The branch book of service stories

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FOREWORDS

When I wrote to all sixty members of our R.B.L. branch, inviting them to send in an account of a memory of their days in uniform, I had no idea what the response would be. What follows is the result. My chief feeling is one of gratitude to all contributors, and of amazement at their wide variety of experiences.

It is sad that two of our contributors, Colin Davis and Leslie Pickard, have died since the project was launched.

As the purpose of the exercise is to raise money for the Poppy Appeal, I would like to thank you for having bought this book, and to urge you to buy more copies for members of your family and your friends.

I should also like to thank Paul Houlton for donating his time and talent to design the book, and finally John Hodson and his firm Messrs Singer & Friedlander Ltd, whose generous sponsorship has made it possible for all proceeds from the sale of this book to go straight to the Poppy Appeal.

John Haviland
Editor

I was delighted to be given the opportunity on behalf of Singer & Friedlander to sponsor the Cowden Hartfield & District Royal British Legion Branch Book of Service Stories. Our role at Singer & Friedlander is to encourage investment in the economic development of this country and provide a safe home for people's pensions and savings. We fully understand that we only have the opportunity to fulfil these roles today because of the contribution to our country of today's Royal British Legion's members.

It is for this reason that we are proud to have been supporters of the Royal British Legion over the years.

John Hodson
Chairman, Singer & Friedlander Ltd

WITH THE WELSH GUARDS 1939-1946
Bill Stephenson

Bill joined the Territorials as a sapper before the war. He was commissioned soon after, in November 1939, serving the rest of his six wartime years as an officer in the Welsh Guards. He was already in his thirties when war was declared - "far too old" he was told, "to have any chance of serving in the front line". Asked if his battalion would go abroad, his colonel replied : "There will always be a need for household troops in London to protect the King and keep law and order, and that will be our role." This was early in 1943.

Two weeks later, Bill was on embarkation leave. By the time he left the army in 1946, Captain Stephenson had seen active service in two of the greatest theatres of war: North Africa and Italy. He has vivid memories of these years but when asked to select one for this collection of stories, he chose the following modest little incident:-

"Sicily had been invaded in July 1943, and the landings on the mainland took place in September. My own battalion was held back in Africa. We trained hard and, on one occasion, during a troop movement exercise, we were practising a quick dispersal from lorries under air attack. To give the event a touch of realism, my commanding officer persuaded a neighbouring U. S. air station to 'dive-bomb' our position.

"The Americans did not take a lot of persuading. They invited three officers to go up with them "to see what it was like". I was one of the three. They gave us luncheon - a tasty and robust meal, made possible by their excellent U. S. rations. Then, comfortably replete, I was strapped into the rear-gunner's seat, and we took off. There followed thirty minutes of unmitigated hell. We circled, we dived, we banked, we climbed, then down again, and up. At one moment, I remember catching a startled glimpse of the commanding officer on the ground - not thirty feet away from me. It was impossible to tell which was the sky and which was the land. Or whether we were upside-down or downside-up. By keeping grim control of my insides, I managed to survive twenty minutes (which was several minutes longer than the others) before being violently and memorably sick.

“We landed at last. Such blessed relief - only marginally aggravated by the fact that the Yankee crew were there watching us. They had been sick too, not from vertigo like us, but with sheer uncontrollable laughter! Of course, they had given us this battering quite deliberately. In real combat, they would have been under fire and could not possibly have gone in so fast or so furiously.

“I had many memorable experiences during the war, but none that I recall quite so vividly as the grins on the faces of that young American aircrew”.

DUNKIRK RECOLLECTIONS

Brian Birkett

My war really started on May 10th 1940 when I was 23 years old. My regiment (Royal Signals) was billeted around the village of Carvin in Northern France not far from Lille. At about 4am we were awoken by German bombers overhead and anti-aircraft fire.

The balloon had gone up and we were on the move within a few hours towards the Franco- Belgian frontier. The weather was perfect and as we passed through fields of corn it seemed sad that we were advancing through such lovely country towards an enemy that had invaded Belgium. How history was repeating itself.

We arrived in Belgium with our morale high as we thought that at last we would take on and defeat the Germans and that the war would soon be over. But how wrong we were.

After some two weeks we were retreating and as a result our morale plummeted. There is nothing like retreat to damage morale. By the end of May we were near or on the beaches at La Panne, a few miles east of Dunkirk, together with large numbers of the British Expeditionary Force. We thought that we would probably be taken prisoner.

There was fairly continuous bombing by the German air force, though the R.A.F. was much in evidence. A vast cloud of black smoke was fortunately blowing over us from oil installations in Dunkirk which were on fire.

On one occasion a German aircraft was shot down by a Bofors anti-aircraft gun and the pilot parachuted into our area. The nearby soldiers arrested him and immediately offered him a cigarette. This small action, or should I say kindness, made me think how futile - though justified in this case – conflict was. Just because an evil dictator existed and diplomats and politicians could not resolve the situation, poor simple soldiers, who could probably be good friends, had to kill each other. That this should happen again after the slaughter of the First World War only 26 years ago, seemed hard

to believe and was a sad reflection on the human race.

We were on the beach for four or five days but to our surprise were not attacked. A number of wise men used their tin hats to dig coffin-shaped holes in the sand in which to sleep, and covered themselves with gas capes in case it rained. Our food was mainly cold tinned potatoes with water to drink. I cannot remember where this came from but I believe we were advised to put a drop of iodine in the water to kill off any bugs - though where we were supposed to get the iodine from I cannot imagine.

I was told, though I did not witness this, that General Alexander (then commanding the First Division) was seen riding a motor cycle in highly polished field boots on the beach. A much respected general such as he in one's midst is extremely good for morale.

There were many rumours as to what was going to happen. The lower you were in rank, the more the rumours abounded. To our immense surprise it transpired that the B.E.F. was to be evacuated and we saw naval ships and smaller boats arriving offshore. There were cruisers, which pumped lead into the air from their pom-poms against German aircraft, together with destroyers.

In some ways we felt we were not doing our duty in having to destroy vehicles, equipment and guns to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. Personal weapons such as rifles and revolvers were kept. Those were our orders. Embarkation was orderly and there was no panic. In my case I happened to be Adjutant and my Commanding Officer, in difficult circumstances, was a tower of strength. He had received some silk underwear at Christmas 1939 as a present from his wife. He insisted that this should be brought home, so the Adjutant had to carry a small suitcase!

Eventually our turn came and we waded out and somehow scrambled into a piquet boat - some 12 of us - and were rowed to the side of a destroyer, H.M.S. Icarus. To get on board we climbed up scrambling nets hung on the side of the ship. The captain of the ship, Commander Colin Maud, subsequently awarded a D.S.C., yelled at us to lie down somewhere as we were about to be bombed. I managed to find a warm air duct and lay there and almost dried my clothes! I seem to remember that the ship's captain wore a blazer and rubber life belt - plus (though I may be wrong) a bottle of gin in one of his pockets! Eventually we (some 20 of us, mostly officers plus a French bishop) found ourselves in the Ward Room. We were being bombed and the noise was intense. The naval officers'

revolvers, housed in a rack, rattled, and we thought the side of the ship would be holed and that would be the end of us all. At this juncture 1 wondered why I had bothered to collect stamps in my youth.

Shortly, a Maltese steward arrived and asked us if we would like our trousers pressed. (Important, even though we might have died at any moment). Of course we said "Yes"! So we all took our trousers off. Soon however some of us were summoned to man a vertical ladder and pass shells by hand from the bowels of the ship to the deck where a 4" gun was in action. The sights shown by those on the ladder were hilarious.

Eventually we reached Dover - somewhat ashamed of ourselves. Kind ladies gave us postcards to send to our next of kin to inform them of our safe arrival.

The evacuation of some 300,000 men from beaches at short notice with limited planning was an operation without precedent. Such an achievement reflected immense credit on those who organised "Operation Dynamo".

But "Dunkirk" was not a victory - it was an unmitigated defeat.

WITH THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE
BEFORE DUNKIRK
Henry Russell

as dictated to John Haviland

I went on board ship to go to France on April lst 1940. It was pouring with rain while we were going over and we were all on deck and got thoroughly soaked before we reached Le Havre. While they sorted some of us out to select the drivers and mates, the vehicles arrived; they were flat-nosed Bedfords with a bar across the front of the radiator to protect the front of the vehicle in case of a collision. I was put in charge of doing the driver selection. We hadn't got time to take them for a run round the block; we had a much simpler way than that. We'd tell a chappie to jump up in the vehicle, make sure it was out of gear, and start it up. As soon as he got into the cab, sat down, wouldn't let go of the steering wheel, looking round for where the gear lever was and where to switch on and start up, you knew jolly well he wasn't a driver, and he came out of it straight away and we'd put him down as a mate or second driver. The chappie that got up in there and moved the seat so that he could reach the pedals and move the gear lever, switched it on and started it up, obviously he'd been in a vehicle before.

It all went the way he approached the whole thing. If he could give the impression he was a driver, then he was a driver. We put one of them up there as his mate and said Right start it up and drive it up to a position ahead where there was a couple of chappies with clipboards, they'd take their name, number and everything, the number of the vehicle, all sorts of things like that, and tell them where to park it.

We were parked in a place very much like Mount Harry Road in Sevenoaks - the trees were growing over the road which gave us some concealment from the air - we didn't have any RAF protection at that time - we didn't see much of anything for quite a bit. I was in the breakdown vehicle with a driver, a corporal, and a fitter who put his tools in the back. I also had a workshop vehicle with a small lathe in it and a charging plant.

The breakdown vehicle was standing ready at the docks and a call came through for us. We drove round to where the other vehicles had been parked and when I got out and walked round to the front of the vehicle - what I found wasn't very clever I'm afraid. A chappie had been climbing over the back of his vehicle to check if he'd got spare wheel, jack etc and the chappie behind him drove forward right up close to give him a fright and whether he missed the brake pedal or what I don't know but he didn't stop and just hit the poor bastard dead on. It was a hell of a mess.

I found out afterwards that the two of them had been sort of bosom pals. They went to school together. They left and joined the same firm. They were in the scouts together. They never left each other. They joined the army together. They volunteered so they could be in the same unit. One of them had been issued a vehicle, that was the one in front, and his mate had got issued the one behind. But when he saw what had happened of course he couldn't believe he could have done such a thing. I suppose it blew his mind. I heard that he'd been sent back home. I suppose he finished up in an asylum. I never knew. I never even remembered his name, not that I would mention it even if I did.

I was ill for about three days after that. Sick as a dog. Of course there was nothing like they have today - someone coming round and giving you a talking to, and all that sort of thing. You were just to pull yourself together and get on with it, which of course you did do.

Well, we got them all sorted out in the end, and we moved out to our first headquarters, a field of course. The vehicles were all parked along the side of the field, under the edge of a small wood. Being in workshops we didn't get any guard duties, or anything of that description. I was a Third Class Artificer in those days, having been trained by Lucas before I was called up. The drivers and drivers' mates were given the job of fatigue units in cookhouses, digging latrines and trenches, putting up hessian. It was all very mundane and nothing like what we expected. We had a sort of dance on the village green with the people from the village, with plenty of wine flowing, beer, singsongs, that sort of thing. Then a couple of days later, orders came through to move up to what they said was an advanced station, somewhere up near the Maginot Line.

We weren't over there long. I went on April lst and came back on June 2nd. It all seemed stupid at the time, I suppose everything seems stupid when you're connected with a war of any description, because it's like a jigsaw puzzle, you only see a little part of the puzzle you're involved in at that time,

you don't see the whole picture. So you haven't a clue what it's all in aid of.

There was a reservoir near where we were, of course we were told not to go there, there was a punt, and there were three of us, and we took it out on to the water. While we were out there we had our first air raid; there was an AA unit there and the lake was peppered with shrapnel from bursting shells. We got back as quick as we could, a couple of us baling like mad. We got it in the neck, but what did it matter we were young, we had a tin hat, water bottle, gas mask, rifle, all that sort of thing but we didn't have any bullets - they were issued later.

After that we were under air attack on almost every convoy we went out on. For eight weeks. The first convoy we went on we were supplying the front line with food, mainly tinned stuff. Then we moved up to another position in Belgium, we were in a wood there where we could drive the lorries in. Some of the farms were empty, and if we got there first we'd find the cellar and clear it out. If the officers got there first they'd put a guard on it. If we got there first they didn't need to. We'd have cleared it out. They used to come round and search the lorries. Daft thing to do. We weren't going to leave it in the lorries.

We had some jolly good nights too, but that of course was before the war really began, while the Germans were going into Poland.

But when the onslaught started against Belgium the roads were pretty well choc-a-bloc, people carrying things, pushing barrows some had horses and carts. The roads are not very wide out there, there was usually a ditch on either side, which we found useful when Jerry came over machine-gunning, there wasn't much that stayed on the road, everybody dived for one of the ditches, those that didn't make it didn't get there. We'd knock it out of gear, yank the handbrake on and we were all diving over the tailboard and out of the front before the vehicle had stopped. Then sometimes the vehicle was OK to get back in but quite often it wasn't and sometimes there wasn't much left of it.

There was one time we were down in the ditches, half-filled with water and green slime, and we were opening up with rifles. They said afterwards that rifle fire is about the worst thing to fly through because everybody picks their own spot and somebody's going to pick a winner sooner or later. This German aircraft shot up into the air with smoke coming out of it, he turned over and dived down into a field.

There was a hell of a lot of dead along the road. You dragged off what you could that was more or less in front of the vehicle, you just had to drive and that was it. We were only youngsters. Some only 18. We weren't in France long but we were a hell of a lot older by the time we came back. We'd really grown up. There was one time we had a Bren gun carrier ahead of us and the Germans just looked down and tore it all to pieces - nobody came out of that.

After that we moved up through Belgium and there were several places where we made camps, and moved out from there to the forward dumps. Our trucks were getting fewer and fewer, they didn't all come back. A lot of the chaps didn't come back either.

But I was lucky, I was in workshops pretty well all the time, until we got an order to empty the trucks out, load everybody up, take all the ammunition we'd got with us (we all put bands of ammunition round our chests), and we sailed away heading for what we could now see was the front line. We could see the flashes. It came to an end before I thought it would. We never made it to the front.

Fortunately we went over a small river, the French had got the bridge mined and were going to blow it as soon as Jerry came anywhere near it. We were told by despatch riders to turn round and head back to base and we got as far as the river. It was too late to use the bridge so we disabled the vehicles so that Jerry couldn't use them and we all had to swim. I was no swimmer but I found I could do a dog-paddle. I was pretty nearly drowned but the boys saw me struggling and managed to get me out.

Our orders were to get back to our last camp because that was where the breakdown and workshop vehicles were, and our toolboxes. We got what vehicles were left there and started off back to our previous camp. I was in the breakdown vehicle on the next convoy which I didn't know was going to be my last. We found one of our trucks in the ditch with the driver firing at everything he saw, shellshock or something, they got up behind him, collared him and put him in the breakdown. I got up in the wagon, put a chain on the back of the breakdown, and they hauled me out. But in doing so they ripped the drain plug out of my sump and I didn't get very far after that. I was hooting and banging and yelling but it didn't make any difference they just carried on. So I did the usual thing, smashed the carb and distributor, got my rifle, gas mask, and tin hat, and started legging it the way they had gone. Which was in the opposite direction to the front line. You could see where that was, the sky was lit up like the lights of London. Believe you me when you're on your tod that's

when you find out whether you've got any guts or not. You can be brave in amongst a crowd of them when they're all the same, all trying to be brave, but when you're on your tod the only person you're kidding is yourself.

I don't know how many days I was going - not on the road of course, I got along as much as I could behind the hedges and through the woods, and one day all of a sudden everything went black. I don't know how long I lay there. When I came to I couldn't hear anything, I'd been belted on the side of the head, the side of my head split open and my ears were filled with blood. You can still feel the dent. My God my head did ache. I'd never had pain like that in my life. I wondered if that was what it was like when you were dead. I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't see anything. And I couldn't ruddy well move.

The King's Royal Rifles found me. They said I was very fortunate because they thought everyone around there was dead. They thought it was probably a Panzer unit operating beyond their front lines. The KRRs propped me up against a tree and cleaned me up, bandaged my head, gave me a couple of pills and a drink of water, then I was with them, walking wounded. I don't know how long we kept going. Apparently we were heading for Dunkirk. We didn't know anything about it but there was a huge pall of smoke ahead of us, from an oil refinery. When we arrived there wasn't much left - it was all over. I must have been one of the last to leave. I went home with the KRRs on HMS Anthony, and they took me to their barracks in Winchester.

After a short period of recovery, Henry was shipped with the RASC to Egypt, where he worked with supply convoys in the desert, and finished his war in East Africa training local recruits in motor maintenance.

FRANCE JUNE I940
Peter Jamieson

When you tell people that you went to France after Dunkirk, to say the least they look mildly surprised. It did however happen to me.

I was commissioned in the Worcestershire Regiment in the spring of I940 and after a short while was sent on a Liaison Officers course at Camberley. This was in Le Marchant House which was in the grounds of the RMC. As a newly-commissioned officer one couldn't help feeling rather smug when the voice of RSM Brittain was heard drilling cadets. Our training on the Liaison Officers course included motor-cycle riding. Luckily I could already do this and so avoided some of the more hair-raising episodes. We enjoyed ourselves doing cross-country riding on Bagshot Heath.

The Germans were inconsiderate enough to invade Holland and Belgium on the day before my 2Ist birthday. However, with the help of one our members, we managed to load about twenty people into and on his Morris Oxford and go into Camberley for a suitable party the details of which I do not remember.

