffs which they offered which we were only too pleased and grateful to accept. As always we were the 'poor relation' and they knew their rations were superior to our own. There was a problem of where to store it but in the meantime and as we moved off it was carried on the rear behind the turret.

When we were stationary and had unpacked the contents it was found that there was tinned meat, fruit puddings, coffee, cigarettes and a considerable variety of other luxuries. Our own rations had greatly improved of late but could not in any way compare with those bounteous provisions.

We solved the storage problem by stacking the contents in the space below the turret ring, ensuring that in doing so that the turret was still capable to traverse the whole 360 degrees without jamming on the tins. I don't know what attitude our senior officers would have adopted had they known of the method we had used to preserve our newly-acquired food supply. I did tell the crew though that should we receive a direct hit then we would probably die covered in sponge pudding and meat and gravy when the tins exploded.

There was no improvement in the weather; the rain persisted and was a hindrance to our advance. It also gave the enemy valuable time in which to switch his forces to the Normandy area having realised that this was the actual invasion and not a diversion. They had recovered from their initial surprise.

Most of the German leaders had believed that the Calais area was the most likely place where a landing would be attempted and for that reason had erected hundreds of miles of defences known as the Atlantic Wall. We heard that General von Runstedt was quickly bringing his forces into line to repel our advance.

Our Headquarters took up positions in an orchard and our troop of Honeys were out to reconnoitre the road; we cautiously leapfrogged for about a mile down what was little more than a lane, steeply-banked and overhung with hedges and trees giving us little chance to manouvere

should we suddenly encounter danger.

Being well aware of what to expect from anti-tank guns, snipers or mines we paused and satisfied ourselves that all was clear before moving forward again. My troop leader turned into a farm track and parked among the buildings there using the upstairs of the house to observe the immediate surrounding area. I left the corporal under cover at the bottom of the track and myself moved on a short way further down the road; all seemed quiet and nothing seemed to be happening and then I parked under the overhanging branches of a clump of trees where I thought I could observe unperceived.

I thought that I heard a report of some sort while intent on searching with the binoculars but there was quite a lot of crackle and buzz of wireless traffic so that I ignored it, it was when we began to move forward again that I felt a sudden stab on my hand and saw the blood begin to flow. Whether the shot that was intended for my head hit me directly or was a ricochet I would never know;

I got the gunner to spray the trees with the Browning and ordered the driver to reverse to where it was possible to turn round and made our way back to the orchard where I thought I would be able to receive treatment. The hand didn't feel too bad at all although the rag with which I had bound it was rather bloody.

Later, I understood snipers became somewhat of a problem and dismounted men would be used to clear the roadside before advancing with their tanks. The snipers' objective would be to take out the commander so that the vehicle was out of control; I never found it practical to work 'closed down'; it would have been safer to have done so but then impossible to observe.

Back at the orchard I approached a group around the squadron leader, showed them my bloodied hand and asked for treatment. I was told to get my tank stationed at the far end of the orchard as there were known to be six Tigers in the vicinity, after which I was to get myself off to the casualty clearing station which the sergeant-major pointed out to be about half-a-mile along a farm track. I found it to be housed in a white plaster-type farm building, little more than a cattle shed.

Outside on the grass were about a dozen injured, either sitting or lying there while the more serious cases were inside. An orderly cleaned up my hand which afterwards didn't appear too bad. After I had sat there for some time shells began to fall in the area and close enough to shake the shed causing dirt and roofing debris to fall on those inside. There was a quick move then, the ambulances taking the stretcher cases out of the range of the guns.

The walking wounded were told to follow on accompanied by an Orderly for quite a long walk and stopped just inside the edge of a wood, there I asked if I could leave and go back to my unit but was told the doctor must see me first.

A short time after arriving there I was given a cup of cocoa which instantly made me sick. All of us walking wounded had our boots removed and were laid on stretchers on the ground; I think I then suffered from shock and there was a little pain. The shelling persisted but did not affect us. I was thinking of leaving and getting back to my tank but our boots had been removed so that was not possible. Then suddenly irrespective of our condition, whether serious or not, we all were put onto ambulances and driven to a small airstrip and loaded onto a plane.

I tried to point out that my wound didn't warrant further treatment but the Orderly told me that orders were for all of us to be flown back to England. On reflection it was understandable that with the situation in the bridgehead still critical it was easier for treatment to be administered in England than to be an incumbrance and clutter up the small area of operations and of occupation. There was always the possibility that the Germans might force a breakthrough.

I hadn't ever flown before and the aircraft was not very comfortable, just a bare interior. We were packed in fairly tightly and only a number found room to sit down. We were each given a sweet to suck and told the flight would affect our ears, so to keep swallowing. We landed at Bristol and then boarded a train for Lichfield in Staffordshire and became patients in Burntwood Hospital. I sent a card to Hilda informing her that I had received a slight hand wound and of my present whereabouts. I was examined, it was found that the bone in one finger was splintered and the remainder cut and bruised. I received treatment daily and it soon began to heal.

Chapter Nine: Out of Action

A day or so after arriving at Burntwood, Dad and Hilda came up to see me and Hilda stayed on at a nearby house for a day or two, having managed to get time off from her Land Army job. My injury gradually improved so I applied for release from hospital and for 'Return to Unit' but found that it was not likely to be permitted in the immediate future. I learned that once you were in the system you had to go along with it. I remained at the hospital for about a month and was then transferred to a country house a few miles away.

It was a large impressive building standing in its own grounds and gardens which were very well maintained, both kitchen and flower gardens with greenhouses. The house was set back about half-a-mile from the main road, reached by a gravelled drive. It was possibly the A5 road because I remember Bedworth being only a couple of miles distant. There was a small village which could be reached just by crossing a couple of fields.

The house was actually a convalescent home with nurses in attendance and with routine visits from the doctors. There would have been about thirty patients there and none of us were ever called upon to perform any duties; there was nothing of a regimental nature and no sign of Army authority, just so long as we carried out our therapy work nothing else was demanded of us; that consisted of either of making patterned belts by the plaiting of coloured strings worked by securing the work to a chairback, or the creating of posies or brooches shaped as butterflies by threading tiny beads onto pliable thin wire.

Some men created beautiful work, hours were spent in this manner. I enjoyed it and it was fascinating to watch these soldiers who were more at ease with their guns than employed in that way. In most cases the finished articles were a pride and a pleasure to see; there is no doubt that it was helpful towards men's recovery because it created an interest and rested the mind.

I had been there almost a month when I was granted seven days' sick leave and Hilda got time off also so that our time was spent between Far Cotton and Irthlingborough. When we stayed at the latter, at Hilda's home, we spent a lot of time walking in the fields, other than that we did little more than make the usual rounds of visits but most importantly we were together.

Back at the convalescent home life went on in its usual leisurely way, there was not a great deal to do. The weather at the time was quite summery, hot and sunny apart from the odd thunderstorm so the grounds and the garden were a delight to walk in.

There was the occasional evening film show, one I enjoyed and can remember was 'Dangerous Moonlight' with the Warsaw Concerto musical theme. Some evenings we visited the village pub or the club and on occasions, having borrowed bikes, we rode as far as Bedworth for a drink.

There was once a very special outing when we were collected and taken by bus to an armaments factory in Birmingham where the workers had subscribed to a fund which provided for us a meal and a theatre show, each of us partnered by a female. We patients, in our hospital blues, must have presented quite a colourful sight, brightly arrayed in our sky-blue coat and trousers, white shirt and red tie. I doubt if today's hospitalised servicemen are clothed in such a patriotic, gaudy manner. Anyway, we all really did enjoy our day and were grateful to those workers who made it all possible.

I had heard that my regiment was still fighting somewhere in Europe and as I was fit again I believed that very soon I would be able to rejoin them; I would have liked to be with them for what seemed to be the last phase of the war. It appeared to be only a matter of months before the final surrender of Germany and I thought that it was possible that I might be there to play a part at the end.

The Allies though had suffered a couple of recent setbacks, the landing of parachute forces at Arnhem was repulsed after some terrific fighting when they were met by the might of a German

armoured division; although men battled bravely the odds were too great and they were badly mauled before they touched the ground, resulting in a great loss of life and material. Later, the Germans had counter-attacked through the Ardennes forest and almost accomplished the breakthrough, but the threat was overcome.

My time at the home came to an end and I was sent to a rehabilitation centre where it was the intention of the staff to prepare everyone coming from hospital for return to service conditions. The first of these centres to which I was posted was at Taunton and I remember the sight which immediately met my eyes on entering through the gates, it was that every stone, every kerb and every step was painted white with neat flower borders.

Every morning after a long boring roll-call and inspection we were made to form a continuous line and then to make a concerted sweep throughout the whole of the camp to pick up any litter and cigarette ends. In most such sweeps there was nothing to pick up because rarely was anything ever dropped due to the punishment meted out to anyone guilty of that offence.

There were many inspections for kit, barrack rooms or full parade dress. Lectures were given by staff of the Education Corps, often those periods were a good opportunity for a quiet snooze. Debates and discussions were a diversion, the subject which aroused most interest was when the Beveridge Report which had recently been published was made known to us.

It made us aware of the recommendations for the reforms which it was hoped the first post-war government would implement. Two of the most important issues at least as far as most servicemen were concerned was that of full employment and a health service free to all but paid for by taxation.

We were allowed out here at night but found that beer was in short supply. The many Americans in the area were seen to be given preference due to the amount of money which they had at their disposal. They were able to purchase almost anything they wished whether it was beer, whisky or even women. There was quite a lot of ill-feeling between our troops and those white Americans; we had a great deal of sympathy for their black counterparts because of the degraded way in which they were treated, they seemed to be very unequal partners.

It really wasn't very pleasant to go out at night anyway because fighting regularly broke out. A lot of our boys were to blame by purposely seeking trouble with the Americans and their belligerent attitude provoked retaliation, most of those involved were our Guardsmen and the Parachutists.

It was a nightly occurrence to see them throwing Yanks out of a pub onto the street; a deal of the antagonism was the result of jealousy over the money they had to spend and their smarter dress and not least over their bombastic attitude. Also, on our part, there was much ill-feeling over the many 'Dear John' letters received by our men wherever the Americans had been stationed, causing either broken marriages or engagements.

I myself was unexpectedly involved one night while at the bar of a pub where it was known that beer was in short supply and there would not be sufficient to serve everyone. So I was patiently waiting my turn when I was elbowed out of the way by a persistent burly Yank to which I objected, as I was doing so I was pushed aside by two British soldiers who told me "out of the way, sergeant, we'll fix him" and they did. Even so, it was not very pleasant and one of the reasons why we didn't go out much while there. It was quite possible that any soldier in the vicinity of one of those incidents could just have easily been rounded up when the Redcaps appeared even though they were not the culprits but just soldiers out for a quiet drink. We had been told that there had been a lot of friction and ill-feeling well before the Second Front opened and that if it had not happened when it did the situation could have become more serious.

After a few weeks we were pleased to leave Taunton behind us and move on to Chester to a camp which I believe was called Seaton. There is not a great deal to record of my time there. I do remember that we watched the wartime 'Cobblers' play against Chester.

In Chester there was one particular pub which we frequented (I've long forgotten its name) where we were made most welcome and where the people were more hospitable than those at Taunton. If we had the price of a drink, what was called a 'latch-lifter', we were bought drinks for the remainder of the evening and became accepted by the locals as part of their group.

In that camp we all wore shoulder flashes of different colours, each colour denoting the nature of the injuries from which we were recovering; it was perhaps therefore red for an arm, blue for a leg and so forth. Each injury indicated by the colour worn. The system made it possible to allocate duties relative to the colour shown.

On morning parade when the duties were announced after a lengthy roll-call, we were lined up under the appropriate colour marker. Whatever one's rank the colour took priority. Those of us known as 'hand or arm' therefore would not be likely to be called on for a duty such as 'spud-bashing' and each of us among ourselves became 'Private Leg' or 'Corporal Head' and so on. It all sounded nonsensical but I suppose that it served its purpose.

Once again it became "pick up your kits" time. Why it became so many times necessary to move camp was in no way clear to us but after being in Chester for about three weeks we were off again to Stoke-on-Trent. As it happened it turned out to be an improvement on either of the previous places; life was not so hectic and the billet to which I was allocated was a Nissen hut which held about twenty-four men, mostly sergeants but also several sergeant-majors.