Having completed the course I returned to the depot at Worcester. The evacuation from Dunkirk occurred while I was waiting for a posting. This came towards the end of May and I was sent to HQ 2 Corps which at that time was at Aldershot under the commend of Lieut. Gen. Sir Alan Brooke, later Lord Alanbrooke.

It seems from Arthur Bryant's book "The Turn of the Tide", which is based on Alanbrooke's diaries, that he was under orders "To return to France with a new BEF". Alanbrooke in his diaries says that this was one of the blackest moments in the war as far as he was concerned. There were still 140,000 British troops in France after Dunkirk and the plan was that with the French Army that was still intact, and possibly a further four British divisions, it would be possible to hold the Brittany peninsular.

2 Corps HQ duly set off from Aldershot to Southampton on June 11th, and sailed for Cherbourg in what Alanbrooke described in his diary as a "dirty little Dutch steamer only capable of 12 knots". However we arrived safely in Cherbourg that evening during an air raid.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that the 51st Highland Division which was under the orders of General Weygand fought an heroic action about the time we were arriving in France. One of their territorial battalions lost 23 officers and 500 men in a single day without yielding any ground. Shortly afterwards the Division was surrounded at St. Valery and forced to surrender.

The day after our arrival we moved to Le Mans where the Corps HQ was to be established. The joumey of some 170 miles was uneventful apart from a growing number of refugees on the road.

On the 14th June Alanbrooke had a meeting with General Weygand and the question of holding the Brittany peninsular was discussed. This was also the day that Paris fell. It became apparent to Alanbrooke that to hold the peninsular at least fifteen divisions would be required to hold the front which would be about 100 miles long. He told Weygand that he felt that the plan had no chance of success as the troops required were not available, but Weygand replied that the plan had been considered by the Inter-Allied Council and should be taken as an order.

However in spite of this Alanbrooke took immediate action advising Sir John Dill, the CIGS in London, that all British troops should be returned to England as soon as possible. Churchill was not in favour of withdrawal but after a 30 minute conversation with Alanbrooke he finally agreed. Plans were therefore made for the evacuation of British troops.

Our Headquarters was moved back to Vitre near Rennes on June 15th as it was considered our lines of communication were too exposed. I may say that at this time both Army and civilian rations were hard to come by and the junior officers lived mainly on omelettes which were still available in local restaurants.

On June 16th our HQ moved again to Redon on the southern side of the peninsular not far from St. Nazaire. I was ordered to go from Redon to Cherbourg, a distance of about 160 miles each way. The roads in that area were almost empty and I made the round trip in one day without seeing any sign

of the Germans. However one of my fellow liaison officers sent to Cherbourg the next day almost drove into a German convoy at a road junction.

About this time Marshal Petain succeeded Reynaud as Prime Minister of France and negotiations were put in hand for what was euphemistically called a "cease-fire".

By the I7th or 18th June we were ordered to St. Nazaire for embarkation to England. Alanbrooke and senior members of his staff had intended to be evacuated on a destroyer, but this being unavailable, they had to make do with an armed trawler.

Another liaison officer and myself found places in the "Ulster Monarch". A troopship, the "Lancastria", had been bombed and sunk with the loss of 3,000 lives a day two before, and we had many of the survivors in our ship. They were a sorry sight, still being encrusted in fuel-oil.

Our joumey back to England took three days. One German plane passed overhead presumably on reconnaissance; otherwise our voyage was uneventful, which was just as well as we were entirely alone.

In all some I50,000 British and 47,000 Allied troops were evauated from France, although it seems that on his return to London Alanbrooke was asked why he had not saved more vehicles and equipment.

We arrived at Falmouth in glorious weather. I told my companion that when we reported to the RTO (Rail Transport Officer) for our onward movement we should say that were GHQ, which in a sense was true, since our HQ has been the senior one in France. The reason I suggested this was I somehow knew from my time in England at the time of Dunkirk that GHQ troops were sent to London. The RTO was duly impressed, saying "I haven't got any special trains to London so you two will have to go on the ordinary night train this evening."

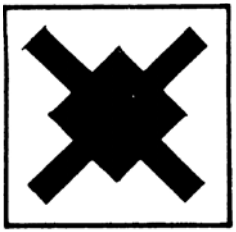
We spent the day in the best hotel we could find in Falmouth, perhaps not to the entire appoval of some of the elderly residents, who looked askance at our rather crumpled battledress.

On arrival in London we had to report to Wembley Stadium. Here we were told to go away leaving a contact address. As far as I was concerned this gave me about a week's unofficial leave before being

posted to the 18th Division. That is another story.

ON THE MOVE WITH 18th DIVISION 1940-1942

Peter Jamieson



After my unofficial leave I was posted to 18th Division HQ which at that time was part of 2 Corps. The Division, which consisted mainly of East Anglians, was appropriately stationed in Norfolk, and its task at that time was to defend the coast from King's Lynn to Yarmouth. The Division was commanded by Major-General Beckwith-Smith. The headquarters was stationed close to Norwich at Sprowston Hall. Some thirty years later I took my family to show them where we were stationed, but with all the building that has taken place after the war it was almost impossible to get one's bearings.

We used to receive regular intelligence reports of the barges the Germans were massing in the Channel ports, though for reasons of geography it is doubtful if they would ever have attempted landings on the Norfolk coast.

I remember one job I had in Norfolk was to inspect "Q" site aerodromes. These were open spaces on which dummy aircraft such as Wellington bombers had been placed to deceive the enemy. These sites were also equipped with landing lights in the hope that the Germans might waste their bombs on them. One of these "Q" sites was not all that far from our HQ and was indeed bombed one night.

At the end of 1940 we moved to Melrose where we experienced one of the coldest winters in living memory. We were billeted in the Melrose Abbey Hotel, close to the ruins of Melrose Abbey. Again, some twenty years after the end of the war, I took the family to see the hotel only to find it had been demolished. From Melrose we went to Knutsford in Cheshire, and then to Bewdley in Worcestershire. All this time we were conducting exercises moving the entire division comparatively long distances, training which would, it was hoped, prepare us for desert warfare, albeit in somewhat different conditions.

When we were stationed at Bewdley, the GSO1, Colonel Hutchinson, said that as he knew I had a typewriter, he wanted me to type out some Most Secret orders relating to the Division's next move.

He said “Only three people know about this order, the General, myself and you. If there is a leak we shall know where it came from!”

The orders were that the Division was to sail to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we would disembark and re-embark on American transports. This was somewhat surprising since we would be sailing towards the end of October 1941, and the United States were not yet in the war.

We duly sailed from Liverpool at the end of October 1941, although some of our Division sailed from Greenock, joining us somewhere in the Western Approaches. Our ship was the “Reina del Pacifico”, not unnaturally known to the troops as the “Rolling Reena”.

We had a very small Royal Navy escort consisting as far as I can remember of two destroyers and possibly one other vessel. Our journey was uneventful until we were about half way across the Atlantic, when we awoke one morning to find what at the time looked like the whole United States fleet on the horizon. The sky was buzzing with Grumman fighters from an aircraft carrier. Nearly sixty years later it is difficult to say how many ships there were but there were a lot. The Americans were escorting a convoy bound for Britain. This convoy was taken over by the Royal Navy, and we sailed towards Halifax with the U. S. Navy escort. As far as I recall the Red Ensigns on our ships were taken down; I believe the correct word is “struck”. There we were, a large convoy which consisted not only of our Division but other units including RAF personnel bound for flying training in Canada.

Bearing in mind that all this happened at least a month before the United States entered the war, it was a considerable breach of neutrality. As I understand it the arrangements were made at the “Atlantic Meeting” between Churchill and Roosevelt earlier in the year.

On arriving at Halifax the first thing that struck one was the absence of a “black-out”, although I believe restrictions were imposed on the Eastern seaboard when U-boats became active.

Within twenty-four hours of arriving, we transferred into American transports. By an odd coincidence the ship I was transferred to, the “Wakefield”, had in 1939 been the USS “Manhattan” in which I had travelled to the States to visit friends.

We sailed within about 24 hours in the ships of a still neutral country, and furthermore we were escorted by ships of their navy. Five of us were allocated a cabin or perhaps it could be classified as a stateroom. It was reputed to have been used by the film actress Madeleine Carroll for her Atlantic crossings. We were reasonably comfortable but we soon learnt that unlike the Royal Navy, all ships were "dry" and that included transports.

Our first port of call was Port of Spain, Trinidad, where the ships were refuelled. We were not allowed ashore. We then sailed for Cape Town across the South Atlantic. The only land we saw, shortly after leaving Port of Spain, was the coast of Venezuela.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour occurred only about four days before we arrived in Cape Town, and a large part of our naval escort turned about and headed for the Panama Canal and the Pacific. When we arrived in Cape Town the South Africans could not understand how British troops had arrived in South Africa when the United States had only been in the war for a few days.

We stayed in Cape Town for four days, and it seemed very far away from the war which indeed it was. One highlight of our stay was when General Smuts addressed a gathering of officers.

Also when we were in Cape Town the news of the sinking of the "Prince of Wales" and the "Repulse" off the coast of Malaya was announced. This was of particular significance to the people of Cape Town, since the two ships had called there only a short time before.

After we sailed, it became clear that our destination was unlikely to be North Africa or the Middle East. One Brigade, the 54th, was in fact sent to Singapore and took part in some actions on the mainland of Malaya. The officer in command of the Field Artillery in the 54th Brigade, Col Toosey, was later to be the British officer in charge on the building of the Bridge on the River Kwai. He was quite unlike the character played by Alec Guinness in the film.

The remainder of the Division sailed for Bombay where we disembarked and travelled by train to an Indian Army station at Ahmednagar. We were there for New Year's Day 1942. There was obviously some doubt as what to do with our Division. After the war I was told it was recorded somewhere that Winston Churchill had offered us to Stalin as a reinforcement for Stalingrad but I do not know

if this was in fact the case.

However, at that time the Australian Government was pressing the British Government to send reinforcements to Singapore, and so we returned to Bombay and embarked again on the "Wakefield". This time as I recall our convoy had only one escort. This was the famous "Exeter" of River Plate fame. Not long afterwards the "Exeter", together with Australian cruiser "Perth" and USS "Houston" took on a far superior Japanese force and were all sunk, but some survived to become prisoners of the Japanese. As the convoy, in line astern, passed through the Sunda Straits between Java and Sumatra, some bombs were dropped on us by Japanese aircraft without doing much damage. Considering that virtually no air cover was available, it was surprising that the Japanese did not take more advantage of what can only be described as a "soft" target.

We duly docked and disembarked at Singapore just two weeks before General Percival, the C-in-C, decided he had no alternative but to surrender on 15th February 1942. After the war I learnt from an American naval officer whom I had got to know on the ship that the "Wakefield" which had brought us from Nova Scotia to Singapore, caught fire at sea and was a total loss. After the war the naval officer became a banker in Boston. We are still in touch.

OUR LIGHT COASTAL FORCES

John Cain

If you were to ask my grandchildren about the war at sea all those years ago, they might well be able to give you an account of Noel Coward's "In Which We Serve", or even, if pushed a little further, of some of Jack Hawkins's more spectacular, cinematic battles.

But my own early experiences of serving with "our light coastal forces" were very different!

I had been sent for training to Fort William in Scotland, and from there to join a flotilla of motor launches ("M.L.s") on the East coast. Our duties were to escort and "protect" huge convoys of wallowing old merchant ships on their nightly journeys to and from Immingham and Great Yarmouth - unimaginably boring patrols, ploughing through the North Sea, in the dark, in unspeakably foul weather - not at all my grandchildren's idea of fun and adventure.

Just how inglorious it could be is recorded in one of Peter Scott's books. He describes how one of our M.L.s, as part of the escort, kept station throughout a very dark night on one of the smaller ships of a convoy. When the dawn came, the M.L. was still close beside this ship, but the rest of the convoy was nowhere to be seen. Presently the ship ran aground on a sandbank, and a few moments later the M.L. ran aground too. The skipper of the small ship leant over his bridge rail with a megaphone. "I'm here for the sand. What are you here for?"

But of course it was not always like this - not even at the beginning.

The senior officer of my flotilla, in whose boat I served, was Lt. Cdr. Whitfield D.S.C., R.N.R. - a phlegmatic, hardened sailor of the old school. He became famous for his skills in sea rescues, and it was under him that I learned my respect for the sea, for rum toddies, and (more importantly) for the unbridgeable gap between young ardour and the true professional seaman.

His subsequent accounts of how we rescued survivors from life-rafts and sinking ships always had

a touch of humour, but in fact they were deadly serious. They became legendary, like the poor chap we found dangling from a rope over the stern of a sinking ship. It was well out of the water, the ship's propellers were still turning at a good speed. He would have been cut to pieces if he had let go. But we got him! When we were fifty yards clear of the stern, the ship lurched upwards and sank.

With the passage of time the work of coastal forces changed. The Germans themselves had great harbours and ports to defend, and like us, they needed to protect their own coastal convoys. Both sides developed better ships for the purpose - faster, and better armed. The Germans had their e-Boats; we had our motor gun-boats (M.G.B.s) and torpedo-boats (M.T.B.s).

The stories of the battles which resulted have been told by better pens and memories than mine. All I can do here, in the following paragraphs, is to give you a few brief snapshots of some of the more dramatic operations in which our light coastal forces took part.

The St. Nazaire Raid (28th March 1942)

I was not personally involved in this raid, but I have two good reasons for wanting to include it.

1. Having served my seatime on the lower deck of a "Hunt" class destroyer, H.M.S.Fernie, (see "Tom" below), I was sent with a dozen other brand-new sub-lieutenants R.N.V.R. to Fort William to be taught how to handle fast motor-boats on Loch Linnhe. We were finally passed out as "fully qualified"(?) at Christmas 1941. I was drafted to Lt. Cdr. Whitfield's flotilla of M.L.s on the East Coast; most of the others were sent south. I think I am right in saying that the St. Nazaire raid was the first experience some of them had of serving at sea as officers!

2. Writing about the raid some years later, Commander R.E.D.Ryder, V.C., R.N.,who was in charge of the naval forces at St. Nazaire, (and won his V.C. there) said "I regard the St.Nazaire raid from the naval standpoint as primarily a coastal forces achievement".

The existence of a dock on France's Atlantic coast capable of sheltering Germany's fleet of U-boats, and big enough to accommodate their battleships (including the Tirpitz, biggest of them all) was a

huge threat to Allied shipping and, indeed, to the entire balance of power at sea. It had to be put out of action.

How this particular method of destroying the dock gates came to be accepted I have no idea; it sounded quite preposterous when we first heard about it; but, miraculously, it worked. At some cost!

The plan was to fill an old American destroyer, H.M.S. Campbeltown, with high explosives, sail her under her own steam into the mouth of the River Loire, convoy her upstream to the lock gates at St. Nazaire, then scuttle her and blow the lot up.

The four-hundred mile journey from Falmouth to the Loire, with destroyer protection, was not without incident, but appears to have been achieved without the harbour defences becoming suspicious. As the estuary was entered, however, and the river became narrower, the Campbeltown had to be escorted entirely by a fleet of M.L.s, M.G.B.s and M.T.B.s. In full daylight, and using false "recognition" signals, they got to within two miles of the lock gates before the Germans realised what was happening.

The incredible story of the next two hours has since been told, but can still hardly be imagined - a story of mayhem, horror, cross-fire from two sides, bravery and determination. Of the seventeen coastal craft that went in, only seven came out; and of these seven, several were in such bad shape they had to be jettisoned and sunk later.

But the lock gates of St. Nazaire had been completely destroyed; and the dock remained out of action (I believe) for the rest of the War.

The Dieppe Raid (19th August 1942)

Depending on your point of view, this attempt to occupy, for a day, ransack and then evacuate a major French port, heavily defended, in full daylight, was either a brilliant success or a total disaster.

For the five thousand men of the 2nd Canadian Division who were put ashore by the Navy, and of whom two thirds were killed, wounded or captured there, "disaster" is probably the more accurate description.

For the small group of coastal forces involved (only a fraction of a formidable fleet), it was certainly confusing, and full of frustration.

But who knows? The more enemy forces which could be tied up in defending coastal ports and landing beaches (at a time when Germany's main operations were on the Russian front) the better. And decisions still had to be made about how, when and where an Allied invasion, when the time came, should be carried out. Dieppe seems to have been a "trial run".

Whatever the strategy may have been, a vast armada of destroyers, tank-landing craft, infantry assault ships, Free-French escorts, gun-boats and M.L.s left the Solent in the late evening, on a clear starry night in August. It crossed without being detected until it reached the point a few miles off the coast where the assault ships were being lined up for the landing. Suddenly, our ships on the east flank were lit by starshells; they had been spotted by a German convoy moving down the French coast. Surprise had been lost.

I cannot give an account of the actual landings except to say that our men and tanks were put ashore and immediately met by devastating fire.

At sea, our ships had a long and perilous wait. At first nothing happened. Destroyers and coastal craft lay in the boat pool surrounded by empty transports waiting for the re-embarkation. Then, suddenly, all hell was let loose; massive and continuous air attacks from bombers and fighters of all descriptions and from all directions. Frantic orders to "make smoke"! Never was there so much smoke as at Dieppe.

Then some time after midday, one of our destroyers received a direct hit. Obviously sinking, there was time to take off survivors before it was decided to finish her off. It took two torpedoes before she went down for good.

The withdrawal of the few troops who had made it back to the shore (there were no tanks) was ordered some time in the afternoon. A few empty landing-craft made it to the beaches; the majority could not. By mid-afternoon, the raid was aborted. By evening, the battered convoy had returned to Portsmouth - for rest, reflection, and (eventually) for re-assessment.

Success? Failure? Who knows? But perhaps it is significant that when, nearly two years later, the Allies landed in Normandy, we towed our own harbour with us!

I would like to quote verbatim from two recent obituaries in "The Times". They record the lives of two of the most gallant and decorated senior officers of our light coastal forces. Some of us knew them. All of us revered them. And to those who sailed alongside them, their skill, bravery and leadership we shall never forget. The events occurred in the days and weeks after D-Day when the Germans were trying at first to reinforce, and finally to evacuate, Le Havre.

Lt. Cdr. Dudley Dixon D.S.C. and 2 bars, R.N.V.R. "One particular action began with Dixon's group of three M.T.B.s chasing three E-boats until they gained their convoy off Fecamp. Moving in to attack the convoy, they found three coasters about four hundred yards off shore, strongly escorted by E-boats. Under the bright glare of starshells and constant fire from shore batteries, they set one coaster on fire and damaged an E-boat. The enemy turned back but was wiped out by further M.T.B. attacks.

"Two nights later, co-operating with the French destroyer La Combattante, when the final remnant of German shipping sailed from Le Havre having mined the harbour, Dixon attacked with three M.T.B.s, who sank two coasters while the destroyer set another on fire and damaged a fourth."

Cdr. Donald Bradford D.S.O., D.S.C. & 2 bars, R.N.V.R. "With four boats, he attacked a force of German torpedo boats and minelayers, sinking one and disrupting their operations. This action was the more hair-raising for being conducted inside a German minefield. The British boats triggered twenty-three mines but survived thanks to their light displacement and speed."

From my own personal reminiscences, I have chosen two little acts of gallantry which earned no gongs, nor any mentions in dispatches, but have stayed in my mind and remained unrecorded, as far as I know, until today.

TOM. I cannot remember his real name, so let's call him "TOM".
Tom was an "O.D" (naval shorthand for an ordinary seaman), Which was about as humble as you can get in the Royal Navy .- an assertion to which I can personally attest since I was an O.D. myself

in those early days of the war. He joined me on the lower deck as a replacement for somebody or other a few months after we had commissioned our brand-new Hunt class destroyer.

From the first moment he stepped onboard he was unpopular. Hard to say exactly why. We were "crew" and he was a stranger. But there was more to it than that. Tom wasn't too bad at handling his Oerlikon machine-gun, but awkward at everything else. He was clumsy and out-of-step, always getting in someone's way, never there when you needed him. He was untidy, too, and - to tell the truth - not always very clean. And on the lower deck, that was always a cardinal sin.

It got so bad that one day, the leading seamen of his mess decided to do something about it. With the help of some mates they took poor Tom and made sure that he was clean - with a scrubbing brush! I remember feeling sorry for him, not so much for the discomfort he must have suffered, as for the humiliation.

As for Tom himself, he remained much the same as before. He seemed to have an inner life which made him impervious to insult or the opinion of others. One night, some weeks after the "scrubbing", our ship was sailing at high speed somewhere between Portsmouth and the occupied French coast. I think a convoy had reported trouble. We were quite alone. The sea was rough. The crew were at action stations, (a necessary precaution in these narrow waters). There was always danger here even though we showed no lights and must have been almost invisible. Suddenly, without warning (these were the days before radar), the scream of an aircraft's engine broke the silence. Straight out of the night sky came an enemy plane, returning no doubt from some nasty mission of its own, which had spotted us and decided to "have a go". Impossible to describe what it does to your guts hearing the roar of a diving plane firing directly at you. It swept across us amidships, then up and away before any of our ship's gun-crew had time to get him properly in their sights.

When we could collect our senses, it was clear that we had had an extraordinary stroke of luck. We were still on course, still keeping our thirty-odd knots, but somewhere abaft the bridge where the Oerlikon guns were stationed, something had happened. One of the gun's ammunition pans had been struck, the case had broken open, the loose explosive set on fire. What might have happened in the next few minutes if the whole damn thing had exploded God only knows. But it did not happen because there, in the light of the burning explosive, was Tom unlocking the tricky catch of

the shattered pan with his bare hands as coolly as though he was still at gunnery school, carrying it with serious concentration across the deck to the ship's side and ditching it smartly into the drink.

We shall never know whether Tom might have become the most popular member of the mess-deck because he was sent ashore a couple of days later. What I do distinctly remember is our captain, standing on the bridge as Tom left the ship, cutting him off one of those salutes which you normally only see in a Jack Hawkins film while Tom himself, slack and awkward as ever, shambled down the gangplank, failing utterly either to notice his captain or to acknowledge him.

Come to think of it, though, most of us might have found it a bit awkward trying to salute with one arm in a sling, and the other bandaged from fingertip to armpit!

So, Tom, wherever you are (pushing 80 perhaps?) thank you, good luck and God Bless You!

DICK. I only knew him for a few days in the winter of 1944/45. (fifty-five years ago - can it really be so long?) The first Normandy landings after D-day were behind us. Troops were still being brought in, of course, but the allied forces were deep into enemy-occupied territory.

I had reached the dizzy heights of " Lieutenant R.N.V.R." in command of one of His Majesty's motor torpedo boats. And wonderful little boats they were, too. I served in four different gun-boats and torpedo-boats between 1941 and 1945, and by the time of the invasion I considered myself a regular "old salt", entitled to wear my naval cap at the jauntiest possible angle over my right ear.

They were not "little boats" at all, really. My last one, built for D-Day, was 120 feet long and weighed over 100 tons. But she was fast. She was powered by four Rolls-Royce aircraft engines, each engine delivering 1500 horse-power, and needing 5000 gallons of high-octane fuel to keep them all going for a few hours. We would burn most of this in a single night's patrol.

Most surprising of all, perhaps, was the fact that the hulls of these ships were made entirely of wood twin "skins" of teak and mahogany.

I find it hard, now, to credit that we could put to sea in those dangerous days in a wooden ship

carrying all those thousands of gallons of high-octane spirit. Yet I never saw an M.T.B. on fire! The fun came when we returned to harbour after a night patrol, our tanks nearly empty, and came alongside the refuelling tender for more supplies. "Fill her up" we would say nonchalantly, returning to base some hours later with a strong smell of petrol and our gunwhales a foot closer to the water.

Many stories have been told about "our little ships", in home waters, at Dunkirk, St Nazaire, Dieppe, for example, and in the Mediterranean and those famous Force-H convoys to Malta. But the little story I want to tell now, in which Dick first distinguished himself, is less well known.

We must remember that, as the German troops were being driven back from the French coast, the ports and harbours which their fleet (mostly U-boats and E-boats) had occupied were still in enemy hands. They were exposed, but still dangerous. It was the Navy's job to eliminate these vicious little remnants and make the sea-ways safe again for Allied shipping.

The normal German tactic was to rush out at night, fighting their way into the open sea to run as fast as they could northwards along the coast to a safer (if only temporary) refuge. If they could make it difficult for allied ships to use the harbours they were evacuating so much the better (from their point of view).

One of their nastier little tricks was to foul the fairways by dropping mines, some of them technically defined as "unsweepable". By international agreement it was forbidden, even in wartime, to drop sea mines which could not be swept, or rendered safe. It was a convention which, so far as I am aware, had been fairly observed by both sides.

But at ports like Le Havre, for example after D-Day, it was ignored. As they stampeded out to sea, the German ships jettisoned everything - including what we came to know as their "oyster" mines. These were mines which were so sensitive to the slight pressure waves moving ahead of a ships' bows that they would detonate precisely at the moment when the ship passed above them.

As I write, I realise that this description must be woefully inadequate, but the fact remains that they were considered very dangerous indeed at the time. The problem was how could they be disposed of?

This is where" Dick" comes in. One of the first methods used to clear the mines was to blow them up where they lay at the bottom, along the navigating channels. To do this, we decided to experiment using some of our fast motor boats, driven as fast as possible, over the top of the mines, blowing them up (it was hoped) at a safe distance astern. The boats were made ready, stripped down to essentials, and manned by skeleton crews (an unfortunate description in the circumstances, although as far as I know, no-one was hurt in the end). They were then driven like mad one by one across the mines. They did blow some up. The boats did survive and in the end, the harbours were made safe.

But what of "Dick"? Even today, nearly sixty years later, I find this hard to believe. In order to guide the boats to the precise spot where a mine had been laid, it was necessary to mark the position accurately. To do this, a naval diver had to be sent down to walk the bottom - carefully! - and identify the mines one by one. He would then attach a line secured to a dan-buoy which would float to the surface and indicate the mine's exact position.

Dick was that diver. In peace time, I believe, he was something very respectable and desk-bound. For health reasons (eyes perhaps) he was unable to be a deck officer at sea. So he volunteered to become a diver and found himself treading the murky waters of Le Havre searching for some of the most dangerous mines ever deployed.

I remember that Dick was later given the "Freedom of the Flotilla", entitling him to as many free tots as he fancied on any ship he went aboard. But when I look back today at what he did, the free booze seems entirely inadequate to the task he performed.

So, Dick if you are still around and happen to read this little tribute, I hope you will give me a shout. Nothing would give me greater pleasure in this millennium year than to stand you "The Other Half".

These were exceptional men, and exceptional battles.

But let no one say that our light coastal forces were short on "adventure". Not even my grandchildren!

Curious footnote. As I was scribbling these notes for the Royal British Legion, it suddenly struck

me that, although I had served six years in the Royal Navy during the War (nearly all of them at sea), I had never sailed further north than Aberdeen, nor further south than the Channel Islands.

"We joined the Navy,
to see the world;
And what did we see?
- We saw the (North) Sea"!

MY LIFE IN UNIFORM
Peggy Leppard

I was born on May 3rd 1927 and lived in Gyllis Street, Kentish Town, moving to Leyton, E., in 1934. On lst September 1939 I was evacuated, aged 12, with Norlington Road School, to Ongar, Essex. I returned in May 1941 and started work in the City in July, working in Camomile Street for a firm of brokers, as office girl. From there I went to Leadenhall Street and finished up working for the British Red Cross in Finsbury Pavement where the repacking of P.O.W. parcels took place.

In the meantime I joined the Women's Junior Air Corps. Unlike in the ATC, we had to raise money to buy our own uniforms, and give up our clothing coupons. Our unit was No.17, the first in Southern England. We were taught First Aid, Morse Code, Aircraft Recognition, Unarmed Combat, and of course Military Drill.

At 16 I joined the A.R.P. as a messenger. We went to the Report & Control Point every fourth night, on our bicycles, and were paid 3/6d per night. We slept on the premises and there were two girls on at a time. At any time if there was a raid we would have to report there as soon as possible. There was a cinema right next door, and if there was an alert the audience would be informed, and we would dash out and report. Our job was to take messages to and fro all round the building, so we would know all about what was going on, what damage was being caused, and where the ambulances and fire engines were being sent to. All incidents in Leyton and Leytonstone were reported here, and marked on a huge map.

In May 1944 when I was just 17, I was recruited into the Women's Land Army. I had my first posting, to Shrewton on Salisbury Plain. In my first month there I was taught to hand-milk, starting at 5.30am. I was paid 18/~d a week. About six weeks later there came a chance for me to learn to drive a van and do the milk round. This took me to Larkhill Officers' and NC0s' messes, and NAAFIs, through Bulford to Netheravon Camp. In those days we sold more loose milk than bottled.

After eighteen months with very little home leave, I put in for a transfer and was posted to Mr Robinson's at Chiddingstone Hoath. There I stayed for over three years. We had German P.O.W.s who worked on the threshing machines. Two of them, Cristof and Herman, asked if they could come and work on the farm full-time, which they did. Mrs Bean in the village fed them in the day, whilst at night they had their supper with us and slept in the attic.

In January 1949, I was married to Wally Leppard who had been in the army for six years, abroad with the Eighth Army for four of them. During my life I have spent a lot of time in uniform; Brownies, Guides, W.J.A.C., A.R.P., St.John's, and, to date, for thirty years as Cowden Royal British Legion Women's Branch Standard Bearer.

HOME GUARD MEMORIES

Cecil Paynter

During the War it was customary for boys over fourteen to do some voluntary war work in their school holidays. The summer holidays for me always included a fortnight's harvest camp organised by my school.

My mother also volunteered me to help the Mark Beech Home Guard making camouflage netting at the Village Hall. The other job I was asked to do was to take hot food and tea in heavy boxes and urns from Cowden and Hever stations to the two contingents of Home Guard responsible for guarding both entrances to the tunnel. I used to perch the containers on my bicycle saddle. Rather a precarious journey.

The tunnel was used to conceal valuable strategic train loads by letting them stay in the tunnel during the day, and proceed on their journey when night fell. They might contain light tanks, armoured cars, ammunition, and troops. Many of them were destined for the Channel ports and resorts where the invasion of France was being prepared.

One night the men on duty heard some rustling in the undergrowth. When their challenge had not been answered three times, all eight of them fired their rifles in the direction of the sound. They were then charged at by the old grey horse which was used to haul the local fire engine. It was some two hours later when the men reappeared looking rather crestfallen.

The Kentish Horse used to have a pub monkey that lived on the roof. If anyone approached the pub but failed to go in, the monkey would come down and give his ankle a gentle bite.

When the Home Guard was first issued with rifles and five rounds each, the company commander ordered his men to line up and fire their five rounds at the monkey on the roof. No one hit it, and as the company commander marched his men away to the village hall, the monkey came down from the roof and bit him very hard on both his ankles.

One of my first games of cricket for Falconhurst was at Chiddingstone at the height of the Battle of Britain. It seemed that the pitch was being strafed, so our gallant skipper ordered "Stand to your posts; don't flinch in sight of the enemy!" The second time this happened actual bullets were flying round, and we fielders looked round for our skipper but he was nowhere to be seen.

MALTA MEMORIES 1941
Colin Davis

I joined the RAF Dental Branch in 1939 and volunteered for overseas service in 1941 when I was posted to the Middle East, and in due course arrived in Malta after a hair-raising convoy from Alexandria. It was very exhilarating to be at the very centre of the war in the Middle East in which Malta played such a vital role. It was under almost continuous air attack from Kesselring's bombers, which were only sixty or so miles away in Sicily.

My surgery was in a beautiful old house in the main street of Valetta and very much in the target area. When the sirens went my sergeant would ring up the Ops Room. "Big raid coming in from Sicily, sir. Over the island in eight minutes." I would go on drilling or whatever for seven minutes. "Rinse out and follow me". Then a quick run round the corner to the vast dungeons built centuries ago by the Knights of Malta when all hell was let loose, harmlessly as far as we were concerned, and as soon as it stopped, back to the chair.

How Malta held out was a miracle. The bombardment from the air reached a climax over the Easter weekend. As I watched from the comparative safety of the RAF hospital which overlooks the whole island I thought how different a scene it was from Easter in Cowden, and the words of a suitable Easter hymn came into my head, and then I found them changing to the words Kesselring might have sung to the tune:

Kesselring's Easter Hymn

'Tis Holy Thursday - let us snooker
All those bloody Spits at Luqa.
Fill the sky with every Stuka
Hallelujah!

Hail Good Friday - Halfar's turn,
Watch those bloody Swordfish burn.
Won't the buggers ever learn?
Hallelujah!

Easter Saturday - that's fine
Make Takali toe the line.
Here a rocket, there a mine,
Hallelujah!

Christ the Lord is risen today!
Let's bomb the harbour, bomb the bay.
Bomb the bloody place all day
Hallelujah!

Easter Monday - let 'em rip.
God, we'll give those boys the pip;
Tear them off a Safi strip
Hallelujah!

Luqa was the main airfield on the island with a small emergency landing area known as Safi Strip. Halfar was the home of the legendary old Swordfish aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, and Takali the only other airfield which for some reason the Germans attacked with rockets and mines.

I passed my Hymn of Hate round to some of my friends and to my surprise it appeared in Daily Routine Orders. Not quite Churchillian perhaps, but good that we could laugh when the outlook was still so grim.

WITH THE SCOTS GUARDS 1942-1953

Simon Bland

I joined my regiment on 7th August 1942, a week after leaving school, aged 18, and it is a day that remains very fresh in my memory.

My family was living, at the time, some five miles from the Guards Depot, Caterham, where I was ordered to report. Petrol was in very short supply in those days, but never-the-less my father took pity on me and agreed that our chauffeur could drive me in what happened to be a rather posh motor.

On arrival at the awe-inspiring gates of the Guards Depot, I was released into the arms of the Sergeant of the Guard who at once shouted to an orderly, "Take this gentleman's suitcase". We set off, I feeling very relieved, though naturally somewhat surprised, after all that I had heard previously regarding the rigours of Army life in the Brigade. After we had gone a little way, the orderly asked me which of the Regimental Officers quarters he should take me to, and I explained that, as a recruit, I presumed he should take me to the Scots Guards lines. "You're a new recruit, are you?" He dropped my case with an oath with which I was not acquainted, being, in those days, no more than a very immature schoolboy.

From then on it was "LEFTRIGHTLEFTRIGHTLEFTR1GHTLEFT" at a breathtaking pace and accompanied by even more unintelligible oaths, until we landed up, miles away, in a down-at-heel wooden hut. My escort took huge delight in handing me over to the Trained Soldier in charge with the words, "This one thinks he's an officer already." The barrack room was already filling up with fellow recruits, many of whom had been my school-fellows a few weeks before, and the noise was considerable, but not, unfortunately enough, to drown that fatal remark which was to haunt me until I was finally commissioned some six months later.