The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, much enlivened by a Welsh sergeant who was one of those barrack-room comics which are often found. He was without doubt one of the funniest men that I had come across, always a different repartee which kept us entertained.

Discipline in the camp was not over-forced, just enough to cause you to realise that you were definitely back in the Army and the easy life of the convalescent home all in the past. The evenings spent in the Mess were very pleasant and were enjoyed among the good friends that I made there. The permanent staff operated a racket in weekend leave passes which could be obtained over and above the normal one to which each was due. I was never fully conversant with the workings of the scheme because I wasn't concerned enough to make myself acquainted with it. But as far as I became aware some of the senior NCOs were involved.

Apparently an application had to be made to the squadron office worded in such a certain way that the writer was willing to pay for the privilege of an under-the-counter pass. No doubt those persons living only a reasonable distance away were only too pleased to take advantage of it. In my case it wasn't practical to take part because to travel as I would have had to, by train, the time actually at home would amount to little more than an overnight stay.

Although I have said that life at Stoke-on-Trent was not so hectic there was an incident occurred there in which I was involved. It happened during my spell as Guard commander and was important enough to subsequently cause me many anxious weeks then and even after I had left Stoke.

It all began innocently enough when the Corporal reported that three prisoners had requested to use the latrines which were outside the Guardroom. I should have known better than to allow all three out together but one at a time. However, I did make sure that they were adequately escorted. I had cause to regret that I hadn't been more strict because no sooner were they outside than a sentry shouted "they're away, sarge!". With that I called out the Guard and set off after the escapees followed by the sentries.

The prisoners had a good head start and were racing across the park making for the gates. One of them veered off to the left into the thick undergrowth and trees where no doubt he felt that he would be able to conceal himself until the hunt died down. I caught up with him there and held onto him until the other sentries arrived. The whole of the Guard was then up with the prisoners

and between us we captured the other two. The one which I had caught was resisting and attempted to break away again so that it took two sentries to restrain him as he persisted to struggle. We managed to get them safely back into the cells and securely locked in.

That though was only part of it for although they were back behind bars I had the very unpleasant duty of having to inform the regimental sergeant-major and then anxiously await the consequences, so really the worst was still to come. The RSM would be far from pleased that there had been a break-out in his domain, those are the incidents which he would have wanted to avoid because there would need to be an Inquiry which involved him and with myself being directly responsible for what happened. I wondered would charges be brought against me? Had I been negligent? All those thoughts passed through my mind as I sought out the Big Chief.

I was told at Regimental HQ that it was not at all the best time in which to make any approach to him and that I would at least be unpopular if I did so at that particular time as he would just then be taking his pre-dinner drink in the Mess and would not take kindly to being disturbed. It had to be done though. I asked an Orderly to inform him that I was the Guard commander and I would like to speak to him on a very important matter.

With that he came out to me, accepted my verbal report and being satisfied that the situation was then under control told me to have a written report on his desk next morning by 09.00 hours. That to me in itself was a problem because I had not the slightest idea of how to submit a report being only aware that there was a certain formula which must be adhered to in those circumstances. No doubt it was all set out in 'King's Regulations' but although I admit it was remiss of me I was not too familiar with them.

When I went into the billet my fellow NCOs, having seen me at dinner time, wanted to know what my business had been with the RSM. I told them the story of the escaping prisoners and of my dilemma regarding the production of a suitable report. They were all very concerned and offered to help, finally two of the Military Policemen who were occupants of our hut and who as part of their daily duty knew all about those sort of things offered advice until a report was outlined. Then I and one of them retired to the Mess to write it out in a true and proper manner. Having done so we settled down to a drink on the strength of it.

In the morning, hoping that what I had to offer in the way of a report would be acceptable, it was duly placed on the RSM's desk at the appropriate time and then I waited for the result. I expected to be called, perhaps to clarify something, or to receive some sort of order or comment but none came, not that day nor during the following week. In fact even months later I still expected to be summoned to a hearing or possibly a court-martial. It hung over me and I was just a little perplexed. I need not have been because I never heard another word then or since. That it ended for me as it did I was grateful to those policemen who were probably responsible for getting me out of a serious situation.

The next move for me came near to the end of 1944 and it took me to my own section of the Army, to the Armoured Corps Base Depot at Catterick. A garrison town much like Tidworth but with many more temporary buildings, so I was almost back to the real Army.

One of the first actions I took there was to apply for 'Return to Unit' and was informed that postings were continually being made and anything affecting me or anyone else would appear as usual on the Notice Board, all very short and to the point, so I just had to wait. I took charge of a hut of troopers waiting for postings as it appeared was everyone other than the regular staff.

In the sergeant's Mess I met a man named Gibson who hailed from Coventry but had been stationed in Northants, in Rushden, and had married there to a local girl so we had that much in common as our wives lived only a few miles apart. Our leaves of seven days came up at the same time, so we travelled home together by train as far as Wellingborough. The weather was extremely

foul and we shivered in the wintry morning as we stepped onto the platform; we then had a walk of a few miles to cover, he two or three miles more than myself; as 'Gibbo' said "the walk will soon warm us up".

That was not quite how it turned out however because I agreed to his suggestion that we make a shortcut across the fields which would lessen the distance. I had accepted his suggestion because he assured me that he knew the area "...like the back of my hand", having carried out many schemes across those same fields when he had been stationed there, and rather than offend him I bowed to his superior knowledge of that part of the countryside.

Shortly after leaving the station we turned into the fields but were very soon forced to return to the road and to attempt elsewhere because we had encountered a thick hedge and could find no way through. We crossed the next one fairly easily but met with a deep muddy ditch and although eventually finding a gate it was on the far side of the field in the wrong direction; that led us into a ploughed field which we skirted but was quite boggy and our battledress trouser bottoms were beginning to show the result of our futile wanderings and our boots heavy with mud. We backtracked several times but everywhere we attempted to get through offered some kind of obstacle; after what seemed ages we managed to find a road and then the going became easier.

I suppose that we had been negotiating and circling those fields for about two hours, long enough to recognise some of them, having traipsed them over and over again. We laughed about 'shortcuts' as we walked on, having taken twice as long as it should have done and when we emerged in Irthlingborough we were both in a dishevelled state, our legs and feet soaked, with large parts of those 'shortcut' fields clinging to us. It was fortunate that there were no Redcaps in Irthlingborough on that morning as we entered. When 'Gibbo' left me and carried on to Rushden I told him that if I were him I would keep to the road, it would be quicker.

Everywhere was quiet apart from the distant throbbing of the planes on the local airfields. While traipsing those fields we had both been fascinated by the brightness of the skies to the east emitted by the landing lights of the numerous bases, Chevelston, Poddington, Molesworth and many more where planes were either warming up before the day's operations or returning. It looked a real fairyland scene. There was, as far as I was aware, a general blackout order in force which would account for the amazing spectacle we beheld against the darkness elsewhere. It was obvious that the threat of enemy air strikes against our bases was over.

I made my way down to the Parks to Hilda's home too early for most people to be about but her next door neighbour was preparing to leave for his work as a boilerman, where he had to make an early start. I gave him a knock and shared a mug of tea with him before he left by which time both Hilda and her dad were up, she would then have to bike to her work on the farm in Stanwick; her dad worked nearby in town.

Whenever I was on leave I marvelled at the meals which women such as Hilda's mum or my mother were capable of providing even on the meagre ration allowance and in spite of the lack of choice of ingredients. When all of us were there for dinner Hilda's mum cooked for seven persons, including her father and her brother who worked in town but lived in Rushden. It was truly remarkable to perceive those wonderful dishes which she placed before us which were both wholesome and substantial.

On our return from leave Gibbo's wife and Hilda saw us off at the station and after being in Catterick for only a few days we were both given a posting to the same place. Whether it was thought because we were mates that they would send us off together I'm not sure, anyway it happened.

This time we were to report to a military prison where we were to instruct on gunnery, somewhere in the Chatham/Gillingham area; I cannot place it any more precisely because we were not there

long enough to get our bearings but I believe that the prison was known as 'Fort Darlan'.

Whoever thought that prisoners be taught gunnery had not much idea. It didn't take a lot of working out that the prisoners possibly knew as much about guns, perhaps more, than we did ourselves. It was probable that some among them were artillery men but we the teachers were only conversant with tank guns. Someone's grand idea was beyond comprehension.

Shortly after arriving we were given a lecture and were instructed on a few prison procedures because it was pointed out that we might be called on to perform some prison duties. The wooden huts which were our billet were cold and draughty from where the wind blew through the warped boards, we sat wrapped in blankets in the evening when we wrote our letters. There was nothing for us to do, no-one bothered to go out of their way to speak to us, we had our meals in the Mess and sat alone. The weather was too bad to even look around the place to which we had been sent; I do remember how forbidding and sinister those buildings appeared, tall and gaunt with their blackened brickwork.

Almost a week passed and we had still not seen any sign of guns on which we were supposed to instruct but on the Saturday we were called on for prison duty which as it turned out was the serving of prisoners' meals. At that time we had not even set foot inside the prison, hadn't seen the cells or received any instructions with regard to the serving of meals or how the task should be carried out, consequently it all went wrong.

I was given a tray of food and told some cell numbers but had no idea of what to do from there on. I approached the cells and was about to look for door numbers and then all I can remember of the sorry incident was of a sudden rush of bodies and my tray was empty. I just stood there bemused and embarrassed; I couldn't believe that the cells were unlocked but obviously some must have been and maybe the prisoners recognised a 'greenhorn', which of course I was, and therefore took advantage of it. I was taken off the duty immediately and strangely so was 'Gibbo' who had suffered a similar experience.

Back in the hut neither of us could come to terms with what had happened, it was bad enough we thought to have to accept the posting of gunnery instructors at that particular place but to have to do prison work for which we had received no training was quite a lot to have to grin and bear, we expected at any time to be called before someone in authority but nothing happened. As yet we had not met anyone who might be in charge but waited to receive a reprimand and some form of punishment so that on Monday morning we really thought that we would be marched in on some charge or other.

Over the weekend we discussed taking some action ourselves and resolved that we make an application to speak to someone in authority and ask for a return to Base on admittance of inefficiency, but when making enquiries as to whom we might see we were advised by someone that the best thing to do was to go on the Sick Parade.

We wondered whether this person giving us that advice knew something which we didn't. He was certainly a member of the prison staff, someone whom we had met in the Mess; neither of us had any reason to go sick and could well have been in trouble for wasting the MO's time or of malingering, anyway we did 'go sick' as was suggested.

We went in separately and he listened to me and my explanation of the position in which I found myself over the Saturday afternoon's debacle. I was surprised to find him in sympathy over the incident and said that he was recommending that I be taken off the duty and returned to Base depot.

'Gibbo's result was the same, after his hearing we both agreed that the MO was already aware of our humiliation over the cells episode because it must have gone in a report somewhere and surely must have been talked about. We wondered when we found that no time was wasted in getting our passes

and rail warrant almost within an hour of leaving the MO, that maybe someone had some explaining to do over the reason that we were employed in the prison.

We asked ourselves were they so in need of prison staff that they had secured us on the pretence of gunnery instruction? No gun had ever been produced, not one of any type nor was the fact ever mentioned, no classroom offered where we were supposed to teach. It was all very mysterious but we would never know what really happened.

It appeared that no unfavourable report followed either of us when we reported back to our major; all he said with a smile was "I thought I'd got rid of you two buggers". From there on we settled back into the routine of depot life and thankful to do so after our spell at that prison. I lost track of 'Gibbo', except that I would see him in the Mess. I really had nothing to do as I was not ordered to take over a squad until I had been back almost two weeks.

Then once again I received one of those grapevine messages to the effect that there were some men of the 2nd Battalion Tank Regiment who were in the camp and asked that I go along to see them and I was told by my informant where to find them, they were some way off. But as I learned that they were not expected to be there for many days because they were off to where the Regiment was reforming I set out that same evening to see them. How great it was to meet up again with a dozen or so sergeants, my desert comrades who had just returned from Burma. Being together after three years when they had left me in hospital in Cairo it was like old times.

There was a lot of news to catch up with and so many stories to relate; they had never been able to use their tanks in Burma apparently because of the terrain and had marched hundreds of miles to reach Allied lines. They told me of men who didn't survive which was upsetting. But in all it was an unforgettable meeting - a thoroughly enjoyable evening, I was so pleased that I had met up again with at least some of them; unfortunately I never had the opportunity to see them again.