Space does not allow, nor would I presume to relate, all the ups and downs and experiences of a young officer in the Household Brigade in the war years between 1943 and 1945. None were boring, some were frightening and many were great fun. Certainly, looking back, I had to grow up exceedingly

quickly, and I have never understood how I retained the loyalty of the members of my platoon during the discomforts of the Italian campaign at the end of 1944 and the early months of 1945.

Eventually we liberated Venice and fought our way through to Trieste where Tito kept us occupied at arm's length until well after the war had ended in Europe.

I remember well an incident on the outskirts of Trieste when Tito and his Jugoslavs were still trying hard to capture the city. I think it is worth recording this if only because their behaviour is so much in the news at the moment. It happened in the following way. One evening, two shots rang out, disturbing what had been a peaceful supper party. At once my Company Commander asked me to get together a small patrol to investigate. We kitted up and set off into the semi-darkness and, after about a quarter of a mile across country, we saw some flickering lights and shadowy figures in the general direction from whence we thought the sound of the shots had come. We carried on cautiously, with our weapons cocked until we were challenged. We closed in quickly but asked no questions, seeing that there were two Slav partisans lying dead on the ground - one a male and the other a female, both quite young and closely entwined. They had been executed by their compatriots, that being the minimum punishment for that particular offence awarded by the Yugoslav authorities in time of war.

Not wishing to get further involved, we disengaged ourselves and returned to base, with sad thoughts for the young couple.

Finally, just two more short stories relating to my service in the Malayan emergency of 1948-53.

I received orders to join the 2nd Battalion Scots Guards as a Company Commander when I was serving as ADC to General Sir William Morgan in Washington. He was Head of our Mission and the British Representative on the American/British Chiefs of Staff Committee. It so happened that, on the evening before my departure, my General gave a cocktail party for some very senior US generals. I would not bother to relate this story if it did not give you a line on the limited experience of certain very senior American generals in those days. On leaving the party, a very distinguished and courteous four-star general said to me, "Captain, I hear you are leaving us. May I be permitted to ask you where you are going?" On my replying that I was leaving to join my Regiment in Malaya, he said, "Captain,

you've got me there!" I must admit that I was a little surprised but I had to remember that he had been only in Europe during the war.

The second story relates to my time in the Emergency in Malaya. We all had close shaves, though in my case there was only one which should have proved fatal. As is well known, others were not so lucky.

On this occasion, the patrol I was commanding had crept up to a bandit-stronghold and surrounded it. Shortly before we made our final assault, our approach was given away by the inevitable yapping of cur dogs, and pandemonium set in. Bandits were running everywhere and one came straight at me and at point blank range, fired his pistol at me. There was a loud report but the shot, which could not possibly have missed me, did not seem to hurt at all and I ran on, the guardsman behind me having put paid to the bandit. After the excitement had died down and I found I was none the worse, I retraced my steps and discovered that the pistol, which was still in the hand of the dead bandit, was in bad order and the bullet was stuck conveniently in the barrel and so could not possibly have reached its target!

MY WAR SERVICE IN UNIFORM
Alice Daines

My father served with the Royal West Kent Regiment throughout World War One. He reached France before his seventeenth birthday, and was badly gassed before the end of the War. He volunteered again in 1939 for the R.A.F. and served at Hatfield.

When war broke out I was in service with Lady Humphreys in Bickley. I went home to Westerham where I discussed with my parents what I should do for the War effort. I knew I should be called up for some kind of service compulsorily when I reached eighteen, so at seventeen and a half I decided to volunteer so that I could join the unit of my choice. Against my parents' advice I went over to Maidstone (by train - Westerham - Dunton Green - Sevenoaks) and enlisted in the A.T.S. (Auxiliary Territorial Service). After six weeks basic training at Norton Barracks, Worcester, I was sent for assessment to Glen Parva Barracks, Leicester, where I received some training for steward's work in catering. My first posting was at the War Office Headquarters in Golders Green where I worked in the Officers' Mess. We were billeted in some large requisitioned houses there - one owned by Harry Roy, and another by Gracie Fields. We had to do A.R.P. duties during our free time. Then they sent me to Warwick, where I worked in the Officers' Mess of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, where I became responsible for the running of the Mess as a full corporal. I wore A.T.S. cap and shoulder badges, but Royal Warwickshires lapel badges. It was the hardest wartime job I did, but the most satisfying.

My last wartime job was at Aldermaston Court in Hampshire where there was a large A.T.S. establishment serving the American Glider Pilot station. I was in charge of the Officers' Mess there and learnt butchery, becoming an acting sergeant (three stripes with a corporal's pay).

In that sort of life we worked long hours, but there was always plenty to do with our spare time. We often went out to pubs and clubs, but always as a group; one somehow just didn't accept invitations to go out as a couple; we girls stuck together, and always managed to pay our way. Much simpler!

At the end of the War I was offered the chance of signing on for seven years, but by that time I had met the man who was to be my husband so I knew what I wanted to do next!

The only time my life was really in danger was when I was at home on leave in Westerham in 1944 and a V2 exploded in our street. It was at breakfast-time; my father was outside in the garden, talking to his neighbour George Blake. I called Dad in to breakfast and my mother (who was recovering from a heart operation) from upstairs; my father lit the gas and the V2 landed. George Blake died instantly. Everyone else in the street was indoors having breakfast, and survived; my father went to hospital with a variety of injuries; the bed my mother had been lying in a moment before was flattened by the water tank which descended from the attic on to it.

On my return to Westerham after being demobbed I received a communication from the Chairman of the Westerham Parish Council (which I still have) saying to Sergeant Alice Williams, A.T.S.

We the Westerham Parish Council representing all who live in Westerham and Crockham Hill, wish to convey to you our joy and pride in welcoming you back here among us on the successful completion of your long and trying War service, and to express our heartfelt thanks for all you have done for us in restoring peace and safety to our homes and Empire.
C. Edmund Fox, Chairman, Parish Council. 1945.

D-DAY WITH THE 13th/18th ROYAL HUSSARS

Bill Mawson

Grooming for D-Day began as far back as the autumn of 1942. In the 13/18th Hussars our role was to learn the use of swimming tanks on set-piece assault, throughout 1943 in East Anglia, then at Gosport, and finally the north of Scotland, then back to Gosport for embarkation. To say the tactical training was extended, seemingly repetitive, is correct, but a few weeks in Normandy soon made me realise that our then C.O. had taught us most thoroughly, to say the least. I was also lucky inasmuch as while two squadrons were run by OCs somewhat prone to think of their troopers more as marching and kit-inspecting material, my own OC simply asked the best of us, set a remarkable example and left us to get on with our duties. Later in early Normandy days my heart was really to warm to him when one pudding-minded infantry senior commander made us turn-to in close wooded terrain with the infantry. He came up on the air and stated quite frankly to rear-command that he was not there because he wanted to be but because he had been so ordered. Locally what could the rest of us do but our best for him and keep our fingers crossed?

But back to our technical mission. This involved launching the vehicles down landing craft ramps, at which we became remarkably proficient in all seas for which the vehicles had been designed. To look today at the flotation structure in the museum at Bovington it is hard to believe it was possible. The one thing I did not enjoy due to basic sea-sickness was my “slot” as a wireless operator working a lone army radio on a landing craft, during the Navy’s own exercises since they had no wireless of their own.

Our final departure point for France was Gosport where we had done much 24 hour training right up to Christmas 1943. We were so engrossed that nobody had thought or time to slack, and militarism was at rock bottom discount. The squadron could best have been described as a form of frantically busy club; we might separately loathe individuals but hard technical work was too absorbing for animosity.

There was much need to experiment with tank stability viz-a-viz the effect of loading as much ammunition as possible, plus a variety of supplies received by us before, and all contributing to a "can't lose" atmosphere. I myself had a small shelf welded in the turret for Penguin books. As for food, we came really to be fed on an almost help-yourself basis - clearly the cooks were under accounting pressure to deplete stores. Likewise with personal kit, small issue goods were forced on us, presumably so that the SQMS could ride his lorry in comfort! Waterproof pocket escape kits became the fashion along with a brain wave of (I think) Admiral Ramsay, viz that each tank should have an inflatable rubber dinghy. To that man I owe my life as a D-Day non-swimmer.

Day by day the Solent and Spithead became more tightly packed with vessels of every variety, and the day came when I posted home my pyjamas, wondering if I would ever see them again, and we were allowed our last outing before being sealed in our base. This was a highly emotional afternoon which is now deeply engraved in my memory. There were not many goods in the shops but every soul working in them in Gosport High Street and Alverstoke Road knew very well what was up, and we could have had free gratis and for nothing the whole stock if we could have carried it away. Final embarkation occurred just like any other loading time, save the atmosphere being highly charged. One crew personalised its vehicle with the motto "Semper in Excreta" painted on the side.

The long weekend wait for the "off" (naturally I did not know Eisenhower was eyeing me from the heights of Portsdown Hill) was spent close to South Parade Pier, Southsea - an area I had known since childhood as it was the home of my grandparents, so the mixture of my emotions can be guessed at. However being inside the boom, at least I was not seasick. That began after the start when I adopted my normal horizontal position. Strangely enough the moment we launched in the small swimming tank I ceased being sick. I just prayed for any sort of landfall. In the very early hours of D-Day, the Navy presented us with strong tea with rum, which my then condition has prevented me from wishing to taste again to this day. We had known the sailors a long time and I think they were quite worried about our future. The question had been raised whether if there was a very rough sea we would start to swim or would go all the way in on the landing-craft. I still feel that our C.O. (so soon to be killed) knew exactly what our feelings would be if we did not actually perform our much trained-for launch. The code-word "floater" was received with relief - it meant that we were back in our own little maritime element. It is incredible the trained confidence that we had in nearly fifty tons of metal and explosives held just above the water-surface by an apparatus

of canvas and pram struts. It was not misplaced. There were mishaps and casualties, but these did not come from faulty equipment or training.

The run-in over the last few miles was wonderful – nothing happened at all, yet looking back as the light became stronger the entire ocean was covered by lines of vessels elbow to elbow and seemingly stretching back to the U.K., and all rolling remorselessly along; anything that faltered just had to be run down; one of our tanks was overwhelmed due to its slow speed in the rough water, and a crew member survived only because when he was at his last gasp a rating on a passing vessel had managed to fling out a rope accurately. Henceforth my immediate environment began to be somewhat uncomfortable despite the solid curtain of British ammunition whizzing over our heads. We touched land, dropped our front screen, and let off a round or two; but the breakers from the fast incoming tide immediately swamped us so that the water round us rose and reached the turret top just as we did, and we threw out the inflatable dinghy. Luckily we remembered to keep hold of the rip-cord, and to our joy after an eternity it swelled up and in we got in rather undignified haste in the midst of the mortars and shells plopping down. In front of us were all the underwater devices with explosives on top towards which we drifted remorselessly, all save one of us using our helmets as paddles and balers. On and around the obstacles were crowds of poor devils drowning as they tried to neutralise the booby traps, the sea being so rough that clinging to the obstacles they just went under the rising water or an approaching craft. Curiously this rising tide saved us as it carried our dinghy right over the detonators onto the beach beyond; and also (it dawned on me later) by swamping the exploding mortars neutralised their blast and shrapnel.

Once upon the beach, despite our weakened limbs we covered the ground very quickly to the dunes' top, at which point my memory fades. I know we found ourselves on the extreme left of the Orne Canal and that just to the east was a shot-up tank landing craft aground with a figure beside it flat on the scrubby sand. This proved to be a rating with one or possibly two feet missing, but still conscious. Having earlier taken heed of our canny young troop leader's advice to divide the First Aid Box amongst us, we had plenty of morphine syringes. These were used I hope with good effect, and we searched along the beach for succour. Ultimately we obtained a stretcher with which we tottered back to the injured sailor. (Here let me say that I have ever since regarded the toughest task in a war to be that of a stretcher-bearer. How we managed to carry that rating between four of us I shall never know, yet they regularly did all that duty in mere pairs.) The rating, Ordinary Seaman

Peter Hutchins, received medical attention, lost his foot but survived, and now lives in New Zealand. Through a string of coincidences he was able to turn up in Edenbridge and thank me personally on a U.K. visit in 1994.

By now you will gather that the immediate hornet's nest had quietened quite a lot, in fact I now know the assault was well inland, leaving the beach crowded with later technical arrivals and follow-ups. For our part we found a patch cleared of mines in the scrub, dug a trench, roofed it with the anti-sea shields being thrown off by arriving Bren carriers and settled down to await events. During the late sunny afternoon I walked right out towards the receding tide to some of our tanks which had not made it, and secured some items of tinned food. I passed the body of a fellow unit-member (Trooper Schofield) and thought rather soberly how I had been feeling hard-done by during the early hours of the assault.

During the first night we lived in our own trench, and a nearby ammunition dump was bombed which made a fire-work display, but nevertheless with the aid of a ration box collected from a base point (duly signed for!) we lived very well for nearly a week, having sent a message forward as to where we were, and sat it out peacefully until an A Echelon lorry appeared with a familiar face in it, and took us off to the reinforcement unit.

My final memory which I never regret recalling concerns our rejoining our unit and being assigned a new tank and loading and testing it; on a sunny morning in a lovely apple orchard where our C.O. was to be seen dressed in his only remaining clothes, to wit a civilian white jumper with grey trousers; he was unfeignedly glad to see us; come to that, we were relieved to see HIM. Home again!

BOMBER COMMAND MEMORIES 1943

Tom Parsons

After fifty-six years or so I feel there is no possible harm in recounting some examples of the Lighter Side of Life as a 19-year old serving as an air-gunner with 51 Squadron of Bomber Command, stationed in Snaith, Yorkshire.

Some unsanctioned articles were sometimes dropped over Germany whenever the opportunity arose.

One example concerned the strange disappearance of very hard-to-get facing bricks delivered to our airfield for a planned extension to the officers' mess. What a temptation, when the bricks were stacked on site between the briefing room and the transport taking crews to aircraft dispersal points. Easy to take a brick when passing, to be concealed in a flight-bag or inside a bulky flying suit. Over a period the brick stack reduced noticeably in size. The contractor, poor man, was distraught, and reported the losses to the Station Commander and RAF Police, who immediately stopped and searched all vehicles leaving the site in an attempt to stop the pilfering of valuable building material - without success, and very frustrating for those concerned. Eventually the prank was discovered, and the remnants of the brick stack locked away out of reach of unruly aircrew.

Strong disciplinary action was threatened by the Station Commander on the guilty parties, but after an exchange of views in very high places we were all forgiven.

The "stolen" bricks were disposed of en-route to target over Germany, mostly from the rear turret. I did wonder afterwards whether any portly German burgomaster in bed with his portly frau at night was astonished when a brick came through his roof!

On another occasion a member of the squadron, yarning to an assembly in the village pub, said he had it on good authority that an empty pint beer bottle dropped from a great height produced a very loud and terrifying whistling sound. It was decided (after a few pints) that this should be put to the

test over Germany, and this practice soon caught on, much to the dismay of the publican who could not get his allocation from the brewer in those days unless his empties were returned.

The originator of the idea, wishing to keep in the limelight as the squadron wag, then suggested that the bottles could be pee'd into before despatch. This latter embellishment of the prank did not catch on; apart from being indecent and vulgar, there was the risk of frost-bite at 20,000 ft! However, numerous empty bottles were expertly dropped through the photo-chutes or turrets, and whether or not they produced the desired effect we never discovered. The bottle-dropping quickly ceased when it was realised that the pub was becoming short of beer due to the non-return of the empties!

WITH THE IRISH GUARDS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Leslie Pickard

In 1939 when war broke out I was nineteen and thought I would join the Royal Marines as a volunteer. But they would only offer a ten-year engagement, so in the end I was conscripted and found myself at the Caterham Guards depot and was given twelve weeks basic training as an Irish Guardsman. We moved to various places in the south of England in the following years as we continued our training, and I did have one interesting if uncomfortable week in a slit trench at Biggin Hill when there was the threat of German parachutists landing to take over the airfield. Eventually, in 1944, I sailed with the lst Battalion to Algiers, then Tunis, and then Hammamet, from where we crossed to the Italian mainland and landed at Taranto, then on to Foggia, and joined up with the American Fifth Army in Naples.

Monte Cassino was proving difficult to defeat, and the Fifth Army's progress was seriously held up. This required a landing by the Royal Navy of troops further up the coast onto Anzio beachhead. We found the beach easy to land on because the R.N. had blasted it first with a heavy rocket bombardment. They continued to shell the enemy over our heads for the next four months while we held on against continuous attacks by the Germans in very cold and waterlogged conditions. Finally one night some German tanks appeared on three sides of us and a small group of us were forced to surrender.

We were taken by cattle truck via Rome and Florence over the Alps to Munich, a whole train load of us. And eventually to a prison camp near the Polish border, in the Cracow area. By this time the Russian advance was coming close to us, and we were forced to march westwards. We walked hundreds of miles, experiencing at various times the sounds of allied bombing raids, until we found ourselves near Erfurt in Bavaria. Two of us decided to slip away from our guards at this point, as the Germans were getting very jittery, but after three nights and two days we had completely lost our way and found ourselves facing a wide river we couldn't cross. We were picked up by a German patrol. Back at the camp we were greeted by the issue of Red Cross parcels, and no punishment for our escape.

Shortly after this the Americans arrived, fired two shots towards the camp, and our guards vanished.

We spent the next few days scavenging in the neighbourhood for anything at all to eat, and in the end we were loaded aboard a Dakota aircraft normally used for transporting petrol, and after a very smelly and uncomfortable flight landed in Hertfordshire from where we were given six weeks leave.