We parted in the hall of the Mess and I was among the last to retrieve my hat, coat and gloves but my coat wasn't there. There was just one coat remaining but it was not mine. It was hanging where mine had hung, the one that remained was what I thought to be that of a Polish cavalryman, long enough to fit a six-footer with purple and red flashes and a belt at the back. It was a filthy winter night with a good covering of snow on the ground so there was nothing for it than avail myself of what remained. It was a coat anyway and I didn't intend to trudge back in just my battledress.

It reached to my ankles and dragged the snow as I slipped and stumbled my way back and it didn't help that I had had a few drinks. Hoping that I would not be observed I was able to slip into my room unseen. At that time in my bemused state I had not paused to consider what the consequences of the loss of my greatcoat might amount to in the clear morning. Then all I wished to do was to sleep off the booze.

When morning came I remembered the coat and saw it hanging there; I had to face up to the fact that I was responsible for taking my squad on parade for Inspection and Roll Call. I would have liked to ask the Corporal to take it but I had no excuse for being absent. So I had to come to a decision taking into account Standing Orders were that "during the inclement weather greatcoats would be worn". If I went without a coat I would have disobeyed that order but if I settled for the alternative and wore that coat I could be charged with being 'improperly dressed'. If I appeared in that ridiculous garment at least I would be showing a lack of respect; either way or whatever I did, I knew I wasn't going to win.

The Corporal came in and offered advice; he thought it best that I did not wear it, the lads when seeing me trying it on were well entertained and amused at my plight which didn't alter the circumstances at all. Some pointed out that it was too 'shivery cold' to stand on parade without a coat, others wanted me to wear it just for the dare; what finally decided me to put it on was the bitter cold state of the morning, so among a lot of giggling troopers we got 'fell in'.

It was indeed fortunate that our squad formed the rear rank of the parade and even 'Gibbo' who was formed up with his squad forward of me had not then learned of my predicament. I knew though that before very long he and everyone else would soon have knowledge of it.

Time seemed to stand still for me as I watched the Orderly Officer with the sergeant-major in tow slowly inspecting rank after rank as they worked their way to our position. Before they reached me they had seen me and both almost missed a step as they neared my front. I carried on and gave out the day's duties, something like "two men sick, four cookhouse" and so on and ended with the normal "otherwise present and correct, sir". Then as they came forward to inspect, the sergeant-major had no hesitation in saying "dismiss, sergeant. Squadron Office 9.00 hours". With that I left the parade ground and the Corporal took over.

I can't say that I enjoyed my breakfast because the incident had well and truly done its rounds, it was no doubt a cause for much merriment in the men's Mess where they all thought it hilarious and all sorts of punishments were predicted for me. In our own Mess there was some sympathy and understanding of my position. As I made my way after breakfast to the Squadron Office, still in that coat, quite a lot of comments were made while I considered how or in what way I would be made answerable for my misdemeanour.

I can't remember if I was marched in before the Major but I thought when he first saw me in my foreign attire that he tried to suppress a smile but maybe it was only wishful thinking on my part. He asked me what was my excuse for dressing like a clown and making a mockery of morning parade.

He listened to my explanations, of my visit to my old comrades of the 2nd Battalion, of my dilemma and having only the choice of two evils. I must have told it well because he accepted my story and offered no word of admonition and I was dismissed. The sergeant-major ordered me to go along to the Quartermaster's stores and exchange the offending article which I did, and signed for a new real British 'warmer'. I realised that I had been treated leniently and was fortunate to have been before that particular officer and not answerable to someone more strict.

No other posting came my way but a sergeant I had talked to in the Mess informed me of an office job which was shortly to become vacant. I was not very interested in it at the time, in fact I didn't think I had an aptitude for office work but he, sergeant Hamilton, told me that he thought I could do it and described it as a 'doddle'. He showed me what it amounted to and urged me to apply for it. He himself was soon to be released on the grounds of age, service and medical reasons. When encouraging me to put in for the job he said I would be able to see out the remainder of my time there and would have a reasonable easy life too.

My reply to 'Hammy' was that I was waiting to be returned to the Regiment in Germany. At that he said something like "don't be silly, no-one of your medical grade gets a posting of that sort, don't you realise that you are downgraded. You are now B7". I couldn't believe it, but on checking with a Squadron Office clerk found it to be true and it had been so for six months; that surprised me as I considered myself reasonably fit - at least I had thought so when I chased those prisoners a month or so before. However if that was the case then I decided to do as 'Hammy' had suggested and apply for the job, I did so but not without some trepidation.

I was given permission to take over as soon as he had left. From then on after I had taken my squad on morning parade I worked with 'Hammy', where he showed what was entailed and sure enough I found that there was nothing to it. It was all to do with the drawing up of the daily manpower requirements and to detail their allocations for the following day. I would need to know the number of men required each day for cookhouse duties, Guards, Pickets, Escorts and any other further demands which were often made by the sergeant-major, such as area cleaning.

Either I would be made aware of these needs or I would myself make the enquiries which took me

around the camp; the Guards and Pickets were formed automatically from the Duty Roster so that men usually knew when their turn for duty was due. When the lists were complete they were placed on the Squadron Notice Board.

'Hammy' left then to be demobbed and I became accustomed to the job. It was easy enough as he had said and I was really enjoying doing it. I hadn't been doing the work for many weeks though when I was disrupted during part of the day and the reason became a topic in the Mess because there were some strange occurrences in process.

Why, we wondered, were a number of classrooms being set aside, complete with desks seeming to be made ready for some unspecified purpose. Firstly we had to attend lectures given by an officer of the Education Corps, mainly to do with courses which could be taken to prepare one for civilian life.

This involved about twenty of us sergeants; we all realised that the war in Europe was drawing to a close but there was still the war in the Far East so it was generally expected that the conflict could continue for another year or two. So why were we being offered courses then?

We then found ourselves more involved, for each day we were interviewed, questioned and examined; firstly questioned on our military history, then another day our medical history, all of which was already well documented. We saw the dentist and were medically examined, finally we sat before a psychiatrist who gave us puzzles to solve, wooden blocks with which to build shapes, words were fed to us and our replies had to follow with another word. Everything in each test was noted down.

Several days were spent playing those silly games. We wondered about the square peg and round hole situation; were they attempting to place us in postings which were suitable to our qualifications and ability which they deduced from their strange and stupid games.

In the opinion of those of us taking part in those antics the whole affair would have been laughable if the nonsense they were daily putting us through wasn't so expensive and time-wasting. Our medical and military history was well documented for instance and there seemed to be no reason why we should have to relate it all to them, except perhaps that it was thought that they could furnish some illogical answers to their childish puzzles and games.

As we got more and more fed up with it each of us became less co-operative and made a hash of their puzzles and questions, giving incorrect and misleading answers. It gave them a few puzzles to sort out. On the other hand the debates and lectures were enjoyable and enlightening, what was it all in aid of, we asked ourselves, what kind of work were they preparing as many twenty sergeants for?

It must be something important, we argued, and all so secret, no-one had even hinted at its purpose. After a while we heard a whisper, a rumour circulated to the effect that we were not being prepared for a posting anywhere but after the testing was complete a select number would go forward to an assessment centre where it would be decided the percentage of pension to be awarded and a date given for discharge from service.

All that to me, and I believe the others too, was too good to be true, someone we thought was having us on, and yet it was quite feasible from what had been happening during the past few weeks. But it became a fact; it was absolutely true, I was one of those on the list to go and 'Gibbo' too. I believe; all of the others also followed in batches eventually.

We were destined for a medical centre at Morpeth in Northumberland and about six of us set off by train to Newcastle. My journey there was somewhat of a disaster because I made my way there by military ambulance having fallen down at Darlington station and found myself at Newcastle Victoria hospital rather than at a Release Centre.

What had occurred was that as the train stopped briefly I nipped off to get a newspaper and running back to reboard slipped over. From then on, until I came round in a hospital bed, I had not known what had happened; my battledress sleeve had been cut away and my arm, the one I damaged in 1941, was swollen from elbow to fingers and some fluid was drained away. I soon got over it and the arm was back to normal in a week or so.

We were visited by a Red Cross worker seeking information of anyone known to us on their many lists of missing persons. I had encountered this before when I was in hospital in Cairo in 1941; at that time the only name I recognised was that of my old friend Danny, and the information which I could offer then that the last time I saw him was at the Armoured Corps Reinforcement Base prior to the German breakthrough and France's capitulation, but that fact only reinforced what news of him they had already gained.

But at this time in 1945 his name was still on the list and the more recent news of him was that he was aboard the *Lancastria*, and standing near a funnel when a bomb dropped so he was classed as 'missing believed killed'. I was so sorry and very much surprised; sorry because Danny was another of those very close mates that I had lost and surprised too because I had always presumed that when the evacuation from Dunkirk and Calais had begun they would be among the first to get away. But since, having learned more of that terrible tragedy I find the date was the 17th June 1940 which was around ten days after the end of the evacuation a few days after myself, when I had believed that we were among the last to escape.

Apparently the *Lancastria* was anchored outside the port of Saint-Nazaire in the bay of Biscay, there were over 4,500 men, women and children lost when German bombers attacked and hit the liner; as it listed hundreds of would-be passengers leapt into the sea, many were picked up by small boats but there were that massive number who did not survive, Danny being one of them.

This was one of the greatest disasters at sea in history; it so shocked Winston Churchill that he banned publication of the news. After the war I worked with Danny's brother, Sandy, and I was able to tell him of our times together, of how I agreed that being at Base Depot he had a safe job but such is the unpredictability of war that these terrible things occur.

While there in hospital the war in Europe was declared over, and the 8th May 1945 was pronounced VE-Day; so after almost six years of chaos, devastation and death, with many of our cities and Europe in ruins the Germans had finally been forced to surrender. In order that we walking patients could take part in the celebrations we were allowed out for a few hours and found the streets of Newcastle crowded with throngs of people who, as with the remainder of the country, were wildly making merry to celebrate the occasion.

There were street parties decorated with bunting and flags, groups were dancing in the streets, there was much drinking and such other festivities; everyone out to mark that long-awaited day. We, sporting our hospital Blues, were easily recognised and everywhere we walked we were mobbed. People all wanted our company and we were invited to join so many groups that it was difficult to refuse some invitations, there were invites into houses where we were plied with food and drink and urged to join their parties.

A warning had been given before being allowed out not to drink too much and of that I was particularly aware because I did not intend to ruin any chances I had of an early release once I had left hospital. The people there treated us like heroes, little did they know that of the four of us, I had had a small operation on my arm, one had been injured playing football, one had a hernia operation and I'm not sure what brought the other one to hospital because he had driven a 'brass hat' around the country for most of the war. We could hardly be classed as heroes, but on that great day the revellers would have accepted any serviceman as a hero then.

As servicemen though we did not forget at that memorable time that although the war in Europe

had thankfully ended and been brought to a favourable conclusion, there were still thousands of our comrades fighting in the Far East. There were also thousands more suffering in captivity at the hands of those barbaric Japanese. Several of my friends died from the result of their violence and many still suffer today from the result of the punishment which they received. I can feel sympathy for those unfortunates and share with them their hatred against those who perpetrated those atrocities which in some cases might even be forgiven but to forget about them is not possible.

With VE-Day past, it was only to be expected that all servicemen and women would be contemplating their release from service and hoping that their group would be an early one; there were others who were more apprehensive about the possibility that they might be called on to serve out their time in the Far East to assist those fighting there and to hasten the ending of that war too. I myself had no such fear because I was virtually certain that within a few days of being returned to the Release Centre I would be a civilian, demobbed with a pension. That certainty was further enhanced by some of the lads who were my visitors when they came in to tell me that they were on their way home and had come to say goodbye. They assured me that I would soon be following on and that I would receive a substantial pension due to the fact that I had a recurring wound which would count for a lot when the assessments were made.

Among those leaving was 'Gibbo': he came in on his way home to Rushden and said he would look me up in the British Arms in a week or so. I left hospital and on the Monday morning, at Morpeth I expected to be called before the brigadier but instead was issued with a leave pass for seven days which surprised me because I thought it strange that when only a few days from being demobbed I should be granted leave, and although I was well aware that it was the custom to receive sick leave after a spell in hospital I would well have waived the privilege under the circumstances.

However, a pass given at any time and for whatever reason was always acceptable; in any case I told myself that it would only delay my release date a little and when I returned to Morpeth it would just be a matter of collecting my papers.