For a short period I was stationed at Aldershot from where I was finally demobbed, and I rejoined my father who was working at the Air Ministry at Worcester. I was married in 1947 and settled into our first home in Lewisham.

REMINISCENCES OF A WARTIME BOMBER PILOT

Mark Mead

The most dramatic period in my life was the 39-45 War, when I got caught up in the euphoria of the time and decided that I would volunteer for the RAF, which had the reputation of giving its recruits slightly better conditions than the infantry, into which I would possibly have been conscripted before long. Besides, I had always wanted to fly ever since I had watched a Whitley bomber lumber across the airfield at Horley (now Gatwick) making a noise like ten tractors at full throttle. How could such a massive and ponderous thing ever take to the air? It did, of course, roaring just over our heads with a noise like thunder.

The RAF took me in on a cold December day in 1940, and I was billeted with four others in a classroom of a school in Stratford-upon-Avon. One of the four was Vic Saunders, who had worked in an estate agent's office in Brighton, and played for Brighton & Hove Albion football team. We got on weII together, but after our six weeks' induction period we were separated, and I was sent to ITW (Initial Training Wing) at Scarborough.

It was a happy period of my service career, during which we were instructed in King's Regulations (military law) including such valuable crafts as to how to dig field latrines and how to avoid getting the clap. Drill was an essential part of the training, drill, endless drill, under a tyrant of a drill instructor named McTaggart, who was reputedly married to Carole Carr, a glamorous singer with a West End 'big band'. We all felt sure that his voice softened when he was at home. Eventually we became quite proficient and were proud to march around the town in support of the appeals for the townsfolk to give up their aluminium saucepans to make Spitfires.

We were also given intensive lessons in the theory of flight, aerial navigation, dead reckoning, Aldis lamp signalling, and the use of a bubble sextant to find your position by the stars. About half our time was spent in physical exercise of a rigorous nature, which gave us healthy appetites in healthy bodies. After three months of this concentrated training we were given a week's leave, and were happy to swagger about in our RAF uniforms with the white flash in our caps, indicating Pilots Under Training.

My next posting was to Cambridge, to Marshall's Airfield, where I was introduced to the Tiger Moth. Anyone who has flown a Tiger Moth has a life-long affection for the aircraft. It has an open cockpit, it responds to the most delicate touch and has no vices whatever. Before long I was flying upside down, looping the loop and recovering from a steep spin with the best of them. Best of all were the cross-country flights. With a map strapped on to my knee, I followed my course watching the woods, the fields, the roads, the villages appear beneath me like a living map.

Air Vice-Marshal Brian Pashley Young summed it up in a poem which he wrote whilst a cadet at Cranwell and entitled simply 'Flight'

> How can they know the joy to be alive
> Who have not flown ?
> To loop and spin, and roll and climb and dive
> The very sky one's own.
> The surge of power as engines race,
> The sting of speed,
> The rude wind-buffet on one's face,
> To live indeed !

Unfortunately, I hadn't completely mastered the art of landing, and my instructor, Sergeant Camp, decided that I would never make a pilot, since landing is regarded by the RAF as essential. But I was lucky. The Chief Flying Instructor took me up on a circuit of the airfield, and must have been dismayed at my landing but nevertheless he got out of the plane and said "Right, off you go, lad, you're on your own!" And without an instructor to intimidate me, I took off, circled the field at 1,000 feet and made a classic approach and landing. Twelve hours flying and I went solo!

It was June 1941, a beautiful summer spent cross-country flying, night flying, formation flying, acrobatic flying, the happiest time of my service career. The social life with like- minded lads, drinking too much, trying to pull the birds, it was all heady stuff and we were all too well aware that it would not last.

Next, to No.6 Flying Training School at Little Rissington in Gloucestershire, where I started flying

twin-engined Airspeed Oxfords, again doing all manner of flying except the aerobatics because by now the powers had decided that I should train for heavy aircraft rather than become a fighter pilot. So be it! I lost a bit of kudos with my girl friends but by the end of that eight-month course I was awarded my 'Wings' and went on leave. My mother took me round to see all the friends and relatives, insisting that I wear my uniform with the brand new shiny wings!

My next posting was to OTU (Operational Training Unit) at Abingdon, and guess what? The aircraft were Whitleys - twin Merlin-engined Armstrong Whitworth Whitleys, the very aircraft I had watched lumbering into the air at Horley four years earlier. It seemed massive. The instrument panel was a mass of knobs and dials, there were levers at each side of the pilot, pipes and cables and switches everywhere. Yet within a few days I had learned what each did and what is more, had learned to identify each control in the dark by touch alone.

By the end of that winter we had our first taste of flying over enemy-occupied territory, when we flew on a 'nickel raid' over France. I don't know why those leaflet-dropping sorties were called 'nickel raids' but they gave me a first taste of 'flak' and anti-aircraft gunfire.

In April 1942 I was posted to 12 Squadron, an operational bomber squadron at Binbrook in Lincolnshire, and did a brief conversion course on to Wellington bombers, and flew a couple of 'ops' to Hamburg and the Ruhr. At the end of May, the 29th in fact, the station was closed. No leave, no letters home. no telephone calls, no visits to the pub. Obviously something 'big' was brewing. There were three ancient Whitleys on the station, used for target-towing in air gunnery practice, and because I had flown Whitleys in training I was allocated one of these and given a crew, including a flight-lieutenant navigator, and told to take as much practice as possible in preparation for an operation. It was a little unusual in my experience to have a flight lieutenant calling me 'skipper' but that's the way things were in those days when all new pilots were mere sergeants, and even more unusual to be flying what had become an antiquated aircraft in preparation for an 'op'.

All became clear on the 31st when, at the briefing, we were told that the RAF was mounting the largest operation ever undertaken in the history of flying - 1,000 bombers from airfields all over England were to fly that night to drop 1,400 tons of bombs in ninety minutes on Cologne. It had to be a precise exercise in timing, and because I was flying an aircraft that had a top speed of little

over 100mph, I was scheduled for a late arrival over the target. The sight was awesome. Despite dummy fires lit by the enemy in the hope of attracting bombs into open countryside, the real target was unmistakable.

So, too, were the real flak and shell explosions that were rocking the aircraft as we flew over. Tracer bullets were rising slowly but in devastating, colourful arcs all around us, and no one who has not seen it can imagine the sight. The nearest description I can give is of a major firework display where every spark is a deadly bullet or piece of shell shrapnel. That raid is recorded in RAF annals and my place is there as the pilot of Whitley P Peter of 1341 Flight attached to 12 Squadron.

Five months later, in October 1942, I was taken by train through Cologne, unwillingly, but more of that later. The train had stopped outside the main station and I could look down into the shell of a factory and see inside the bombed and roofless structure. There were dozens of machine tools, lathes, hydraulic presses, fly presses all lying damaged and idle. I could also see the roof of the marvellous cathedral. We now know that, quite fortuitously, and with no particular credit to the RAF, the cathedral came out of that inferno with little or no damage.

I would like to take a moment to get rid of some of the misconceptions about the RAF Bomber Command offensive against Germany in the war. It has been said that it was directed against civilians, against heritage cities like Cologne, and that it had little or no effect on the course of the war. Sir Arthur Harris did not plan to bring the trams and buses to a halt in Berlin, he did not plan to devastate housing estates or to bomb hospitals. What he and his Bomber Command did, however, amongst other things was by 1944 to cause Germany to divert to the anti-aircraft role, a third of all armament production, guns and heavy shells, and half of the enemy's output of electro-technical equipment *.

(*Information from Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Armitage in the Daily Telegraph 16 April 1999)

Without that massive diversion of resources, Hitler might well have succeeded on the Eastern front and completely destroyed Stalingrad, Leningrad and Moscow itself, and subjugated the whole of Russia. Where would he have found his next victims? Dresden? Yes, Dresden was a city of beautiful architecture, a treasury of history and heritage. The surrounding area to the east was also an armed camp, a storehouse of tanks and guns. In February 1945 I was in a column of refugees approaching

Dresden from Poland. We toiled up a long hill into the pine forest at the top. Every tree, on both sides of the road, for a mile or more, had an explosive charge strapped to it at about head height, ready for the Russian troops and tanks, who were about one day behind us. Coming out of the forest, the ground fell away and in the valley ahead was the town of Dresden. We didn't go into the city, but skirted to the south, then west towards Leipzig. The whole area was a military repository.

But back to my story. After a few more operations, and I make no bones about it, each time we boarded an aircraft for an operation over enemy territory, we were frightened. Some were shaking with fear, some were laughing and making pathetic jokes, but we were all pretending that we hadn't a care in the world, we were brave young warriors doing a patriotic duty. Our insides were jelly.

As I was saying, after a few more operations, 12 Squadron was stood down and its pilots and crews dispersed to other stations in Lincolnshire. It became an all-Australian squadron.

I was sent to Elsham Wolds, near Barnetby, to 103 Squadron which had recently been re-equipped with Handley Page Halifax Mark ll's. The Halifax. Over twenty four tons in weight, twenty feet high and with a wing span of 33 yards, powered by four Rolls-Royce Merlin X engines, cruising at nearly 200mph, carrying six tons of bombs and with a normal crew of seven - Pilot, Navigator, Flight Engineer, Wireless Operator and three Gunners. The largest flying machine I had ever seen. I was given R Robert, (W.1211) built by English Electric, and allocated a crew which included a Canadian and a New Zealander. We spent about three weeks getting to know the plane and each other, practising, practising, honing our skills in test flights, lengthy cross-country flights in all weathers, and, in my case, hours and hours on Link flight training. One day, we were returning from a triangular flight which had Cullompton in Devon and Kirkcudbright in Scotland as two turning points, and on the last leg the weather closed in completely. We were flying in cloud at about 8,000 feet, heading for home but relying totally on instruments and dead reckoning navigation. I slowly lost height down to 2,000 feet and called base asking for a QFE, which is the barometric pressure which would enable me to set my altimeter correctly for the base area. Having done that, I circled at 1200 feet, still in thick cloud, trying to pick up a radio signal from the outer marker beacon. Luck was with me and the signal came through my headphones loud and clear. I immediately made a ninety degree turn to port and proceeded to lose height at a steady 200 feet per minute. Navigation was forgotten – I was keeping on the correct heading by the signals coming through my headphones - dashes if too far to

port, dots if too far to starboard, a steady signal between the two. At 800 feet we were still in thick cloud, and I was waiting anxiously for the inner beacon signal. There was a deathly silence from my crew. 750, 700 feet, 650 , 600. I was sweating. Bingo! There it was - the Inner Marker Beacon at 600 feet! But no break in the cloud. How low dare I go? Could the clouds possibly be as low as this? Could I continue descending? I had done all this in practice on the Link Trainer, but this was for real. I kept on a true course, listening, listening to those signals. I was down to three hundred feet, and could see nothing. My flight engineer and navigator were standing behind me watching the altimeter needle slowly turning. Down, down, engines throttled back, wheels down, flaps out 40 degrees, 200 feet, 150, if I was wrong I would hit the hangar roof any second now. 100 feet, 75, still going down, 50 feet, and there, laid out before me like a welcoming mat was the beginning of the mile-long runway we had left more than four hours ago!

Later, I asked my crew how worried they had been. Bill Whittwam, the navigator, spoke for them all when he said "Not at all, Skipper, we had total confidence in you."

At that moment, I was on top of the world.

But such euphoria never lasts and the next day, 5th October 1942, we were called into briefing for our first operation in a Halifax. It was a comparatively small affair, and not all the squadron aircraft were involved. The Wing Commander called to me and said "Sergeant Mead, you and your crew can stand down tonight." And then, as an afterthought, "Unless you would like to go with Warrant Officer Edwards, just for a bit more experience?" W/0 Edwards was an old hand, a very experienced pilot, well known and respected throughout the squadron. "Yes, Sir!" I replied.

At ten o'clock that night, I took my place in the second "dickey" seat beside Warrant Officer Edwards. We carried out the normal cockpit drill and waited for the Aldis lamp signal for take-off. The light blinked at us and Edwards held the brakes firmly on the control column as I eased the four throttle levers forward almost to their full travel. Four engines roared in an increasing crescendo of sound as the tail plane lifted in the powerful slipstream of the stationary plane. As the brakes were released, the Halifax shot forward on its main wheels, building up speed along the runway. Eighty, ninety miles an hour and Edwards gently lifted the lumbering giant off the limiting tarmac, and it began to soar with unfettered grace into the dark sky of that October night. "Undercarriage up" called Edwards,

and I reached down to operate the lever. “Undercarriage coming up.” I said. As soon as he heard the thump as the wheels locked in their stowed position, and the red warning light was extinguished, he called “Flaps twenty.” “Flaps to twenty” I repeated as I lifted the lever, watching the dial on the instrument panel. He turned the aeroplane to port, climbing steadily on an eastward course, and asked the navigator for a precise course, which he set on the main and the gyro compass.

It was to be a fairly straightforward operation. and the crew were chatting over the intercom as the plane climbed higher into the moonlit clouds. They were looking forward to completing the short trip and returning to base for breakfast and bed. In the Control Tower, the duty officer knew that, statistically, not all the planes would return, for at that stage in the war, late 1942, one in every five aircraft went missing. Yes, the rate of loss was 20%.

The experienced crew of Q Queenie stopped talking as they approached the Belgian coast, only necessary reports and instructions breaking their silence. Over enemy territory the flak began, deadly flak that was to be with us more or less continuously for the next hour or two. Probing searchlights caught us more than once, but we managed to twist and dive out of the piercing fingers of light. The target was partially obscured by light cloud and decoy fires were burning a few miles off, but despite this the pilot, following the bomb aimer’s directions, pinpointed the target and released the bombs. Stopping only long enough to obtain some photographs for the debriefing officer, Edwards swung the aircraft away on to a homeward course and settled into a slow descent, turning and weaving all the time to fox the enemy radar. After less than half an hour we were flying at about 15,000 feet over Belgium, and the flak had released us at last. The moon was bright, so the crew were still alert. Totally quiet but alert.

Then it came. Over the intercom we heard the dreaded words from Norman McMaster, the rear gunner, “Fighter! Fighter! Below port!” but even before he had finished speaking there was the awful rattle of shells exploding within the aircraft, then a second burst, and a third. Within seconds, flames were licking across the nacelles of the two port engines, and the pilot was struggling to control the plane which had gone into an unchecked dive. He spoke the emergency command quickly and clearly - “Parachute, Parachute, Jump, Jump!” They were the last words Warrant Officer Edwards ever spoke. But he had held the aircraft level long enough to give the rest of the crew just enough time to save themselves. He perished. I was the second pilot, the last man out, and after clipping

the skipper's parachute on to his harness, I jumped from the forward escape hatch. I can still see that ball of fire as Q Queenie crashed into a forest.

After an adventurous couple of days, frightening days, spent trying to evade capture, the Germans caught up with me and I spent the next two and a half years in a prison camp in Silesia in Poland, and renewed my acquaintance with Vic Saunders. He was standing just inside the high barbed wire fence as we were hustled into the Stalag on a cold November evening. It did a lot for my morale to see a friend, and, later, to talk to him and realise that we would probably survive!

THIRTY YEARS ON

Thirty years later, the proud owner of a new 2 litre open car, I planned a motoring holiday along the Romantic Road, through Bavaria and into Austria, but first decided to try to find the place where we had been shot down. After leaving the ferry at Zeebrugge, I headed for Hasselt - the town where I had been first imprisoned by the Hitler's SS. I could not find the prison, nor did I recognise any building or road, so I motored on taking a northerly course, and began to think about the night's accommodation. Stopping in the village of Diepenbeek I went into a bar to enquire about bed & breakfast, and whilst chatting to the barman I asked if he knew of a village or hamlet called Hohenlohe - the only name I had gleaned during the brief trip as a pillion passenger on a German army motorcycle combination. That was a very uncomfortable journey as the sidecar occupant had his rifle stuck firmly in my ribs. The name Hohenlohe meant nothing to the barman, but one of the only other two persons in the bar, a man in his late forties, asked if he could help. "I'm looking for a village or district called Hohenlohe, somewhere in this vicinity I believe." "I don't know such a place. Why are you asking?" I explained that I had been in the RAF and was shot down during the war, and the name had stuck in my mind as being near the site where I had parachuted to safety. "When was this'?" he enquired. "In 1942, October 1942". "What date in October?" "The early hours of 6 October. About 2.30 am." "What type of aircraft were you flying?" "A Halifax Mark II."

Up to this point I thought he was showing no more than an attentive interest in my story, as some people do - fascinated by war-time anecdotes, but his next remark astonished me. "I saw you come down!" He went on, "I was in Jogenbos woods with a resistance group, and your aircraft crashed into the woods. We had to get out quickly because we knew the Germans would be there soon. Yes,

I saw it all and I could take you to the very spot."

His name was Emile Achten, and he was as excited as I was. We got into the car and he directed me to the village of Vliermal-Root, and we turned into a long private drive which led to an imposing but rather neglected mansion where we stopped. Emile explained that he would need permission from the landowner before going any further, and he went to the door and went inside. After some minutes he returned and told me that the Baron wished to see me. I went through the large hall into a library and was introduced to Baron de Cartier d'Yves, owner of the Chateau Jongenbos. After some preliminary talk he asked me pointedly "What is the name of your crewman who was killed?" "Warrant Officer Edwards," I replied. "Yes. It was your aircraft which crashed in my woods!"

The manservant who had brought me into the house was then instructed to make arrangements for us to visit the spot, which entailed telephoning to the Baron's farm. When we arrived at the farm, the farmer, Rene van Heusden-Jonkmans, with his wife and three small children, was waiting for us, with gum boots which they were sure we would need. Rene and Emile then guided the little party through about two miles of dense forest to a clearing which we were told had been made by the burning aircraft. I stood there for some moments in complete silence, remembering, praying.

Emile recalled that there had been a wooden cross, and after some searching we found what remained of it, fallen and moss covered.

On the return walk to the farm Rene missed the track and we walked about three miles before getting back to the farmhouse. Once there, we were able to wash and brush up and then enjoyed a glass of Bols and some waffles and a slice of apple cake. Excellent.

Emile took me back to Hasselt and I booked into the Hotel Memling. On the way there I said how fortunate I had been in meeting him, and what a coincidence that he was in the bar when I arrived. "Yes," he replied, "it was wonderful. I have never been in that bar before in my life."

WITH THE S.O.E. IN CHINA 1943-1945

Ann Sorby

When war was declared I was too young to join up so I did a secretarial course. When eventually I was allowed to report for duty I was told I was suitable to work as a secretary for MI5 and was sent to its headquarters at Blenheim Palace. Two hundred of us were billeted at Keble College Oxford, where the allocation of bathrooms was somewhat scanty. We were bussed out to Blenheim every day, and I worked in the department responsible for advising armament factories on the importance of maintaining tight wartime security.

During the two years I worked there I began to develop a desire to see Peking, perhaps because of what I'd learnt about it from books I'd read and drawings and paintings I'd seen.

While in Oxford I started to study Chinese, and at last I summoned up the courage to go to my boss and ask if there was any chance of being posted to the Far East. I was despatched to Special Operations Executive's office in Baker Street, interviewed, and became a FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomany) in mufti.

Two weeks later I was in a plane on my way to China. The plane was a Short Sunderland flying boat, and contained also eleven lieutenant-colonels and another girl. We landed frequently for refuelling and sleep. At one stage we touched down on the Nile where we were driven to a rather strange-looking hotel. When we emerged from our rooms next morning we found all eleven officers sitting in the lobby where they'd been all night because they wouldn't otherwise have been sure of our safety! We made further stops at Bahrain and Karachi before arriving in Calcutta where our particular operation had its office.

The next step was to fly over "The Hump", which was the foot of the Himalayas which you had to cross to reach the non-Japanese-occupied zone of China. It was a tricky flight, because the only RAF planes available at that time in that area were two Dakotas, small and unpressurised, and unable to fly very high with a full cargo. To clear "The Hump" on this particular flight we had to fly

up to 18,000 feet which made breathing a bit difficult and we were warned not to have any ink in our fountain pens.

My final destination was Kunming, in Yunnan province, an important trading centre and the major base of U.S. General Chennault's 14th Air Force (the Flying Tigers). It was the only large enough air base available in the non-Japanese-occupied part of China. Here our branch of SOE had work for me in their offices where they were arranging an illicit system whereby "hard" currency in the form of "blocked sterling" was exchanged for Chinese currency. These arrangements made it possible for the enormous cost of British activities in China to be considerably reduced. (Inflation in China was of horrendous proportions). It was estimated that by the end of the war the Allies had, by our efforts, been able to reduce their total war expenditure in the Far East by £77m.

Five of our group, including myself, spent a few months in Kaiyuan, near the Indo-Chinese border, securing food, accommodation and medical facilities for a large contingent of French colonial infantry who had retreated from Indo-China in the spring of 1945.

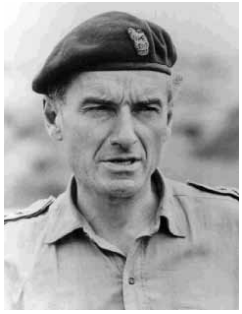
From Kunming a number of other British groups organised various activities including the programme of helping British nationals to escape from Japanese-occupied Hong Kong.

Although so far from home I had enjoyed the family atmosphere which had prevailed among the British in Kunming; many of whom had been displaced from other areas of China where they had lived and worked before the War.

Finally the War ended and I was given the opportunity of going, via Calcutta and Ceylon, to Hong Kong, where I had been recruited to a job in the military administration of the liberated colony.

Eventually I saved enough money to pay for my trip to Peking. The time I was there was the brief period between the Japanese evacuation and the arrival of the Communist Chinese forces. The Forbidden City was almost deserted, but in amazingly good condition as the Japanese while in occupation had done a good deal of restoration work.

While in Hong Kong I met and married a British civil administrator, and we made our home there, raised a family of four children, and finally returned to England in 1973.



THE CROSSING OF THE RHINE, MARCH 24th 1945

Napier Crookenden

By early March 1945 the British and Americans had fought their way forward to the River Rhine. In the north, Field Marshal Montgomery's aim now was to cross the Rhine near Wesel and then launch our armoured divisions into the North German plain. By now all the British and American airborne divisions were operating under one command, the XVIII Airborne Corps, under the command of the American General Matthew Ridgway, and for this operation the Corps consisted of the 6th British and 17th American Airborne Divisions.

At Arnhem the previous September the British 1st Airborne Division had been overwhelmed by the Germans, largely because they were dropped too far from their objective, the bridge at Arnhem, and over three days. This time we were to be dropped at 10am from one massive armada of aircraft on top of the German artillery and reserve positions. Further, the Infantry Divisions were to begin crossing the river the night before. There was massive artillery and air support. I was lucky enough to command the 9th Parachute Battalion in the 6th British Airborne Division.

By 5.30 in the morning we were on our airfield at Wethersfield in Essex, and as the day dawned and we climbed into our American aircraft, we could see it was going to be a fine day. The pilots and the crew chief came down the aircraft to meet us and to check that they would give us the usual warning lights "a 4 minute RED for action stations and then the GREEN for GO !". Then the engines started and we began taxiing towards the runway in a long thundering queue, turned on to the runway, lined up with two other aircraft, remarkably close together, and then all three aircraft set off on their take-off run. Fifteen minutes later all our eighty aircraft from Wethersfield were formed up into their beautiful arrow-heads of "nine ship elements" - a masterpiece of skilled and disciplined flying.

Over Wavre in Belgium our long column of aircraft joined up with a similar column carrying the American 17th Airborne Division from Rheims, and the two air streams flew on together towards

the Rhine. After some initial singing most men began to drowse, until a yell from the Crew Chief "Twenty minutes to go" woke us all up. Then came the order "Stand Up Hook Up !" and each man fastened the snap hook of his parachute to the overhead cable, fixed the safety pin and turned aft and checked the parachute of the man in front of him. Just aft of the aircraft door at the rear of the aircraft the American crew chief listened to the pilot on his intercom and as I was jumping No 1, I watched the lights over the door.

The RED light came on, the Crew Chief shouted "Stand to the Door". I shuffled forward until I was in the door, left foot forward hands holding the door edges, the slip stream blasting my face and below me the great, curving river. Seconds later a blow on my back and a bellow in my ear of "GO!" swept me out into the sunlight. Once my parachute had developed I felt the usual feeling of exhilaration and looked down to see our dropping zone exactly as it had appeared on our maps and models. I could see the men of the 8th Battalion, who had jumped three minutes before us, running in to attack the Germans and I could hear the odd crack and thump of a passing bullet but it was a lovely morning and a comfortable descent.

I landed in the middle of the dropping zone with my usual, clumsy, backward roll, banged open my quick release box and slipped off my parachute. I could see the blue smoke already going up from our rendezvous and joined the stream of our men moving towards it. The Regimental Sergeant Major, Dusty Miller, was standing by the blue smoke canister, grinning broadly and directing the men, as they came in to their company positions in a tight circle round the rendezvous. It was essential to move off as soon as we could to capture the high ground overlooking the Rhine plain and to knock out the German gun batteries. We needed to get our mortars into action as soon as possible to cover our advance. I grabbed a passing mortarman. "Where is Mr Jefferson (the Mortar officer)?" "He's copped it - right through his head" was the reply, but happily Alan Jefferson, a former ballet dancer, appeared at that moment, bouncing along quite untouched and with a cheery "Good Morning, Sir. What a lovely day !"

Each battalion had been allotted three gliders and these now appeared over the dropping zone. One of them misjudged his height and speed, came whistling in straight for our corner of the woods and hit the tree tops right over the 8th Battalion HQ about 100 yards from where I was standing. The glider broke up in a great splintering crash and I ran over to find that it was our own medical glider

and that our excellent RAMC Sergeant Millot and his two RAMC orderlies were dead.

Forty-five minutes later most of our men had arrived and we moved off. Lance Corporal Wilson, my batman, with his usual skill, appeared riding a horse and leading another for me, so that for a time I felt like the Duke of Wellington. B Company in the lead rushed a German gun battery, A Company brushed aside a few Germans and reached the top of the high ground, and by 1 o'clock we were digging in on our final position.

The next excitement was a counter-attack by a German assault gun on its tracked chassis with a few brave infantrymen moving straight up the road through B Company. The German infantry stood no chance, but the gun lumbered up into the middle of B Company headquarters, where everyone dived into the ditch, except for the Company clerk, Private Tillotson. He jumped up from the ditch, banged a bomb onto the engine covers, and shot the first German who looked out of the hatch. The rest of the crew surrendered. The thing was still a runner and we kept it rumbling along with us for the next week of our advance, manned by two ex Tank men in the Battalion.

That evening I was crossing the road on my way round the companies, when a jeep drove up, flying a Union Jack on the bonnet. This could only be the Army Group Commander, Field Marshal Montgomery. I saluted and reported the Battalion and its success. "Good! Good!" said Monty. He often repeated a sentence twice. "I know your father", and he signalled his driver to drive on. "Just a minute, Sir," I said. "100 yards further on round that next corner are a bunch of Krauts." "Thank you! Thank you!" said Monty. The jeep turned round and off he went. That same night he wrote a Field Service postcard to my father, a retired colonel living in Berkshire. "My dear Arthur. I saw your boy today with his battalion. They were in good form. Yours ever, Montgomery of Alamein." - a thoughtful gesture by a very great man on the first crowded evening of a massive battle.

WITH THE GRENADIER GUARDS February 1945
Ronnie Owen

Dear John

I write with reference to the proposed book being prepared as a Millennium project for the Branch. What follows are extracts from Patrick Forbes's History of the Grenadier Guards '39-'45, Vol.l.

(It may interest you to know that Sergeant Hanks M.M. kept in touch with me until he died a few years ago. It is entirely due to the courage displayed by Sergeant Hanks that I am still alive and writing this letter!)

Of the many offensives which the British Liberation Army launched between D Day and VE Day, Operation "Veritable" was fought on the grandest scale. Five hundred Halifax and Lancaster bombers made the preliminary bombardment, a thousand guns - many more than there were at El Alamein - gave artillery support, and the attacking force itself consisted of six infantry divisions and one thousand five hundred tanks. Over three hundred thousand men were involved. By the time it was over not only had the much-vaunted Siegfried Line been broken through but also the entire German forces between the Maas and the Rhine had been sent hurtling back into Germany in complete disorder.

This remarkable victory was won only after a month of some of the heaviest fighting of the campaign. The operation lasted for a whole month, which, considering that the distance covered, from Nijmegen to Wesel, was a bare forty miles and, considering the vast numbers of British and Canadian troops involved, seemed endless. Floods, which submerged parts of the battlefield for days on end, mud as thick and viscous as it had been during the Dutch battles, seemingly endless belts of forest which had to be fought for inch by inch - not to mention the desperate resistance offered by the Germans, especially towards the end of the operation; these combined to slacken the pace of the Allied forces and, to a certain extent, to counter-balance their large superiority in numbers. Operation "Veritable", in fact, rivalled the Normandy campaign in the effort it required to bring it to a victorious conclusion.

On the 27th of February the 4th Battalion were put under the command of the 8th Brigade of the 3rd British Infantry Division, and told to cut across the road linking Udem and Weeze. All three squadrons of the Battalion took part in this action, and for No. 2 Squadron it was a comparatively normal day: they met surprisingly little opposition, and Sergt. Gregory's troop reached the main road by 1 o'clock in the morning. The squadron's only casualty was Lieut. A. H. Gray who was wounded when a bazooka hit his tank. The other two squadrons had one of the most eventful days of their lives.

Probably No. 1 Squadron had the most dramatic time. Half-way between the wood they had captured on the 24th and the road, they encountered opposition from two hamlets, Geurdhof and Bussenhof, and the fighting rapidly became so confused that the infantry had to reorganize and only just managed to continue the advance. What apparently happened was that as the tanks and infantry reached Bussenhof white flags appeared from the houses. Two platoons immediately went straight up to the houses, but the Germans opened fire and killed them all. The majority of another platoon had also been lost, so that there was practically nobody left in the company to carry on. On the left of No. 1 Squadron, however, the infantry fared better and all went well until the reserve troop, Lieut. R. J. McCallum's, was suddenly attacked by bazooka-men. Lieut. McCallum's tank began to burn and, although the ammunition in it might have blown up at any moment, he ordered his driver, L./Cpl. Lane, to reverse so that they would have some chance of escaping alive. Their courage was rewarded, and after many adventures they rejoined their squadron which in the meantime, had reached the main road.

During the early stages of No. 1 Squadron's battle at Weeze bridge No. 3 Squadron, with the lst South Lancs, were having a very unpleasant time in a wood about a mile and a half to the left. It was very thick and swampy and the tracks which looked so inviting on the map turned out to be will-o'-the-wisps leading to impassable bogs. Battalion Headquarters heard nothing of this squadron for some time. The two leading troops were fighting their way on in silence - Lieut. S. C. Rolleston on the right and Lieut. R. J. Owen on the left. The former made good progress through the woods until his tank went up on a mine and he was forced to take over his troop corporal's tank. Shortly afterwards his driver, Gdsm. McCulloch, put his hand out of the hatch to throw away an empty Besa box at the same moment as a bazooka hit the turret. His hand was badly lacerated, yet he managed to put the tank in reverse and drove it back to safety. Lieut. Owen waited for some time

for the infantry to appear and was then ordered to push on through the woods towards the Weeze-Udem road where he was told his infantry would be waiting for him. This turned out to be sheer optimism, because as he emerged into a clearing just in front of the road paratroopers from the 7th Parachute Division swarmed round his tanks and knocked out all three of them with bazookas. Gdsm. Rule was killed and L./ Cpl. Yerbury, Gdsm. Towells, Sergt. Hanks and Lieut. Owen were all seriously wounded. The troop were withdrawn by Sergt. Hanks (who subsequently was awarded the Military Medal for the great courage he displayed during the action) and a new plan was drawn up. It had to be cancelled, however, as the infantry had had so many casualties that they could not mount another attack.

The 27th of February had been an exciting and, at times, an awkward day for the 4th Battalion. They had been up against probably the best troops in the German Army -fanatical paratroopers who scorned death and who were willing to stand up in full view of the tanks to fire their bazookas from a distance of often less than a hundred yards. But it was the last time the Battalion went into action in Operation "Veritable." They spent the next week, most uncomfortably, in a wood near Goch, and by the time they were called forward again the fighting had ceased.

WITH THE RAF 1942-1946
RAY DINNIS

War being declared in September 1939 the first we knew was a roar of aero engines and then a thump! We arrived at the crash site to find an Avro Anson (front line bomber) in a copse. All the crew were safe. Their mission had been dropping leaflets addressed to Germans over Poland; hopefully to bring the War to an end. The slow, poorly armed aircraft showed how unprepared we were. But throughout the war the Anson proved to be a very reliable training craft.

The Canadian First Division came to roost in our village (The Dicker, East Sussex) amongst large areas of woodland. We made friends with them and I visited some of their parents later when I was in Canada. After the Canadians we had the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and Brigade HQ in the village big house, and a new general who was very keen to get all personnel very fit; his name was Montgomery.

To our farm we had many visitors from the D.C.L.I., my family being of Cornish stock knew many of their families and we made many new friends. A company commander's wife stayed with us. One night the C.O. was late for supper; a soldier had put water in the fuel tank of his very nice Humber Snipe staff car. The C.O. and I were good at shooting rabbits with various weapons - .45, 9mm, .303, .38; it was good practice!

I was 16 years old, and left school early, as my father thought I would be better employed on the farm, food production being of paramount importance; so I joined the Local Defence Volunteers (soon to become the Home Guard) and I became the platoon's best shot. One day, while I was feeding cattle in a large field, a Spitfire came over, obviously in trouble, and in trying to land it hit the wires which had been erected to prevent enemy aircraft from landing, and catapulted into some oak trees with a thud. When we arrived at the crash we found the pilot on his feet, cursing that his radio was not working; but he had a large swastika on his back. Was he enemy? With a Spitfire? With my pitchfork at the ready I advanced; he was an RAF sergeant pilot and it was his third Spitfire that week. That was Battle of Britain week. I often wonder what happened to him. He was taken to

the Brigade HQ and duly refreshed with plentiful supplies of alcohol! My mother said Poor boy he should have been given a lot of hot sweet tea.

I took my rifle with me on some of the farm work, and one day I fired five rounds rapid at a Heinkel III. I cannot understand why it did not come down...

We had a mock invasion. Our platoon HQ was attacked by the D.C.L.I.. In order to win the battle I fired live rounds of .22 long-range sporting bullets into the trees above them to make things more realistic. Had they found out who did it I might have been in serious trouble.

One moonlight night the news was that we could be invaded; conditions were suitable and intelligence helpful. I reported to our HQ with a 12bore shotgun, a .22 rifle, a .410 pistol and a sheath knife, feeling I could easily stop the invasion single-handed if given the chance to do so.