I thoroughly enjoyed that leave, it was great to be able to tell Hilda, my family, friends and those in the pub and all and sundry of my early homecoming. At that time too Hilda had some wonderful good news to impart because she informed me that I was about to become a father; further, that she had rented a cottage which would be ready for me when I arrived home - at number 18 Baker Street in Irthlingborough. I felt so elated; so many things were happening, there seemed so much for us to look forward to, to be together as a family in our own home and with no more going away, no more of "pick up your kits"; it was all so unbelievable.

We went to Northampton to pass on the good news to them. Brother Ern was home at the same time, it was he in fact who brought me the telegram while I was in Bain's shop having my hair cut which instructed me to return to Morpeth immediately. I could not explain this sudden development, I couldn't guess at the reason for it but knew that I would be made aware of it on my return.

Chapter Ten: Return to Service

After arriving at Morpeth time seemed to hang as there was so little to do, I didn't know anyone and I wondered why I had been called so urgently. The staff went out of their way to keep us occupied by arranging outings and visits to various places of interest; on one occasion we went down a coalmine, I believe that it was Bedlington. It was most enlightening; I wasn't really in the mood to take part in or enjoy anything very much at that time; I wished the days away and wanted the weekend to pass so that on Monday after seeing the Brigadier I would learn my Demob date and then would be in a position to let Hilda know when she could expect me home.

At the interview which didn't last many minutes all my hopes and dreams for the future were dashed in that short time because the officer came immediately to the point and said "Sergeant Digby, we have another job for you". I was ordered to collect my pass and documents and to report to somewhere in Surrey, I forget exactly where; I was given no indication of the nature of the job or whatever it might entail.

At first I was most shocked and bitterly disappointed over that so sudden turn of fortune. But once those feelings had passed and I had time to consider what had happened I felt that maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all, that perhaps the extra duty which I had been called on to perform would last no longer than a few weeks and would only amount to a short delay before being released and it was in that frame of mind that I wrote off to Hilda and my parents informing them of the changed situation.

I found the billet in Surrey to be a large country house where there were about thirty-five other NCOs all of them like myself downgraded men, which to all of us seemed rather strange that whatever the job was for which we had been detailed it required unfit men. What was the logic of it all? Especially as at the time there were A1 men, many with less service than ourselves, who were being released.

Among the group I found 'Hammy', Sergeant Giles, Sergeant Forte and a few others who I thought had already been demobbed; between us our service had taken us from Dunkirk through the Desert Campaign, Italy, the jungles of Burma and yet were now called on once more for further service. After a few days, having attended several lectures, we were becoming aware that the duties which were demanded of us would take longer than just the week or two I had first contemplated.

The introductory course which we attended dealt with the workings of the Control Commission which was responsible for the disarming and rehabilitation of the defeated Germans and it was at about that point that we all realised that the work could not possibly be carried out at the Home Base in England and although no-one at any time had even hinted that we were to work abroad we were certain then that we were destined for Germany.

The truth finally dawned on us and we learned that we were to become members of the department for the demolition of enemy war equipment; I don't know that I was furious, shocked, amazed or whatever, once my mind had absorbed the new situation, but as usual what had happened had to be accepted as inevitable.

That this sudden turn round in circumstances should occur at the very time when life seemed to have so much that was favourable and pleasant was to put it mildly, disappointing. We all had the sad and unenviable task of writing to tell our people at home and to explain the further downturn in the plans for our futures.

The letter which I wrote to Hilda was written with a very heavy heart knowing how much it would

upset her, to learn that once more I was to go away again. Especially as only a week earlier we had both been so elated. She would of course, as all the women at home, accept the facts as they did in wartime, long-suffering and taking all the knocks, blows and disappointments that were theirs to endure. I was far from being alone in my forlorn feelings because those of my new-found mates were writing in a similar vein to their loved ones; we were with one accord generally bemoaning our lot and asked ourselves just how much does one have to contribute before someone decides 'that's enough'. How many pounds of flesh had to be taken?

Our moaning about our present circumstances and the added curses directed against those unknown to us but who were responsible for our predicament was a way of relieving our feelings and even though we carried on doing so we knew that there was nothing at all that we could do that would alter it. So we finally adopted those well-used maxims and mottoes of "bless 'em all" and "don't let the buggers get you down".

The course lasted about ten days during which time we were made conversant with every part of the German tank because it was to be our duty to weigh, label and report every piece of equipment which was to be destroyed. We also learned just enough of the German language to enable us to get by as we were told that we would learn more in the course of our daily work.

Those in charge appeared to be in some considerable hurry to get us away to our base in Germany although we were not told where that would be and information was not forthcoming. We asked the questions; who would be our immediate bosses, where and how would we live, for instance? But everyone seemed reluctant to tell us anything. Whether they knew the answer themselves we were not too sure, it was as if our mission was of a secretive nature, which of course it was not.

Our first move took us over the channel to a chateau in a very picturesque wooded area of Belgium; we never learned just where it was as we were never able to leave the building except to walk in the grounds. More instruction was given and further language tuition, the same applied when we made the next move which was to a house on the outskirts of Antwerp; the exception there was that while being there for almost three weeks we were allowed out, in fact we visited Brussels and the seaside resort of Blankenburg, travelling by train. It was noticeable how frequent the service was, also how fast and clean, which I thought was quite creditable considering the railway's commitments during the war with movement of both Allied and the German occupying forces and their machinery, their country only being free of war for about a year.

Then we moved on again, it seemed to us that we were being shunted around Belgium as if we were unwanted after all. The actual reason was, of course, that there was a great shortage of transport due mainly to the vast number of drivers who were being demobbed. On we went again, staying nowhere for little longer than a week. The next stop being Westende a few miles along the coast from Ostend, there I recall the Navy engaged in blowing up the minefields.

One other notable thing which happened there was that we received our Voting Forms for the first postwar General Election which became known as the 'Soldiers' Election'. There was very little doubt as to which way we used our vote. It seemed that we with few exceptions among the rank-and-file ensured that Major Clement Attlee and the Labour Party secured an overwhelming victory in 1945.

A further move took us to the old town of Bruges where we along with hundreds of other troops also awaiting transport were stationed in the ancient barracks which appeared to be a holding centre for various destinations within Germany. While there we took part in route marches which were quite pleasant being usually along the canalside; the weather then being late June was warm and the Belgian countryside scented and colourful; we swam in the old baths in the town and at long last transport was made available and we were finally on our way.

As we moved on into Germany, even after the eight months' end of hostilities we witnessed at first

hand from the backs of our trucks the sheer and complete destruction of towns and villages as we passed through them. The damage created by the bombing and shelling of the Allied armies as they advanced, where once stood houses, shops, municipal buildings and all other types of building, had reduced them to heaps of brick, masonry and piles of powdered dwellings from under which people could be seen emerging, and going and coming about their daily affairs; that at the time was the manner of their existence. Quite a lot of aid was being made available in an attempt to alleviate some of these hardships and sufferings through the Allied Control Commission.

Our travels ended in the courtyard before a large building of what seemed to have been the offices and centre of administration; we were to learn later that we were in the Hanover area, the nearest town was Celle and what was to be our home and workplace there was at the village of Hanigsen. After putting down our kits each of us was allotted a room to ourselves which was comfortable and spacious, a very welcome meal was set before us; the cooks and all other workers were Germans.

It wasn't until after the meal when we walked around the surroundings to take a brief look at where we were to work that we saw the mineshaft and we quickly realised that the complex into which we had settled was a salt mine. It came as a great shock to discover that we were likely to end our Army careers working down a salt mine. No-one at any time, not at Morpeth or anywhere since had mentioned or even intimated that we would carry out our duties in such a place.

Once again every one of us felt very much let down and believed that we had good cause for a curse and swear, the Army and top brass went through it all. The German woman who seemed to be in charge and the men who carried our kits to our rooms heard our angry outbursts and no doubt understood our reasons because our grumbles were directed at the Germans and Germany as a nation who we said were responsible for the situation. When the first shock had been well absorbed we cooled down and realised that once again there was nothing to be done except to just 'grin and bear it' and to 'soldier on', then ponder on what the light of a new morning might show.

Intending to make the best of the situation wasn't so very difficult because we found that the amenities and facilities provided for us couldn't be faulted. There was a separate Mess for us sergeants and one for the drivers. The food was first rate and German staff were quite co-operative. Our first morning parade after arrival was at 08.00 hrs when we were introduced to our duties by a Staff Sergeant of the Ordnance Corps under whose authority we would be engaged. We toured the site and went down the mine and acquainted ourselves with the areas there where the tank parts were stored. The whole of the mine sparkled and glistened from the lights reflected from the salt face.

Apparently apart from the storage of parts the large benches and conveyor belt system were used during the war for the making of detonators for shells. There was still at that time much synthetic silk-like material which was used in their manufacture. It was pretty clear from what we had seen that we were going to be kept very busy, so busy in fact it would leave little time for grumbles of any sort or any self-pity.

Not many days had passed before we all found that we had settled into a sort of routine working as a team but each having responsibility for one particular task. My own was to record the weight of each wagon-load of parts which was despatched by train, to describe the parts, types and label each load before it left the mine. It was not often necessary for me to work down the mine as my work began after each load was brought up to the surface. The actual moving and loading of the parts was carried out by prisoners of war who were brought in daily for the purpose.

There were twelve of us 'tankies' who found that our overseers of the Ordnance Corps to whom we were responsible were very easy to work with. At the beginning we had sat down with an officer and a Staff Sergeant and planned the most practical way in which to approach the task; there were also parts in one of the large warehouses which needed to be attended to.



(Above) Sgt. Giles and myself after a swim in Antwerp.

The mine shaft at the Hanigsen Salt Mine.



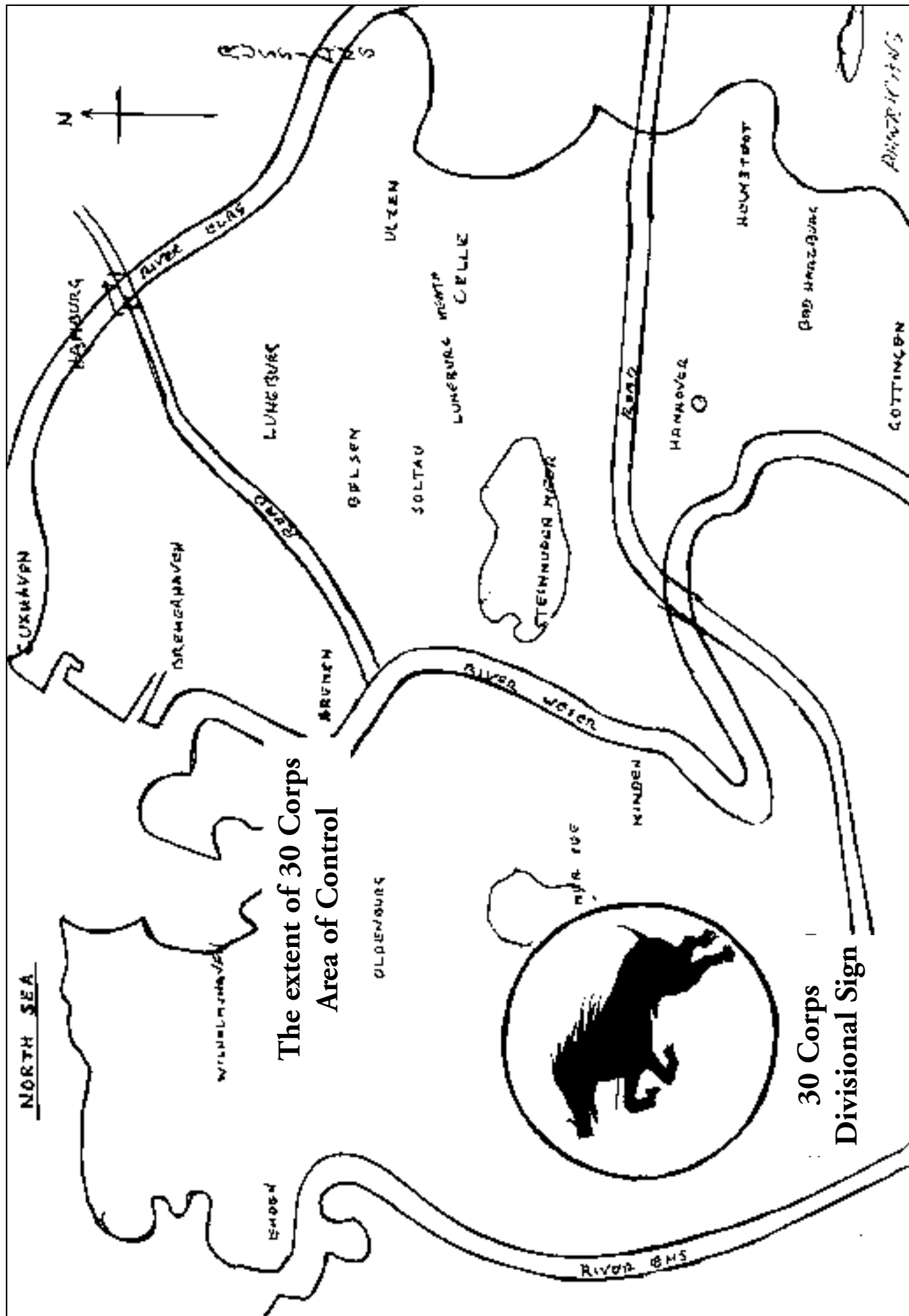
A medical Sgt. among the debris.