My sister, older by 18 months than me, and I, went to Brighton in 1941 to enlist in the RAF. I was still a year too young but I was told that if I joined the Air Training Corps (which had been formed that year) to improve my maths, learn about flying and pass the necessary tests in London, I might be taken on in a year's time for aircrew training. (The ATC is still going strong and I am President of our local squadron.) My sister joined very quickly and trained on radar, becoming one of those important WAAFs on aircraft detection and identification.

In May 1942 my call-up papers arrived despite my being in a reserved occupation. Like so many young men I wanted more excitement. I reported to RAF St. John's Wood and was billeted in a large block of flats, Viceroy Court, still there today. We had our meals at the Zoo. We were chased around something terrible, injections, vaccinations, FFIS, haircuts, kit issues, full kit inspections, etc etc. I next went to Ludlow to be under canvas for three weeks until my posting to Initial Training Wing at Torquay, where we had a very active training programme with navigation, meteorology, signals, mathematics, aircraft identification, sports, PT, swimming, dinghy drill, photography, armaments, and getting our teeth in good shape by very good dentists (very important when flying). Many of our instructors were schoolmasters in civilian life.

After the Initial Training Wing I went in March 1943 to Grading School near Coventry. Those who

wanted to be pilots as first choice learnt to fly Tiger Moths; out of our class of 30, five went solo after twelve hours of instruction; I was one of them and felt confident in being trained as a pilot. I soon however heard my fate; I was to be trained as a navigator/wireless operator, simply because I had done rather well in the necessary subjects at I.T.W. It was all due to having tried too hard. My friend, who did not solo, trained as a pilot and went on to fly Thunderbolts in Burma. However, a navigator's job was a very busy one, very interesting and rewarding. I learnt how to take a navigational fix every ten minutes, work out current wind direction, speed, any new course or airspeed ordered, and enabling the pilot to be within two minutes of his estimated time of arrival at the target.

Next I was posted to Cranwell, the Sandhurst of the RAF, to No. 1 Radio School, where I eventually qualified as a wireless operator (air) at 30 words per minute, with all the codes and procedures. Navigators (W) were trained for two~crew aircraft, such as De Havilland Mosquitos which we all hoped we would fly. Losses were heavy with "green" crews, so more experienced crews were used. A famous raid at the end of the war was carried out by a pilot and a navigator who both held the DFC and DFM.

After Cranwell I was off to Manchester again; the Empire Aircrew Training Scheme was in full swing and aircrew cadets went to either South Africa, Canada or the U.S.A. (now that they were in the war.) My friend was down for pilot training in the U.S.A., and being confined to barracks before his ship left he asked me to meet his girlfriend under the clock at 6.30 pm. I went but never did find her. In 1952 we all met for dinner at his farmhouse in Sussex. My turn came to be confined to barracks and in the autumn of 1943 I sailed on the Queen Elizabeth for New York. She was very fast and managed to avoid U-boats for the whole war. We had air cover only for the third of the way out and a third in. I was detailed to be in the gun crew on the Bofors AA gun covered in green tarpaulin at the bows; we asked if we could be given some instruction, as the gun was unfamiliar to us, but we were firmly told that this would not be necessary. I think they were right - the gun was never used; all the big ocean liners survived the U boat menace through their speed and radar.

We had seven months navigational training at Ancienne Lorette with the RCAF, flying over the massive area north of the St. Lawrence River; I have memories of snow, lakes, trees and wolves. The Canadians were amazingly good at dealing with snow on roads and runways. The weather was sometimes quite severe, but we kept warm and well-fed, so easy with efficient heating and delicious Canadian food.

In April 1944 we graduated as navigators and had single wings pinned to our chests. We celebrated by having dinner at the Chateau Frontenac which overlooked General Wolfe's goat track. Then back home across the Atlantic on the Empress of Scotland, this time very crowded with many American troops coming to join the war.

Our next posting was to Brough, East Yorkshire, beside the Blackburn Aircraft Co. We were flying Tiger Moths with newly qualified pilots; a favourite route was to Marshalls of Cambridge for strawberries and cream and back the right way up! A very nice four weeks!

Next we went to the Mull of Galloway to the Advanced Training Unit, West Freugh. One of our first jobs was dinghy drill, which at Port Patrick even in August was terribly cold. Next we navigators flew with new pilots on routes up the Irish Sea to the Hebrides, down to Wales, and up to Lewis and Harris. From August to October was certainly the best time to be doing this, and the sun shone most of the time.

Our next course was at Operation Training Unit, Bomber Command at Chipping Norton, flying Wellingtons. All trades of aircrew arrived and attended lectures for three weeks. All RAF ranks and trades mixed freely together both at work and afterwards, much to the amazement of the other services.

After three weeks it was time for the captain of each aircraft to select his crew. We all gathered in a large hangar. Most pilots had made up their minds who they wanted in their crew and would not take long over it. I was chosen by F/Lt. Abercrombie to be his navigator. Having all been selected for specific crews, and not detailed, we became a very dedicated and loyal bunch of chaps. We comprised pilot, navigator, wireless-operator, bomb-aimer, and two air-gunners (top and rear). This period was winter 1944, very cold with many thunderstorms and much ice; we had many perilous practice flights. On one occasion the wireless-operator would have jumped out if I hadn't managed to stop him. Another time at 20,000 feet his oxygen supply became disconnected and he fell fast asleep until I reconnected him and he rapidly returned to normal. It was never very nice to know that one was sitting on top of five to ten tons of live bombs; many lives were actually lost as a consequence of this. Fighter pilots of course had their fuel tanks immediately in front of their cockpits which could be equally disastrous.

At the end of this training tour we thought we were ready for operations but no, we went to a Heavy Conversion Unit where pilots had to be trained for four-engined aircraft. This was near Newark where there were some very tall industrial chimneys which we had to overfly each time we took off. We never hit one of them. A memorial stone is being erected at this airfield in September this year in memory of those who died on operations from this base.

Next, still as a crew, we were posted to 630 Squadron East Kirkby, Lincs, flying Lancasters. At this point the war in Europe came to an end before we could be of any help in it. Next was the disbandment of 630 Squadron and we were posted to 57 Squadron, from which Wing Commander Gibson selected some of the crews for his famous Dambusters raid two years previously. We considered this a great privilege. On 57 Squadron we had to learn to navigate in the old-fashioned way in practice for the Far East by using no radar, only DR and Astro. Not so accurate! Our flight commander during this time was Squadron Leader M.Beetham, who is now a Marshal of the Royal Air Force and President of the RAF Bomber Command Association. We were proud to be now flying the brand-new Lincoln bomber. However the Bomb was now dropped on Hiroshima and within a short time the war was finished.

Now the war was over our new duty was to dispose of a huge quantity of bombs and ammunition; and then to ferry aircraft to sites where they could be broken up as scrap. I shall never forget the airfield where this took place; rows and rows of shining new aircraft, from Typhoons and Tempest fighters to four-engined bombers which had hardly been flown.

At the end of the European war we flew across Germany, and it was incredible to see the destruction of the industrial areas such as Essen, Cologne, Hamburg, Bremen etc and then in not really many years time to see the results of the rebuilding. We also flew to Bari in Italy to bring back servicemen, mostly compassionate cases, who had been away from home for six years, a most moving experience; and to be served in the mess while there by Germans.

After this it was demobilisation at a base in Leicestershire where there were thousands of aircrew with no jobs to go to being interviewed as to their qualifications; I was lucky to be on Class B Release with a very rapid discharge back home to join my father on his farm in January 1946.

That was my three and three-quarter years of wartime service in the Royal Air Force, all spent in equipping ourselves to be a better force than we had been in 1939. I am lucky to be alive today; about 100,000 men flew with Bomber Command during that war, and 50,000 perished. My thoughts and respect go to those who lost their lives, and to their families; and also to those who saw so much action and were lucky to survive.

"Per ardua ad astra"
"Corpus non animum muto" (I change my body but not my spirit) (57 Squadron)

But I would like to have done a bit more.

ROYAL MARINE COMMANDOS GET UP TO MISCHIEF

David Anderson

Dear John

I have been trying very hard to remember anything of note during my military service, but it was all so long ago that I seem to have forgotten almost everything; either it was all very boring or my memory is fast going with advancing years!

One incident which I do remember occurred soon after I joined the Royal Marines in October 1945 and was posted to Deal, where there was an enormous parade ground on which we had to parade first thing every morning. At one side of the parade ground stood a small wooden roofed open-sided structure in which hung a very large highly-polished brass shell-case, which was a trophy brought back from Zeebrugge where an epic battle had been fought on, I think, 1st April 1918.

There had been great displays of heroism when the Marines had gone in to capture or destroy some of the German harbour installations, and I think several VC's had been won before breakfast. Anyway this shell-case was regarded almost as a religious shrine and the duty bugler had to strike the thing to mark Eight Bells or whatever to mark the time of day. One morning the bugler advanced on "the shrine" to do his stuff, and, horror of horrors, the large shell-case was not there, but in its place hung, by a thin piece of thread, a highly-polished .22 cartridge case, (about one cm long) gently moving in the breeze! As you can imagine, all hell was let loose and search parties sent out round the barracks to find the precious souvenir. It was eventually found beneath the gym in South Barracks, having been smuggled from North Barracks, with either two very high walls to have been scaled, or else well concealed in its progress past two guard rooms! I cannot now remember whether the culprits were ever apprehended.

Another incident I remember was when I was at Eastney Barracks, where lots of long-serving members of Marine Commandos were coming back from overseas more than ready for demob. It was not easy to maintain discipline amongst this lot, and at the time we were working up for the Victory Parade to be held in London, with massed bands from all the various parts of the Corps assembling and

rehearsing at every possible moment, and large parades rehearsing their drill along with the massed bands on the parade ground every morning. Round the side of the parade were piles of old cannon balls assembled into pyramids, and one morning we all went out to fall in for parade, and the adjutant was waiting in the wings, mounted on his rather magnificent shiny black charger. However it was then realised that the pyramids were no longer there, since their component cannon balls were littering the parade ground itself! Once again all hell let loose, and the finger of suspicion pointed at these rather stroppy commandos but I do not think they ever found the actual culprits, although the group on whom suspicion fell may have faced some delay in collecting their demob suits!

Yours sincerely,
David.

WITH THE 1st KINGS DRAGOON GUARDS, 1944

David Baird

I went into the army in 1943 and was commissioned from Sandhurst into the lst King's Dragoon Guards, which I joined in Italy in mid 1944. I took a regular commission after the War and retired in 1950. In a post-war re-shuffle the regiment amalgamated with the Queen's Bays and became the lst Queen's Dragoon Guards.

The history of the two regiments was written by the Rt. Rev. Michael Mann KCVO who members of the Branch will remember was guest of honour and speaker at our 1999 annual dinner.

Just before Christmas 1944 the KDG were sent to Greece to quell a rebellion staged by the murderous KKE/ELAS anarchists, and Michael and I, as troop leaders, were with them. Michael refers in the history to an incident which forms part of an article written by my grandson Jamie (aged 10) entitled "My Grandfather", an exercise commanded by his prep school, and which readers may find amusing.

Near Athens there was an airfield called Kalamaki and it was attacked by the ELAS whilst being guarded by my squadron. It was night time. There were insufficient armoured cars for me to have a troop to lead so I joined the crew of a car which was short of a gunner, and was commanded by a sergeant. The result of our sortie including the loss of an armoured car was not, I think, very well received by the C.O.

"My grandfather's regiment had armoured cars in Italy and Greece. Mummy used to say that when she and my uncles were children he used to tell at lunch every Boxing Day of something that happened to him on that day of 1944. He used things on the table like the salt and pepper, knives and forks, to show where the enemy was and where he was - and where his headquarters were, for the people in H.Q. were those who did most of the shooting at him.
"Apparently it was night time when it all happened but our aeroplanes kept dropping flares which lit up everything. He and two others were in an armoured car going towards the enemy, which had launched a surprise attack, when it blew up on some dynamite that they had buried in the road.

The two others were badly wounded - one lost his leg. Grandpa was still able to walk so he set off to return to the H.Q. to get a car to go back for the others. People kept shooting at him, lit up by the flares as he dodged between the trees and he noticed that lots of the bullets came from H.Q. who thought he was one of the enemy, so as he got near he shouted out the password which was "Charlie Smirke" - a famous jockey at that time. So they stopped shooting and let him in. Then he and some others went out to collect the wounded, this time being shot at only by the enemy; and in the end they all got back safely."

The following is a quotation from the King's Dragoon Guards C Squadron official War Diary entry for 26th December 1944.
"Sergeant Watson drove around with Lt. Baird as gunner, shooting up other houses - he got on to the main road and met a road block where the Daimler blew up on a mine. Both front wheels were blown off and Trooper Peart was wounded in the legs, and Sergeant Watson was wounded in the chest. Lt. Baird, who was slightly wounded, left the car to fetch help from Squadron HQ and came under fire from SHQ. as they did not know that he was out or what had happened. Having run the gauntlet he arrived and told the situation."

After the incident which Jamie describes, the very next day I found myself driving the leading scout car in the Regiment on a mopping-up operation accompanied as a guide by a Greek "spy" whose only other language was French, of which I had a smattering. When the operation was successfully concluded the Regiment went to Cairo and ended the war there.

NATIONAL SERVICE WITH THE RAF 1951-1953

Len Linden

Initial training at Padgate involved endless drill under the eagle eye of Corporal Garrity, whose hands were never to be seen as they were covered by his sleeves which were always three inches too long.

Persuaded to give blood on the promise of a summer afternoon off duty, we were then turned out at 2pm for yet more drill in the sweltering sun. It was a lesson soon learnt not to volunteer for absolutely anything.

I remember a trip to Hornchurch for flying aptitude tests; struggling through the London underground in the rush hour with all our kit, and having to try and make out numbers and letters in those awful coloured dots.

Having been sent to officers training at RAF Kirton Lindsey, our first task was to scrape the grease from the parquet floor of the billet with our dinner knives. The billet's previous role had been as an engine store.

Towards the end of our training we took part in the Battle of Britain parade at Lincoln Cathedral. We had to march immediately behind a company of WAAFs who could never decide which foot they were marching on.

For flying training we flew to Canada in a Boeing Strato-Cruiser with upper and lower decks. Arriving in Ontario, we were give further medical tests involving eye-drops which completely disoriented our vision, after which we were turned out into the snow to find our own way back to camp.

Our flying instruction took place in Alberta, in Harvard aircraft. These were kept in heated hangars and were wheeled out to start. The groundcrew stood on the wing and wound the starting handle. If the plane started first time, he was nearly blown off the wing by a powerful blast of icy air. If it didn't, it was wheeled back into the hangar for a further two hours to warm up again.

The weather all this time was very reliable, clear cold days with a visibilty of fifty miles. If you got lost you looked for the nearest grain elevator which always had the name of its town written on it in huge letters.

We were able to witness the vast migrations of ducks in the spring. The snows on the prairies melted to form enormous temporary lakes and during the few days that the water was there thousands of ducks would use it to have a rest before the next part of their journey.

We trained with Canadian cadets, but when a guard of honour was required for a military funeral, a platoon of RAF cadets were asked to take part. We did our best to give a good send-off to a Chinese-Canadian pilot who had flown many mercy flights into China during the war. He had crashed in Canada after hitting a power cable.

Another memory was of flying a Harvard back home in U.K. on “circuits and bumps”. One night I had started to take off on full throttle and the aircraft was just off the ground when there was a huge bang, a cockpit full of smoke, and a very concerned pilot. I pulled back the throttle, put on full flaps, and hoped that I could fly straight and get the aircraft back on the ground before I reached the airfield fence - I stopped with about fifty yards to spare. We found afterwards that one of my cylinder heads had blown off.

Then to Oakington for training on Meteor jet aircraft. The experience of taking off in a jet fighter was one never to be forgotten. The other thrill was to be first off the airfield on a clear morning and to climb to 30,000 feet. The whole world was there beneath you and you had it all to yourself. Those were the days ...

PEACETIME MEMORIES WITH THE THIRD HUSSARS

Cecil Paynter

Memory One

After the 2nd World War it was decided to have an independent squadron of Cromwell tanks stationed in Berlin. Getting there from the West wasn't easy. The Russians did not want us to stop on the autobahn corridor for refuelling. Furthermore they wanted us to use rubber tracks.

On the day set for moving, we lined up for the 18 mile dash to Berlin. We had good weather and the last vehicle arrived in the British sector just as it ran out of fuel. In fact nearly every tank, truck and jeep ran out of fuel before getting to the barracks that day. Lucky.

After we had been deployed at the ends of streets we realised that the Russian tanks seemed huge in comparison to ours. What could we do to restore our self-respect? My troop decided that a daily game of football was the way forward. Six Russians and five British against another side of six British and five Russians. Regimental HQ were dubious about it, but we were convinced that it would ease the tension.

On the third day, before we started our daily game a YMCA refreshment van appeared. The Russians could not believe their luck. By half-time a NAAFI van had appeared. Tea, coffee, sticky buns and chocolate were available. The costs were minimal and our lads willingly forked up. By the end of the week we were told that everyone was allowed a daily allocation, which meant that the Russians got it all for nothing. How they loved those afternoons.

After a few weeks the standard of football had improved, and even Russian officers and sergeants seemed to be enjoying the canteen refreshments. As troop leader I had started to relax as well.

Memory Two

Twenty-five years later we decided to hold a Berlin reunion; there were parades, parties and celebrations. Each night the Germans joined us to wish us well, and everyone commented on the sober and impeccable behaviour of the Third Hussars Old Comrades.