Loading tank parts.



Tank parts to be sorted and despatched.



Not all that was brought up was despatched immediately as some would be required to be put to one side until they were checked by an officer from the Control Commission and any special instruments would be sent to England. Although the bulk of materials would go for smelting down there was quite a lot which was burnt in the adjoining fields.

There was a German civilian in charge of the workforce, Herr Lockner, who had his own office. I found him sullen and most unco-operative which made him suspect. We knew that we could not expect to be popular with everyone, it was understandable that not every German wished to see or to assist in the destruction of part of what was their great armoured force and there were some no doubt who would do their best to subvert our efforts. If we came across anything or anyone who appeared to be suspicious it had to be reported and a special watch would be kept on them.

There was an interpreter, I believe he was Belgian, who although he was a member of the Mess and had his meals with us he had little to do with us, but was known to have German friends so we kept an eye on him. There was also a building which upstairs had a darkroom such as photographers use and on more than one occasion I had seen several men using that room. It seemed strange to me that the work we were doing should require photography, it went into my report but whether anything came of it I was not aware.

There too was a doctor who, it was said, was responsible for the mine and ammunition workers during the war, who still had what appeared to be a surgery which always seemed to be crowded; it was then of course still early days in the working of the Commission and as time went on it is possible that these persons and their positions were sorted out.

Our Mess room in the evening was comfortable for reading and writing or card-playing, there was not a great deal more to occupy us. We did have a bar which was very welcome. In my letters to Hilda I told her of my work, that I was in good spirit, content with my position, and not to worry as I was bound to be coming home when my group was called, and anything else that I thought might cheer her up.

There were seven mines in the area and ours was the headquarters. Each weekend the personnel from the other mines came in for a conference and stayed over so it made quite a party weekend. There were different types of war equipment at each of those mines but ours was the only one holding tank parts. There was a warehouse which had housed medical equipment and another which was then still filled with anti-gas equipment both for humans and for horses; there was though little left that could be salvaged from either building because the local Germans who worked in the clearing of them told us that the Russians, when they passed through, had ransacked and carried off anything which they thought would be of use to them.

Those Germans were so in fear they would say something like "Russky not come back, Tommy stay, Russky no good", when they attempted to tell of what the Russians did while there we told them that "it served them right", and that they got what they deserved. Often we would hint that the Russians might come back again to impress on them that the Russians were our Allies and the Germans were responsible for the war anyway.

At one of the other mines were vehicle parts and motorcycles, there the lads each rode around the camp on one. Another place contained naval stores and among them were large-type binoculars such as were used by the German naval commanders and most of us before we came home became the lucky owner of a pair. I believe they were manufactured by Zeiss. From another mine I was presented with a harmonica made by Hohner.

It was said that the railway line which served our mine was a branch of the nearby mainline which in wartime carried those victims destined for the notorious death camp at Belsen and on seeing the headlines one morning on Herr Lockner's newspaper referring to those camps, we asked about it, but he simply refused to talk of it and when we asked others if they knew about it they either

suddenly went deaf or muttered "Ich kann sie nicht verstehen". They understood alright, they must have known of the gas chambers, would have known of the smell and have known when seeing those train-loads of unfortunate human beings that were being transported there.

Life for us was very pleasant, the weather of late summer very warm. We were free of all parades and military duties; all that was asked of us apart from our work was that we maintained a smart appearance, a clean and upright bearing, setting an example of the British Army as befitted an occupying force. As we went about our business no-one bothered us. Work was hard but not without some satisfaction, daily seeing off tons of war materials, tank tracks, bogie wheels, all parts that went into the make up of a tank.

We fed well in our Mess, the food being varied and well-presented. In their spare time some of the men went shooting locally, regularly bringing in a deer so that venison was often part of our diet. Our drivers went far afield in order to bring in some extras with which to supplement the rations; these included wines, spirits and liquors, from where or how these luxuries were obtained, where the money came from to purchase them remained a mystery because I am certain that the small amount of Mess fees which we paid would be insufficient but we didn't enquire of the methods used, were just grateful for all those good things. There was nothing on which to spend our money except a few very reasonably-priced drinks in the Mess each evening and anything such as toiletries which the drivers shopped for in the local NAAFI, so that we were in a position to send some savings home.

There was no entertainment so again there were no costs involved. There were a couple of dances arranged in the village to which local boys and girls were invited as were soldiers from other units. On one occasion we put on a concert, I wouldn't say it was a success but it certainly caused some laughter, using our own talent of course, or rather making the best of our lack of talent;

By borrowing a fur coat and a trilby hat, 'Brummie' and I did a fair take-off Flanagan and Allen's *Underneath the Arches* number, which was reasonably well received, but my harmonica rendition was never completed in fact hardly begun before the catcalls and comments were hurled at me with a chorus of "get orf". I burst out laughing and made a hurried exit. It was good fun, made a change from the routine and sameness of our evenings.

I doubt if any evening passed without our discussing our estimated time of release. Mine appeared to be about the following November, although most of us by this time had enough experience not to count on anything working out as one hoped. We were still smarting over our suddenly changed fortunes six months previously. At one time almost a civilian only to find ourselves there at a salt mine, so it would be folly to take anything for granted.

The letters from home, especially those to us married men, always posed the same question "when will you be coming home?" which they felt compelled to ask when they saw other men arriving home and being féted with parties, flags and bunting. It was understandable that they should show their concern for they suffered so many hardships and endured the wartime restrictions and rationing, had made many sacrifices in so many ways they wished more than anything else to have their men back with them. For those with children they must have been very anxious times.

I was due for leave at the beginning of October but arranged to have it delayed for a couple of weeks, hoping that it would coincide with the birth of our baby; I knew that Hilda would wish that to be so if possible. Time at Haningsen passed quickly mainly because we were kept so busy despatching the contents of the mine. We were constantly occupied. During my leisure time I took one of the educational courses which the Army was offering. I began an Art course so my evenings then took on a different form.

I had always painted and drawn from early childhood but had never thought of taking instruction. I think that I had just about finished part one which was pen and ink work before my Demob, but

once home and with a family it was put to one side and forgotten although even after almost sixty years I still have the results of those first lessons.

Within a year or two however I began painting in earnest with both water and oils and it became my fulltime hobby with hundreds of paintings to my credit; some of which have found their way across the world. Today though I am firmly established with Acrylics as a medium. I remember leaving a large mural on the whitewashed wall of our billet in Cyprus and received the compliments of an officer when one day he was inspecting our kits.

Another diversion to add to our evenings in the Mess was the lessons in German which one of our sergeants set up, he being conversant with several languages. This was very well attended and made it worthwhile for him to give up some of his time. Most of what I learned is forgotten now, although I could never converse with any fluency I just about made myself understood. I very much enjoyed those periods.

When I took my leave I misjudged the time of arrival of our son Robert because by the time I arrived he was five days old. I think that he was in a hurry to enter the world, that was on the 14th October 1945. When I arrived home I expected to find Hilda and the baby there at the home of Hilda's mother but I only found grandad (Albert Bennet) who informed me that they were out for a walk. The weather that autumn was sunny with heavy morning mists and dews which hung over the Nene valley.

Just prior to Robert's birth Hilda had been able to attend a street party organised to celebrate the end of the war in the East. Atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which had forced the Japanese to surrender. It was a wonderful leave with my family which caused my demob date to be even more urgent, it couldn't come soon enough.

Unfortunately the men due for release were not being dealt with as swiftly as had been envisaged at the beginning due again to the lack of sufficient transport. Whether it was a shortage of drivers or of vehicles we couldn't tell, maybe a little of both. Whatever the reason may have been the rate at which men then were being returned to civilian life was progressing slowly enough to indicate that I would not get away on schedule in November; it appeared that it would be nearer to the year's end.

There was no doubt that the returning of millions of personnel from all parts of the world and to finally discharge them was a colossal undertaking and in the main it was accepted as such by us. There were of course those who became impatient and enraged at the delay but they were usually told to "soldier on".

Back at Hanigsen I found that the men had formed a football team and as it turned out one with considerable talent. A match was arranged for each weekend, the opposition was either local German teams, sides from other regiments or against our colleagues from the other mines. There was one professional in our team, a goalkeeper and also some other useful players so I was fortunate to keep a regular place playing every match, maybe I was the only one with a left foot.

Some evenings we took the ball along to one of the empty warehouses either for a five-a-side game or just a kick-about. These buildings were spacious and ideal for the purpose, often there would only be two or three of us and in that case we contented ourselves with kicking the ball against the walls but our games came to an end when the Medical Officer put the buildings out of bounds.

Several of us had suffered unusual headaches and sores and blemishes developed on our skins accompanied by sore throats, runny noses and eyes. The MO became concerned and linked it to the symptoms similar to the effects of gas poisoning. It was then discovered that the building where we had played had in wartime been used for the storage of German gases and our games had disturbed the dust on the walls and in the woodwork. One or two men were off sick due to it. The result was that it put paid to what for us had been a most enjoyable pastime.



*Sgt. Hamilton
and myself
with the Sgt.
Major.*



*Some
members
of the
team.*

Each week someone's demob number would be up, which meant one or several of our comrades would come into headquarters to take leave of us and each of these occasions was celebrated in the Mess. They would be expected to pay for drinks for everyone on the evening before they left.

While we wished them luck on their way it was at the same time quite sad to lose that comradeship which had been built up and to witness the breaking-up of a team which had worked so well together there at Hanigsen.

As we saw these men leave, Christmas was quickly approaching; it had turned bitterly cold, freezing hard both night and day. We put our minds toward making some sort of effort to brighten up the two Mess rooms to do something in the manner of decorations, hoping to create an atmosphere that showed the spirit of the Festive Season. Also, we thought that it would take our minds off the fact that we were to spend yet another Christmas away from our homes and our loved ones. It was then well past my release date so I intended to make the best of the situation as it was.

I was honoured to accept the task of the decorating. I was allowed the assistance of two privates with the use of a workroom and set about to transform the Messes, scrounging any materials which we thought might be of use because there were no ready-made decorations. At first we had no idea of what we were looking for but were dependent on what turned up as we searched the complex. In doing so we came across reams of brown paper, powdered dye and tins of various coloured paints. In addition there was any amount of electric light cable and bulbs. Having gathered those basics we set to work; firstly the paper was cut and squared and then soaked in baths of dye of mixed colours, hung up to dry they were then cut into strips with which to form chains or lanterns and other shapes.

The words "A Happy Christmas" were cut out of cardboard boxes and each letter painted white, when dry these were hung in the hallway between the two Messes. To find suitable greenery was no problem as there were numerous holly bushes in the vicinity and we felled one of the many fir trees which we used as the centre piece. When all the mass of paperwork was assembled and in place, the tree illuminated and our efforts complete we ourselves were astonished at the transformation of those previously grim interior rooms.

With the entrance bright and seemingly inviting it really did appear to be Christmassy and it was all finished in time. Some tinsel and perhaps fairy lights might just have given it that little extra touch.

We three were pleased with our efforts and we accepted the congratulations of our fellow messmates. We were asked many times how long it took us to gather all that had been necessary to carry out the decorations but actually we hadn't to look that far afield or to search a great deal as it was all at hand and there was more than enough for our needs.

A visiting Brigadier thought that our efforts to create a seasonal setting "a good show". He asked who was responsible for it all and asked to see me that he might congratulate me on a "splendid effort" and added that he thought that I would never need to be out of work in my future life. I told him that I had the help of two good men and he asked me then to convey his satisfaction to them also.

A few days before Christmas four of us were detailed to supervise the burning of hundreds of large wooden crates. These were well made of very fine timber, they were the containers for gas equipment. We had them dumped in the middle of a nearby field, it did seem wrong to us that such good quality wood was not reserved and put to some use, especially there in a country ravaged by war and attempting to rebuild itself. In fact the very men engaged in the burning of them could themselves have used them to some purpose, and they let us know that they too were appalled over their destruction. For those homes locally where there was very little in the way of fuel they would have been most welcome as firewood. Villagers with their children and stood around and watched

the blaze and no doubt enjoyed the heat which was being generated.

The women amongst the onlookers pleaded with us to allow them to take some of the wood away and one of my colleagues approached the sergeant-major to ask if their request might be granted, but as was expected the crates as well their contents came under the heading of 'enemy war equipment' and he told us that we must carry out instructions. It was pointed out to him that it was the contents only which came under that heading, not the containers, but it was all to no avail we had to obey and carry out our duties. Once again it was a case of 'ours is not to wonder why'.

It was possible sometimes to turn a blind eye, I saw some of the contents emptied on the fire and quite a few empty crates found their way into the trees and bushes and were no doubt recovered after dark for firewood. It was terribly cold and we all felt that it was wrong that those children there who were not old enough to be blamed for the sins of their elders and their nation should suffer cold and hardships because of their actions.

The civilians who worked for us were terribly afraid of authority as was shown when we were called at the end of the day on occasions to do a gate or a train check. Each one had to be stopped and searched for stolen articles or materials and while we were doing so some men and women would just shake with fright. Some of the older women burst into almost uncontrollable tears.

Our impression was that it must have been due to similar searches carried out by the Gestapo and the frightening hold that they exacted over them. They possibly believed that our authority was in some way similar. We never at any of those searches found any equipment missing. Whatever was found only ever amounted to a few insignificant items, usually of little worth. To my knowledge only one person was dismissed from her job and she had worked in the cookhouse and had stolen food; hers was a tempting situation and she was caught. No-one else, I am sure, suffered more than a lecture from the camp commandant.

The Christmas dinner was a superb meal and served as was tradition by the officers; it was a most convivial affair, a comradely gathering with the officers sharing in our jokes and fun. None of us assembled there could believe that we were enjoying such a feast at a German salt mine; food and drink was plentiful and of the highest quality, certainly superior to that which our folk at home would have been able to serve at that time.

The children of the village came to us on Boxing Day to a party which we had arranged for them, every one in the unit had contributed an amount of money which had been passed to the cooks for them to make provisions for it. Father Christmas (St Nicholas) was there to greet them, complete in his home-made robes assembled from a dyed blanket with lots of cotton wool. The children tucked into their food, the variety of which must have been a surprise to them, they not being used to such an assortment of luxuries.

From somewhere, a gramophone and records appeared, we had practised singing "*Silent Night*" in their language "*Stille der Nacht*" so that we were able to sing along with them. On leaving, each child was given a present, most of which were made by the lads themselves in the workshops in their spare time.

I am certain that those parents and the children who were present on that Boxing Day afternoon of 1945 appreciated our attempt to bring a little cheer into the lives of those children in their first peacetime Christmas, for whom those times must have been very distressing, especially for the very young.

It is hoped that they would remember that Christmas in the dark cold winter before their lives and the country had been rebuilt and our little effort of some benevolence which perhaps assisted in fostering better relationships at least in that locality as a result.

I had always said that it was unwise to take anything for granted, not to count any chickens and

true to form when my Demob date finally arrived early in the early New Year, the Army in the person of our Camp Commandant, didn't want me to leave.

Although they couldn't hold me they wished for another pound of flesh. I was asked to stay on, not just myself but about eight others who were in the same release group. We were called to the office individually where the Commandant assured each of us that there was no way in which he could keep us on but appealed to us to consider staying for a further six months.

He pointed out to me how imperative it was that we stayed because by leaving at that particular time would much impair the work of the Commission as we were experienced workers in what was an essential service. The position, he thought, would become stable once the National Servicemen began to filter through and be trained to take over. He then put the question "would you be prepared to serve for six more months?" and "would I go away and think about it?"

At that point my answer would have been an emphatic "No" but there were bribes offered, various inducements which were worth my consideration. The War Office were most anxious to persuade as many of us as possible to do that little bit more.

There were advantages; I would be entitled to immediate promotion to staff sergeant, which meant an increase in pay and a larger family allowance, all very tempting. On the other hand I had my family commitments to take into account and that was not the only reason that I was reluctant to make any hasty decision. I realised that those men first out would be able to choose their occupation whereas I being that much later would find it difficult to find suitable employment and be forced to take what was available. Also, as so many of our staff had already left us the workload had become that much heavier and would in the future become more so. There was no longer the free-and-easy workday to which we had become accustomed. I pondered over the situation for some days and even then was unable to give any satisfactory answer; the other men were having the same difficulty and at that point the commandant offered to write to our wives or to parents and explain the situation to them with regard to the request he had made for us to serve for a further six months. This he did.

In the meantime I had written to Hilda and informed her of the situation. In her reply she agreed a compromise and suggested that I stayed on for three more months only which would then bring my release date to, at the latest, early April 1946. I reported to the commandant with my decision which he accepted and I was granted seven days' leave. While at home I was able to assist in the move into our cottage and with the help of Hilda's mother we managed a little decorating. By the time my leave was over it was all homely and I began to feel so settled that I was reluctant to return and do my extra three months, 'to do my bit'.

On my return to Germany I found that as an extra to my mine work I was to work away from Hanigsen. This entailed journeys of about 100 kilometres with a couple of diesel trucks to a canal where it was discovered that there were barges filled with crated items of some sort which had to be transported to our mine to be destroyed. It was usually late evening when we had made the return trip.

It was really cold and our vehicles broke down several times which caused much cursing and swearing. We carried out a number of those trips but the first day was the worst, the one most remembered. But the warmth of the Mess and the hot meal on our return was gratefully accepted. It was after one of those journeys that I was informed that I had arrived just an hour or so too late to meet my brother Ern who had come to visit me. He had ridden a motorbike from Kiel and on learning that I would not arrive until nightfall had to leave. I regretted missing him, his ride must have been most unpleasant and in the end fruitless.

Our days being so fully occupied passed very quickly. I and the others who were to leave with me were counting off the days and therefore preparing our kitbags in readiness. It was something like

filling the Christmas stocking 'Brummie' Giles brought me a pair of those binoculars which I previously described.

I acquired a bottle of champagne from the Mess which I intended to be reserved for Robert's christening. I had also managed to obtain some rolls of synthetic material which looked very much like Nylon or Rayon, which was later made up into dresses for Hilda, her mum and other relatives. This was the material which was used in the making of shells. There were other items which I pushed into the kitbag before I left so that I could go out fully loaded.

It had been the custom in the past that when men were due for discharge they were excused all duties for the week prior to leaving. They were free to do as they wished. They could visit nearby towns, go shooting, some went to the mountains. But all those of sort of concessions had ended because being so many less in numbers we worked right up to the last day which as it was made us all that much keener to greet that final day and to take our leave of Hanigsen, the salt mine and its contents, of the British Army and of Germany.

But sadly, we who were then due to leave, also would be saying "cheerio" to those of our comrades still remaining. We had been together for under a year but had enjoyed each other's company, worked as a team and forged a bond which could not easily be broken. That for me, and I believe for most other servicemen, is the overriding benefit derived while serving, and which is simply referred to as 'comradeship'.

That was something which I knew I was going to miss more than anything else; that sense of belonging, to be accepted. For wherever in the world you may find yourself, to enter a barrack-room or a tent, not knowing anyone and unknown to them, within only a matter of hours you were accepted and you accepted them as readily as if you had been associated for years.

It probably stems from the fact that through good times and bad, those that were pleasant and those hard times, the sense of being in it together 'come what may' and the dependence on each other in whatever situation arose. Another important factor was that you were never alone there was always someone by your side, I knew I would feel the loss of their company.

Chapter Eleven: A Civilian Again

At long last the day arrived, it was the 26th March, 1946, and complete with documents I was on my way homeward bound. There should have been four of us on the truck with me into Celle but why I was on my own I cannot now remember unless the others followed on a later train. So I was alone from then on until I reached home; no doubt we were despatched according to the space allocated on each train.

The whole of the journey with just a few exceptions is difficult to recollect, it is all a little hazy. I do recall however that I was fortunate to find a seat in a compartment which was terribly overcrowded.

There were men and their kitbags in every conceivable space. It was by no means the sort of journey which I had envisaged for the past few months, for considering that we were all on our way home, about to discard our uniforms for ever, there was no cheerful conversation, in fact there was little conversation of any sort, many men slept.

Usually when men were gathered together there would be card schools, singing, we would all normally have let rip with those well-worn old Army songs; those which were sung when life was favourable and also when spirits were low in all sorts of places and at any time. Then though there was none of that, I had expected that there would be excitement, exhilaration and gladness that the long-awaited release day had really arrived.

I wondered, was everyone as preoccupied with their own thoughts as I was? Maybe a little apprehensive of what the future might hold, almost the same feeling as that on joining up, of going into the unknown. But surely it couldn't have been so because that had been our function for the last six-and-a-half years.

I realised, and I am sure that those other men with me did also, that as much as we would have liked to take on again where we left off, it would not be possible; the world had changed too much, there would be no resemblance of the life we once knew and which we had left behind in 1939.

It was doubtful that it had improved although it was generally felt that on returning from war we could expect better conditions than those which our fathers came home to, at least promises of a better future had been made many times of late. Apart from the hope that the fear of the Dole Queue had been banished for all time, most of us wished to live out our lives in a free and peaceful world.

The sense of freedom was not in the least in evidence on that train that day, it was a sort of anti-climax. No doubt we would need time to adjust ourselves to our new responsibilities of a home with a wife and children and the need to provide for them. Such sombre thoughts as those were mine as we travelled, and on looking about me I guessed they were very similar thoughts to those of my fellow travellers who seemed to be wrapped in their own daydreams.

The miles slipped away bringing us ever nearer to the coast of France which, when having arrived at Dunkirk, it reminded me of that fateful summer of 1940 when we managed to escape from Cherbourg and of our nation being left alone to combat the Nazi menace.

I cannot bring to mind any part of the train journey to London or to Northampton but what I can recall is our arrival at Castle Station where the men from our area alighted and of the walk along the Barrack Road to the Racecourse where our Demob centre was situated. Once there and taking my place in line I was swiftly and expertly dealt with, much as of a conveyor belt system, being issued with a civilian suit, trilby hat, raincoat, shoes and finally collected my discharge documents, a Certificate of Release dated 26th March 1946. I was despatched and walked off the Racecourse as a civilian, having survived six-and-a-half years of war at its worst and what was said to be in the

service of my country. I was then aged twenty-eight and as with all those other men leaving with me there was a loss of all those young years. That being so, as I have said, I did survive and would always be aware of so many of my mates who did not and were laying in some foreign land.

It must have been almost nine-thirty and too late for me to reach Dergate bus station in time to catch the last bus to Irthlingborough. So I hoisted my kitbag on my shoulder and ambled back down the Barrack Road and made my way to Far Cotton to stay the night with my parents. All down the streets of the town were dozens of other men who like myself were making for their homes. I knew none of them and although in a crowd as we walked I suddenly felt very much alone. There appeared to be very little conversation even among those who knew one another. As we reached the town centre the walkers thinned out until I found myself without company.

I did check in at Dergate to make sure that the bus had not departed but found that I had just missed it. With that I phoned the British Arms for them to inform Hilda of my position and that I would be home in the morning, after which I carried on to Far Cotton.

On that walk my thoughts strayed to the day when I left as a recruit bound for Tidworth, aged 20 with that squad of fifty; I wondered how many of them who would also at the time be due for discharge survived as I had done. Any of them who had been fortunate enough to come through would now at the time of writing be in their 84th year. I do know of two men who live locally and who I meet occasionally, although both are in indifferent health, they fought and lived through. I know the names of several who were killed in various campaigns but of the remainder I will never know.

It was about mid-morning when I boarded the bus for home and finally set down my kitbag in our little cottage where my wife and son waited to greet me. That was the beginning of a new life, a fresh start with no more going away. There were no flags or bunting arrayed for my return but the welcome of my own little family was sufficient. I was a newcomer to the town, people had by that time become accustomed to seeing the returning servicemen and women, I very soon though made friends amongst them and settled down in the town of my adoption.

Our cottage had been made cosy and comfortable. It was situated on the right-hand side of Baker Street as you approached the fields down the hill, and set back high above the road. The front door was reached after climbing eight steep steps and along a sloping path through a small front garden. The door opened immediately into a fairly large room, off to the right of which was another smaller room which we used as a living room, as it was free of the draughts which found their way through the front door of the first room.

Also off to the right was another door and this opened onto the stairs which led to one large bedroom. Inside the back door was a small pantry-cum-larder, here stood a small table where there was a washing-up bowl.

Outside the backdoor was a concreted area recently laid down by one of Hilda's neighbours and on the right of the door as you walked up the slope of the back garden was what was known as the 'Back Shop', that was the term used by the shoemaking community. It had been more recently been used as a coal store. One of the first jobs I tackled was to rebuild the wall which appeared to be in danger of collapsing.

Then the coal was moved to the top of the garden and the 'Back Shop' or barn was painted through and an old industrial sink installed and piped to a bucket which had to be watched against it overflowing. As you can see, none of it was very modern but that was our first home. We had an outside toilet at the top of the garden which caused a journey one was forced to make on a dark, wet, cold wintry night to be most unpleasant. The nearest water was a standpipe two doors away.

After the first week or so of being home, generally pottering about the garden, making the odd improvement in the house, I began to feel restless. Brother Ern was a fairly regular visitor in those

days and would install extra electricity points and help with any improvements which I was making. He helped me set back the front steps to create a more gentle slope and make it easier for Hilda to pull the pram up.

From spare parts he made up a bike for me which served for a while, and as Hilda still possessed one we were somewhat mobile and as Robert grew old enough we were able to take him with us. The summer of 1946 was really glorious and I recall the games of cricket which we played down in the fields when some of Hilda's many relatives came from Northampton, Raunds, Rushden and elsewhere.

In those days there was an adequate United Counties bus service so that we made the trip to Northampton, Wellingborough or Kettering, all around quite often. There was also a train service from Irthlingborough through to Bridge Street station at Cotton End which made a pleasant ride when visiting my parents.

The Zoo at Wellingborough was an attraction where we sometimes took Robert for an afternoon. We were fortunate that we need walk only a few hundred yards into the fields which bordered the Nene valley and I remember those delightful walks there.

I had made quite a few new friends and there were among my neighbours many ex-servicemen, one of whom was an ex-Guardsman. He told me that he was due for a review of his war pension which reminded me that at one time I was considered to be pensionable, and talking to him prompted me to do something about making a claim. I felt that if in 1945 at Morpeth I was to receive some sort of allowance for my injuries then the same should still apply those fifteen months later.

After filling in and posting off my claim form I received a very prompt reply and duly attended Northampton General Hospital for a medical examination and again within only the space of a few days I received confirmation that I had been awarded nine shillings and sixpence per week which amounted, at the weekly wage which I expected to earn about half a day's pay. Not a lot but anyway most acceptable. Each year from then on I had to attend the hospital for a review and subsequently the total was raised to eleven shillings and sixpence.

I actually began my civilian life with a grand total of one hundred and twelve pounds seven shillings and sixpence; my war service credits amounted to ninety-two pounds seven shillings and sixpence and I received twenty pounds gratuity for my Military Medal, plus the five pounds I had in my pocket. I found that there were no credits added for the extra three months which I served nor did I receive the staff sergeant's pay which we were promised. I suppose by the standards of the time I was financially fairly well off; it amounted to about twenty or so week's pay, of course there was still an outlay of cash to be made due to having to purchase clothing and other necessities.

I was pleased when one of my new-found friends who like myself had previously worked for the Co-Operative laundries called on me to see if I was ready to go up the Crow Hill and inquire about the possibility of starting to work. We were guaranteed work by our employers as near as possible to the work we had been doing prior to call-up. I had lazed around for a few weeks and as I said I was a little restless so was grateful for the prompting which his call gave me. So we set off on a Monday morning to find out what the management were likely to offer us.

Before he had joined the RAF my friend (Ray) actually worked in the laundry and was assured that he could begin again in the same capacity as before. When I saw the Transport manager my case was not so straight forward, there was no van for me, that was a similar answer to the one received in 1939 when I asked "when will I be getting a van?". This time the reason was that with petrol on ration only a certain number of vans could be put on the road, and they were already manned by those drivers who had been released earlier than myself. That I realised was one of the results of my serving that three months after my time.

There was work there for me though if I would work in the Dry Cleaning department where they

had a backlog of work needing to be processed. I agreed to do so and to begin on the following Monday. After all, it was a job and I felt that it would be suitable until I could find something better.

Although being disappointed in not being able to resume van work it was possible that it was better that it turned out as it did because it would have meant that my work would have been in Bedford, where I left off, and would have entailed moving home and no way would I have done that.

When I started to work, I saw as the manager had pointed out that there was one building stacked out with work, much of it consisted of Army greatcoats, battle dresses and blankets, all to be dyed. These ex-service clothes were used for work for many years.

We worked a forty-eight hour week then and it was possible for me to go home to dinner each day. On Saturdays we worked until twelve-thirty, later the working week was reduced to forty hours. I learned to be a Hoffman garment presser and enjoyed it. Life was easy and no great pressures put upon us, I operated one of a row of six machines, the others all manned by ex-servicemen so there was a lot of good humour, all having a lot in common.

It was there that I met Sandy, the brother of Danny, who lost his life on the *Lancastria*, and I was able to tell him a little about our service life together. I don't think the foreman could understand us, he had not been called up and our easy attitude rather puzzled him at times.

At the weekends I watched the Cobblers or county cricket, went to the local boxing venues or visited my parents with Hilda. When I went out for a drink I used the British Arms and the Band Club which brings back a memory of my old Army pal 'Gibbo', who had predicted when he saw me in hospital that I would be released immediately and that he would see me in the British Arms. Later, when I did see him, I explained how far off the mark he was as I had served a further twelve months in Germany.

Another of my new-found neighbour friends told me of a meeting which was to be held at the 'Sow & Pigs' pub with a view to reforming the town football club and invited me to go along with him. This I did and we both joined the committee, I also signed on to play. Most of the local teams were at that time reforming, Irthlingborough would play in the old Rushden & District League. They were known as the 'Dodgers', I have never learned why.

In every spare moment we were busily engaged erecting dressing rooms and preparing the playing area on the Band Club ground at the top of George Street where part of Whitworth's processing plant now stands. The necessary timber, paint, corrugated roof sheeting and such materials were readily given to us from many members of the public and businesses. All was ready for the kick-off for the 1947 season, all the grounds in the local towns and villages could on a Saturday afternoon command crowds of a few hundred spectators. I played a few games in the Reserves, being nowhere good enough for a first team place.

Some of the names of men who played for the Club at that time (late 1940s) come to mind: Frank Gotch (goalkeeper), Jack Keech, (?) Boddington, Bob and Jack Clarke from Finedon (Bob also played cricket for the county), Pete Carrington (centre forward), Billy Tearle, 'Boggy' Hackney, Ron Smith, (?) Graham.

I regret that the remaining names escape my memory, and to those I have missed I apologise.

I was introduced to the branch of the local Labour Party by one of Hilda's relatives and very soon became a committee member and subscription secretary. That entailed being out on Friday nights to collect from members who found it easier to find a small weekly amount than needing to find the whole amount later. I also made some new members. By doing so I received the congratulations of the committee for my efforts.

I was very keen about the work of the party and felt that it was our duty to contribute to the Peace

which we had fought for and helped to bring about, all starry-eyed no doubt when looking back but then a lot of us felt that in our Democracy even individuals could assist in making life better for the people.

This post-war Labour government was carrying out measures which much benefited the ordinary folk of our land; there was the new Health Service, where teeth, glasses and Prescriptions were free initially but paid for from insurance contributions. At the same time some of the most important means of production and distribution were taken into public ownership for which I was one of the majority of people who were proud to support.

Industries such as Transport, Steel, the Docks, Electricity and Gas, and the Mines became publicly owned; the lives of the miners in their work were then made safer and more congenial. It was realised at that time of grave shortages that those measures were necessary for reconstruction to control the raw materials with which rebuild our industries and to change them to peacetime production.

The economy was in a seriously low state due to the drain on our resources during the war. There was a great need for a massive building programme to house the returning men and women and their families. In order to ease the situation prefabricated houses were erected as a temporary measure but many of them were still habitable twenty or more years later. These to my knowledge were quite comfortable dwellings; also many council housing estates were built.

The Wellingborough constituency during the late 40s and into the 50s was represented in Parliament by a very active member, an ex-railwayman named George Lingren. There was generally a wide interest in politics by all sections of the community. I enjoyed my work within the party and made many friends, I was elected to serve on the management committee at Wellingborough.

After such a wonderful summer I believe that without doubt the following winter, that of 1947, was by far the worst that I have known in my lifetime. Up until and throughout the Christmas period the weather was no worse than usually expected. There had been no snow, just the dry frosty days and nights, but in the first week of the New Year it snowed heavily and froze, and continued to do so causing a build-up which was impossible to clear.

There were no snow ploughs, sand, salt or grit. In the early stages when vehicles were able to move, ruts were formed of about a foot deep into which it was possible to set your bike wheels and make progress in that way, and at least ride part of the way of a journey. I did manage to get up Crow Hill to work during the first week or so but only a handful of us did so. No work could be processed because of insufficient labour, those of us who did arrive were engaged in unloading coke at the railway station so that the boilers could be kept going. Later it became impossible for even myself to turn up for work.

To make life more difficult the shops ran short of stocks of all kinds of necessities. Coal was not available so that caused a run on paraffin for the stoves which most householders used. There were gas and electricity breakdowns. When our coal supply at home had become exhausted I was fortunate to have a heap of coal dust (slack) remaining. With this and a mixture of cement I produced briquettes by means of filling empty baked bean tins with it and when they had set hard they helped out a little.

There was one drawback however and that was that they had a tendency to spit out the concrete particles with a hot sudden and startling bang, sounding like gunshots. Anything combustible, cabbage leaves, potato peelings whatever could be used for backing went onto the all-night burner fire. We men would go across the fields wooding and I know a lot of the local farmers became short of a few fencing posts while we were doing so.

Sometimes we biked to Wellingborough or Rushden and joined the queue for a bag of coke from the gasworks. Not being able to work gave the men free time and we spent our days acquiring

enough fuel at least for the following day; it was hard for old people and those with young children. The same weather conditions persisted into early March when on a Sunday morning I watched with neighbours the sudden thaw bring torrents of water which gushed and flooded its way down the road past our houses, it was the end of an unforgettable winter period.

In May 1948 our second son Alan was born in the early hours of May 5th, a brother for Robert. Although I knew that Alan was due to be born, Hilda still agreed that I should go to Northampton to a boxing tournament which I had arranged to do with my brother Ern, and so set off on my bike. It was a fruitless journey because he had forgotten to obtain tickets which had I known about I wouldn't have travelled. Anyway, rather than turn round and bike home we went for a drink or two, I was late arriving home and early the next morning I fetched the midwife and mother-in-law and Alan was born before the doctor arrived. I managed to be at work a little over half-an-hour late, that was nice timing Alan.

On my annual visit to the hospital for the pension check up I was offered a final settlement which I readily accepted and became richer by £80 which, with another family member to provide for, was too much to refuse. It also made it possible for me to purchase our first car which was a 1936 Singer Eight for which I paid one of my Labour party comrades £65. It was thirteen years old but it had been garaged all through the war years so we became a car-owning family in 1949 and that vehicle gave us as much pleasure if not more than any of the cars I have since owned.

That same year we enjoyed our first holiday together at Butlins camp at Clacton. Our life altogether at that time in our little family was one of contentment and when looking back I can still say that those years of the late 40s and throughout the 50s were the most enjoyable times of my life and the reason for that was not only that we were then young but the relationship of people, one with another, was far more sociable. We had time for each other. Some of the feelings of those wartime years was still in evidence and people were more satisfied with their lot even though it didn't amount to much in money or possessions.

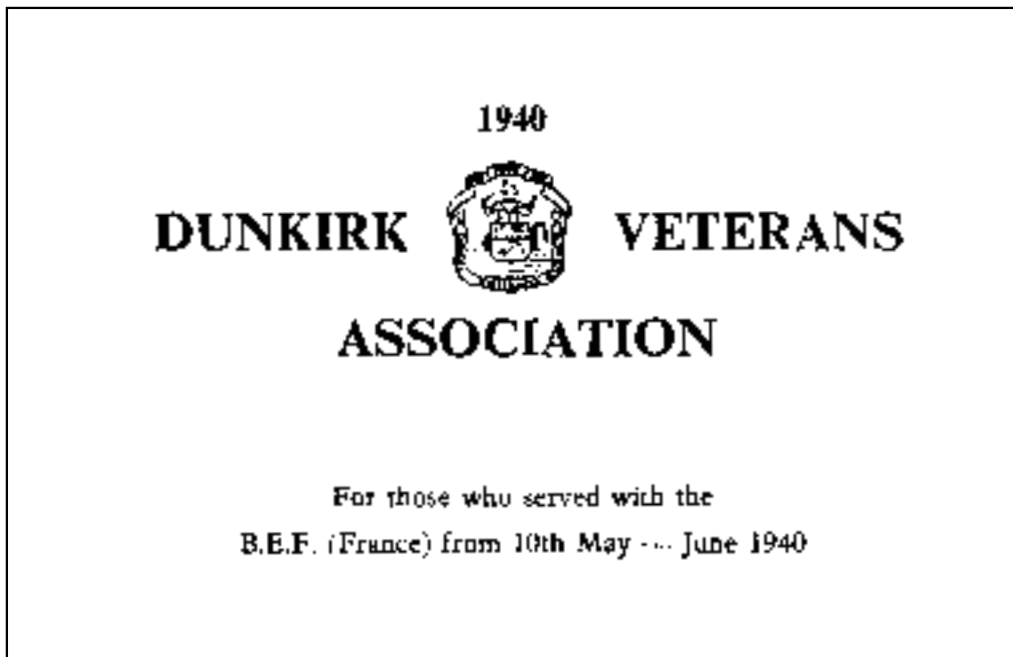
In the outside world there was a measure of peace but at the same time there were areas of dispute and conflict. India had been granted independence and Nehru had become their first Prime Minister. Pakistan was formed. At the end of 1948 the last British troops had left and at the same time Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated.

In Palestine too all British troops had been withdrawn and the Jewish problem there was passed to the United Nations Organisation to deal with. In Europe the Russians had blockaded Berlin and what was known as the 'Berlin Airlift' was in operation, so that several parts of the world were not at peace.

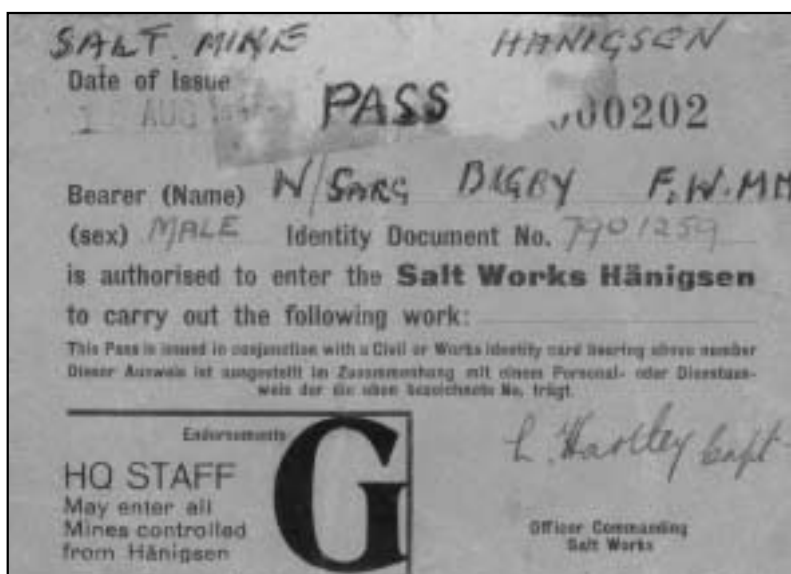
On a lighter note and in the boxing world Joe Louis retired as the World Heavyweight Champion; George Orwell wrote his bestseller entitled '1984', and the film being shown and the most popular was *The Third Man*. Those were the days when very few homes had television and if so it would have been black and white only; we therefore relied on our radios for news and entertainment. Irthlingborough had its cinema with a changed programme during the week where again our news was brought to us by Pathe Gazette.

At home we had few labour-saving devices, no washing machine, vacuum cleaner, no bath or shower, duvets or electric blankets; no fridge and before there were wall-to-wall carpets our floor was surfaced with linoleum and pegged rugs. Double-glazing was an innovation well into the future as were such things as Microwave cookers, but for all that in our simple life we were in need of nothing but were just grateful for our life together in comfortable contentment.

Although I had made many friends in the town of my adoption and had numerous interests I somehow never felt settled; there was a nagging feeling that always seemed to be around somewhere hovering in the background, which came over me when alone or at night in bed. I don't know what



Tank veterans at the Cenotaph.



it was or the cause but it persisted, a feeling of foreboding, of something unpleasant just waiting to happen.

A fear which I know I had was of once again having to leave home and the family which was something I wouldn't wish to face. I had seen so many of my mates who, when they returned home after years away, were not recognised by their children who were but babies when they left. Why it should have affected me so much I am at a loss to understand because I was too old and unfit and was not likely to ever be called on again but for all that it was there and haunted me for some time.

I do know and admit that in those first few years after my homecoming that I was difficult to live with, often moody, irritable, with a hasty temper and forever impatient. Hilda or no-one else ever referred to it. I didn't realise those faults at the time but did so later. It would be easy to blame them entirely as a result of the war because without that as an excuse I still may have behaved in the same way even under different circumstances.

There was though something else at that time which flared up regularly and continued at intervals for some years which, I have no doubt, can be attributed to the war and the effects which the horrific experiences had upon me. I would wake suddenly in the night and see plainly once again some of the terrible scenes which I had witnessed: the same pictures of blazing tanks, of running men ablaze, engulfed in flame, all accompanied by the sounds of battle. How long these sessions lasted I have no idea but I usually woke up with a start, sweating and with a headache. I began to dread these dreams, they are well in the past now but over the years when they prevailed the incidents and the personnel were as clear and vivid as if it were really happening. I thought at one time that I would never be free of them; Hilda didn't know of my anxious state although there were the odd occasions when she told me that I had shouted out in my sleep.

Later in life I found out that some of my 'tankie' friends had also suffered in a similar manner, it came up in conversation. Other than that I have never made reference to it until now. It was not a thing we would have talked about before, each of us keeping our feelings to ourselves because they were the days when you tried to show that 'stiff upper lip' even if below it was a flabby chin.

It was the age of 'grin and bear it', or otherwise become known as a 'namby-pamby'. In any case one would have been ashamed to admit to such feelings and happenings. Today we would probably be diagnosed as suffering from Stress, but at the time to which I refer the word was never used, whereas now it is used frequently and in excess. Nor was there such a thing as counselling.

In the course of time all those awful scenes became dimmed and although as I have shown the memory of them is still clear I have been able to put them behind me and even though I have stated that I found life difficult during the early years after the war, I still maintain that they were the happiest days of my whole life apart from the years spent in retirement with my wife.



Our family.

Epilogue

My intention when narrating this book was, as far as I was able, to portray something of the life of one young man among the hundreds and thousands of others whose experiences during the period of the late 1930s through the years of war and its aftermath into the 1940s, were similar to my own. It is my wish that they recognise some of those similarities and are able to see resemblances in many of the incidents and situations.

Well before I had written a word I had the title in mind, it was and still is '*The Lost Years*' - its adoption seemed to me at the time to suit the purpose of my writings, now however, on reviewing what has been written I have doubts and wonder if that chosen title is entirely appropriate because it appears to describe those years as being 'lost'. In other words, misspent and wasted, which I am certain was not the case. In fact far from being 'lost' to me they were in many ways beneficial and brought advantages which I would not have encountered in any way in a different life.

I wouldn't at that time have travelled as extensively as I did, nor would I have sailed the seas in a luxury liner, even though converted to carry troops, that was unheard of then outside of the domain of the very rich. Although those journeys were fraught with danger they carried me to far-off places, new horizons, lands which I had only read about in my previous life. Such wonderful places as Cairo and Alexandria which although in the zone of conflict were untouched by any direct action of war.

In Egypt, where on being awakened by the bugler's Reveille and with the 'char-wallah' with his bucket of tea, on opening the tent flaps and seeing at a distance of a few hundred yards those great stone monuments to the Pharaohs, the Pyramids, was a sight not easily forgotten. Then there was the Western Desert which I loved (when it was not being used as a gigantic battlefield) and which was hated by many others. I have some wonderful memories of the island of Cyprus with the Troodos mountains, its fertile plains, streams, orchards and vineyards, now changed of course by the advent of Tourism.

There were some fine cities in Europe which I had the pleasure of seeing before many of them were turned into rubble and dust, and recollect a great deal of the French countryside in the months before the evacuation of Dunkirk - from the interior of a horsebox which was labelled '40 Hommes 8 Chevaux' during one of our missions to intercept reported German parachutists.

It is of course true that all those instances and travel and sights accorded to me in no way compensated for my lack of freedom as an individual; the freedom to pursue the simple pleasures of youth which I believe that all men (and women) ought to have the right to enjoy but which was unfortunately denied my generation, as it was our fathers' some twenty years before.

But again if it had not been my lot to be called to serve would I have still been cycling to Bedford to work, would I ultimately have been provided with a van? Who knows, I'm sure I'll never know. I went away a boy with little knowledge of the outside world being aware only of my own home territory and not very much beyond our county boundary, but when once involved with men of the world as those old soldiers certainly were and with so many different types of characters I soon grew up and enjoyed their association. They told me early on that it took just one taste of battle for a boy to become a man.

To be a member of a regiment was to be part of a team, like a large family where everyone relied on the other members often just for survival. It added up to a feeling of belonging, of being needed, and I know that of any of the gains that there were it was the binding together of men in a common cause, it was 'comradeship', which is so much more in my opinion than just friendship.

Surely too, there was something more which could be counted as a benefit and that was the fact

that we helped preserve the freedom of our nation. We assisted in freeing those other nations across the Channel who for years had been subjected to Nazi tyranny. That in itself I believe was cause enough to feel proud that I was given the opportunity to play a small part in it and to consider it to have been worth giving up part of our lives for.

I believe that the war we fought was 'just' and that when it was too late that there was no alternative. I think though that it could have been avoided and it need not have been necessary to fight if some of the leading politicians of the day and a large proportion of the aristocracy had not been so keen to allow Hitler and his Nazi henchmen to build up such a large military machine to a strength far beyond that decided at the Peace Conferences after the German defeat in 1918.

But the warnings of their warlike aims were ignored because of the belief that a strong Germany would be a bulwark against what they called a Communist threat to our country. It was of course true that there was a fear that many people would turn to Communism or to that other alternative, to the Fascists, then being led by Oswald Mosley, because there was a great deal of unrest among the ordinary working classes, due mainly to the suffering caused by the high level of the unemployed which affected them and their dependents.

The total of unemployed had risen to around three million; there would have been a great following at that time for anyone who could ease their misery by providing work for them. It had already happened in Germany where Hitler had created work although it was mostly due there to the vast rearmament programme and the building of the autobahns. It was the case of a starving man and his family being willing to follow anyone in exchange for a loaf of bread.

At the same time there was a strong belief in complete disarmament by a large section of the Labour Party and in the Universities also where the Oxford Union had passed a proposition that "*that this House will in no circumstance fight for King and Country*". On the other hand there was just a small minority led by Winston Churchill who repeatedly pointed out the threat which existed of a militant Germany bent on war. Unfortunately their warning went unheeded.

This account of my personal knowledge of events, incidents and observations throughout a period of about twelve years of my young life is described as accurately as possible but if there are any discrepancies with regard to dates, times, places, then I offer my apologies. Where too it may appear that there is a lapse of memory then might I be excused by reason of age?

After my misgivings regarding the suitability or otherwise of the title '*The Lost Years*' I still haven't changed it in spite of those doubts because I can't think of a more fitting alternative.

Fred Digby