Memory Three

During my service with the Regiment in Germany, I was acting as umpire on a regimental exercise, when one of my colleagues drew my attention to a remarkable-looking horse pulling a plough in a field not far off. We looked in amazement at what turned out to be a mare with Hanoverian Stud markings. A rapid wireless conference with the C.O. and our Corps commander resulted in an hour's suspension of the exercise, while the VIPs joined us to carry out a serious exercise in bargaining, which ended in the Regiment acquiring the animal in exchange for a quantity of whisky, gin, chocolate and cigarettes. We soon realised that we had bought no ordinary horse, and to cut a long story short Marmion, ridden by Ronnie Dallas of our Regiment, won a Gold Medal at the Helsinki Olympics. (Ronnie went on to become Secretary of the Beaufort Hunt, a job he carried out superbly.)

WITH THE PRINCE OF WALES'S FEATHERS 1948-57

John Haviland

During my National Service and subsequent territorial service I wore the Prince of Wales's feathers in two different forms. The 12th Royal Lancers were raised in 1715, and having won many honours were given the title "The 12th or The Prince of Wales's Regiment of Light Dragoons" by George III in 1768. The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry was formed in 1797 as "The Regiment of Wiltshire Yeomanry Cavalry" After performing many services in peacekeeping round the country during the political disturbances of the period, the regiment was re-named "The Prince of Wales's Own Royal Regiment" in 1863 and duly assumed the feathers as its badge (the Prince of Wales at this point being Queen Victoria's eldest son).

The other relationship the two regiments have is that they were respectively the first and the last cavalry regiments to be mechanised; the 12th Lancers handed over their horses in exchange for Rolls-Royce armoured cars in 1928, while the Wiltshire Yeomanry received 15cwt trucks in place of their horses in Jordan in 1941.

Both regiments won battle honours during both World Wars; "C" Squadron of the 12th Lancers carried out the army's last successful mounted cavalry charge at the Battle of Moy during the retreat from Mons in August 1914. The Wiltshire Yeomanry formed part of the 9th Armoured Brigade (New Zealand Division) in the opening stages of the Battle of el Alamein, and received Immediate Awards for gallantry comprising one DSO, four MCs and four MMs.

The personality who stays in the mind most from my 12th Lancer days was the commanding officer, Lt.Col. Andrew Horsburgh-Porter, who had served in the regiment throughout the war. Having been trained as a subaltern on horseback as a young man, he still, in 1948, believed that the best training of a young officer was done on a horse, and encouraged all his officers to ride whenever possible. The regimental stables were the pride of the county. "Why isn't Captain X on parade?" "He's out exercising his hunter, Colonel." "Ah, that's all right then." "Second Lieutenant Haviland's applying

for permission to keep a car in the camp, Colonel." "Does he keep a horse?" "No, Colonel." Then he can't have a car. He should get his priorities right." To re-establish my credibility I accepted the offer of one of the regular officers to exercise his hunter while he was on leave. (No horse was left unridden while its owner was in camp.) The first morning out I rode happily into the middle of a large neighbouring park, at which point my steed decided to go home. It galloped straight for the nearest park gate, ignoring all the lower branches of the stately oaks which would have killed me if I hadn't flattened myself against its withers; tore through the gate and lit out for home and bran mash at a level gallop along the winding road, miraculously clear of traffic, and it pulled up at the camp gate and walked sedately back to its stable. Nothing was ever said, but I never offered to exercise a brother officer's mount again. I did get permission eventually to keep my newly bought 1932 Austin Seven in the camp. Brigadier Sir Andrew Horsburgh-Porter Bart. became a distinguished equestrian journalist after his retirement from the army.

My commanding officer in the Wiltshire Yeomanry was the squadron leader at el Alamein who won the DSO. Tim Gibbs was wounded in that battle, but returned to the regiment for the Italian campaign, and then opted to continue with the regiment as a territorial, becoming C.O. in 1950 when I joined them. He was an inspiring leader, and though a farmer and a commoner, was later considered the right man to succeed the Duke of Beaufort as Lord Lieutenant of Gloucestershire and was a resounding success at that job.

Both regiments are still flourishing, though because of unit reductions they have both had to amalgamate; the 12th are now the 9th/12 Royal Lancers (Prince of Wales's), and the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (Prince of Wales's Own) provide a squadron of the nation-wide Royal Yeomanry Regiment.

The best aspect of my full- and part-time days with the military, apart from the fun of learning to operate and manoevre tanks and armoured cars, was the opportunity I had to get to know some remarkable and admirable people, through some of whom one had a glimpse of the actual wartime achievements of two redoubtable regiments.

MY YEARS WITH THE POLICE – MILITARY AND CIVIL

Richard Ballard

My grandfather served through the Boer War and survived to take part in World War One. I have amongst my collection of memorabilia a parakeet he brought back alive to his Wiltshire home together with his handwritten notebooks and part of his tunic made into a New Year's greetings card he sent to his family from South Africa. His son, my uncle Edwin Woollcott, was a major in the Somerset Light Infantry, and from 1936 to 1948 was Musical Director at the Bombay garrison, performing often to the Governor, Lord Linlithgow. My mother, who died in 1990 aged 94, as a nanny travelled widely with families of commissioned officers during her younger years, returning from Jersey to Mark Beech in the late 1920s. Another of my uncles piloted Catalina flying boats during World War Two.

I was born in Sussex in March 1936, and from 1950 to 1954 was a member of No 1 Independent Cadet Company. During my cadet years I took part in several Guard of Honour duties, the most memorable experience being chosen to witness the Coronation events.

On 19th May 1954 I enlisted in the regular army, and following my training at Inkerman Barracks Woking (a former women's prison and now thankfully demolished), I was posted to Northern Ireland, 173 Provost Company, Palace Barracks Holywood, and did patrols of Belfast city and environs for about three months before moving to Thiepval Barracks, Lisburn, where I became one of a section of four M.P.s who regularly provided armed escort to the G.O.C.

Later, in 1955, I returned to London District Provost Company, Kensington. During my remaining colour service, till May 1957, my duties included two Woolwich Tattoos, Queen's Birthday Salutes in Hyde Park, Trooping the Colour, Royal Tournaments, pay escorts to various military establishments around London, and foot patrols of the West End and main-line termini. Many thousands of troops of various nationalities frequented and transited through London in those years, and our Provost company was kept very busy. One extra special duty for me was to be at Marlborough House for a

week during the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference of 1956. Most of my service in London entailed wearing blue ceremonial uniform with the exception of pay escorts and foot patrols.

Being an Al Reservist subject to instant recall, and paid quarterly by postal draft, I was attached to the Grenadier Guards units and and remained so for a further eight years. From August 1957 for four years I was employed as a Patrol by the Royal Automobile Club.

In 1962, having taken the advice of another uncle, (a serving Reading Borough policeman) and with my Royal Military Police experience, I decided to join Kent County Constabulary. I initally served at Rochester which was then still very active with military personnel and Chatham Dockyard with naval activities. I moved to Tunbridge Wells in 1963 and in February 1965 to Cowden. I was on duty for a week in January 1965 at Chartwell whilst preparations were being made for the funeral of Sir Winston Churchill, and during that week met various Commonwealth representatives.

In 1977 I was one of four Kent policemen fortunate enough to be on duty outside St. Paul's Cathedral throughout the service commemorating the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. In 1986 I was one of only sixty serving policemen in the U.K. to be a member of the Police Contingent at the Cenotaph on that Remembrance Sunday. I retired from police service in 1991, but in 1994 met and chatted with Prince Charles in Normandy on the 50th anniversary of D-Day. I have been a member of the Cowden Branch of the Royal British Legion for over thirty years.

RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS OF AN R.N.V.R. DOCTOR 1955

Andrew Russell

Those of us who were exposed to National Service after the War were a fortunate generation. If you were lucky it broadened your horizons and introduced you to many of the attractions and disciplines of service life without much risk.

Medical training is long and intense, and in many ways rather myopic and narrow, so that a spell in the Services came as a welcome change in an environment where your flock were mostly young and physically fit. If they fell ill with anything which might be considered medically interesting then they would probably be invalided out!

So the M.0. often found himself in a medical vacuum, surrounded by hale and hearty fellow officers who regarded him with bemused interest as someone different yet potentially capable of wielding a measure of influence out of all proportion to his age and experience of life. This aspect was brought home to me very early in my time in the Royal Navy when I was confronted in my first appointment with my Captain's chronic indigestion, which was obviously related to his excessive drinking habits. How was I to tell him to cut it out - or else? He heard the message but got his own back at the next Sunday's Divisions, when the whole Ship's Company was lined up for the Captain's inspection. The retinue of Captain, Commander, First Lieutenant and Doctor processed down the ranks. Stopping in front of a particularly spotty sailor with awful acne the Captain called me up and asked what I was going to do about it - always a particularly difficult problem to treat!

After initiation at Portsmouth Barracks and Haslar Hospital where we were introduced to drill, drinking and the duties of an M.0., we proceeded to our appointed postings. Thinking that if I opted to look after Naval families I might see some Medicine, I was told that I would be proceeding to a Naval Air Station near Liverpool! Luckily there were two Russells on the course and they had muddled our names, so with relief I was drafted to the Families Unit in Malta, which at that time still had a large Naval presence. I would also be responsible for the personnel in the main Supply Base which was located in an erstwhile Knights of Malta fort with honey-coloured buildings around a central parade-ground overlooking the harbour - an altogether delightful prospect. Here was another strange thing,

a shore establishment referred to as “Her Majesty’s Ship PHOENICIA”.

My ego was boosted on arrival to find a prominent notice over my door “SENIOR MEDICAL OFFICER”. My Sick Berth Petty Officer, a little man, whose complexion suggested long exposure to the rum ration, was there to greet me and guide me. No doubt word soon got round that the new M.O. was a greenhorn, as on asking a rating on my first sick parade what ailed him and being told “I’ve got CRABS Sir.” I was none the wiser till Hanson whispered in my ear “he means he’s got pubic lice”, one of the less harmful varieties of V.D.

My sick parade was usually conducted to the strains of martial music from the Royal Marine Band outside playing all their old favourites, then at about 10.00am Freddie, my driver, would collect me to take me to the Families Unit in Sliema. Should I sit in the back and conduct myself like a Senior Medical Officer or sit alongside Freddie who was a companionable elderly Maltese, fiercely loyal to the Crown and all that went with it? I oscillated between the front and the back as the mood dictated, but as my ego burgeoned I began to feel more comfortable in the back!

The Families Unit was much like any GP surgery but of course the clientele were mainly mums and children. Visits would follow to all parts of this fascinating island and it was an eye-opener to see how the other half lived. Remember medical training in those days was all Hospital based and I had seen little of the poverty and deprivation that many sailors’ families endured. At that time there was a large contingent of locally recruited Maltese ratings, and visits to their families gave further enhancement to my ego as they seemed to regard a visit by this handsome(?), man in white uniform as a heavenly messenger whose touch could cure all. Always watched by the image of Christ or the BVM on the wall of each room, I did my best to live up to expectation. What did come as a surprise was to have one’s hands dowsed with Eau de Cologne after the examination instead of the traditional soap and water.

Apart from duty days when one was on call for emergencies, work was usually over by lunchtime, so it was back to the Wardroom overlooking the harbour for a snifter and lunch. What an idyllic life I thought as I took a siesta on my bunk. The rest of the day seemed to pass pleasantly enough on the beach with friends, sailing or sometimes going to sea with Bill Mitford in his MTB to do a bit of target practice on the radio-controlled scarlet target boats. Life was one jolly party after another.

Further boosting of my ego was related to my friendship with Vikky, the beautiful daughter of the Irish Surgeon Rear Admiral, who had a reputation for pinching the bottom of any pretty girl. Vikky was tall and elegant but any reciprocal behaviour on my part would have been taboo as her rather fierce mother kept a close watch, so our relationship remained strictly platonic as of course most were in those days. However Sunday picnics were something special, when the Admiral's launch would pick me up from the jetty and we would set off down the coast to some remote bay, often waterskiing behind the boat all the way. Was this really what a doctor's life was like? Why did I not sign on for a short-term commission? I suppose, looking back, the old work ethic drilled into us throughout our schooling was having an effect. Also I felt my hard-earned knowledge was ebbing away in this Utopia.

But things were destined to change in 1956 when President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. British interests were thought to be threatened and Eden's long experience of dictators' disregard for international law led us into an attempt to regain the Canal. Also another factor may have been that Eden's health at that time was poor after he had undergone gall-bladder surgery at Guys. This had damaged his common bile duct, a rare but serious complication from which he never fully recovered despite later reconstructive surgery in the States. Thus it may be that his medical state influenced his judgement at this critical time in his career; if so it would not be the first time that a leader's health had a profound effect on the course of history.

As we now know there was active collusion with the French and Israelis and the whole episode ended in a humiliating fiasco and the blocking of the Canal with sunken ships. I was transferred to HMS Manxman, one of two fast mine-laying destroyers capable of 40 knots in their heyday, when she was very important in keeping Malta supplied during the siege. Latterly she had been fitted out to accommodate a number of senior officers, so she was chosen as the command ship for the enterprise. We chugged along at the pace of the slowest vessels till we arrived off Port Said after about a week. It began to feel like war when the Captain addressed the Ship's Company over the tannoy, instructing them that the M.O. wanted all hands to change into clean underclothes in case of battle injuries. The thought actually had never crossed the M.O.'s mind!

With the battle ensign flying from the mainmast we closed the coast which was shrouded in a pall of smoke. Apart from getting a shell through one of the three funnels nothing much happened from

our vantage point as the troops went in, but I was summoned the the bridge to be asked by the Captain how many casualties we could accommodate. My mind boggled at the thought of a hundred or more badly wounded men lying on the empty mine deck, with totally inadequate medical supplies on board. My moment of potential glory passed without a single scratch or broken finger coming my way! We entered Port Said next day and tied up alongside the Hospital Ship which seemed to have got there first. I did visit the Surgeon Commander on board to ask if I could transfer a rating, my only patient, who was suffering from hepatitis in the humid noisy sick bay over the engine room. We were destined to spend the next few weeks ferrying fresh fruit and veg from Cyprus for the troops and I thought it was a bit rough on this poor chap. No luck! He thought it would be good experience for me to look after him!

Later in the year I joined HMS Surprise for the C-in-C's spring cruise of the western Med. This ship was a converted corvette or small destroyer designed to accommodate the C-in-C's staff and wives for ceremonial duties and flag-wagging excursions, an unlikely luxury viewed from nearly half a century later, but still justified in the terminal phase of Britain's imperial past. Sir Ralph Edwardes was a charming entertaining man and we had a jolly time visiting all countries of importance. Each visit started with a cocktail party for the local nobs under the awning on the quarter deck to the accompaniment of music from the Royal Marine Band. Reciprocal parties and sightseeing followed ashore for the next few days till we sailed away into the sunset. What a life! The only medical incidents which might have justified my presence at Her Majesty's expense were an ever enlarging carbuncle on the Bandmaster's bald pate which eventually entailed his being invalided home, and then the Chief of Staff's wife developed a sinus infection which necessitated a penicillin injection into the buttock administered in the prone position while the Band played "Rule Britannia" on the quarter deck above!

All good things come to an end and I returned home to serve out my last few months at HMS Ganges - another shore establishment on the east coast, for training boy-entry ratings.

So ended a very interesting and enjoyable two years.

WHAT I DIDN'T DO IN THE WAR

Andrew Izod

I spent the last days of the Second World War being nurtured. I was born on the day that the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. I want to make it quite clear that I did not ask to be born on this day; I just was. Perhaps I might have preferred the days, pre-penicillin, when peri-wigs, breeches and dandyism were abroad - but they weren't, so I have to tell it how it was - post-National Service, yet before the world became "cool".

My first experience in uniform was as a Boy Scout when we were spoken to around the campfire by Brigadier Lorne Campbell V.C., who was what now would be referred to as our Troop Sponsor or Patron - absolute rubbish, he was next to God and had the 48th (Camberwell) Scout Troop named after him (Lorne Campbell's Own). The Scouting movement taught me the invaluable skills of map-reading, self-sufficiency, climbing, abseiling. and hiking (known by the military as 'long marches').

Then came the day when I sought for something more, something that would make me a more rounded individual, although I have to admit that the rounding did not occur until I had completed my service and I wonder now how I ever got into those uniforms which I still retain. I thought I should join the Army. But I was then an Articled Clerk, so I applied to the Recruiting Office in Charing Cross and declared that I wished to become a member of the Territorial Army. Furthermore, because I had heard of its legendary properties, I wanted to join the Honourable Artillery Company. They (the recruiters) said that they were very sorry but they did not deal with such esoteric units and would write to me. I duly received a letter setting out the address and telephone numbers to which I should apply. The first title was most daunting to one of my tender age; it read, 'First Field Regiment, Honourable Artillery Company, Royal Horse Artillery, MONarch 6066'. The second was at least shorter - 'Inf. Battalion, HAC - MONarch 6067'. To this day I cannot remember whether the first number was engaged but I did get through to a man with a stentorian manner (who later proved to be the Quartermaster, Major (formerly RSM) Jim Cowley, Coldstream Guards), who enquired why I wished to join the Honourable Artillery Company. (The proclivity here should be noted for guardsmen to use the full title for unit or appointment where other lesser units might use initials ...) I replied

with the insouciance of a civilian: “Well, both my brothers were Gunners” - to which I received the reply “If you mention that word again I shall be sick down the telephone!” I became an infantryman.

During the 60s and 70s I was poised like a coiled spring to answer the call to duty. But it never came. There were times when the governments of the day were reluctant to expose the world to the impositions of citizen soldiers, and yet we were always there and ready, polishing our brasses, blancoeing web belts or cleaning Sam Brownes and wrestling with buff equipment on Wednesday nights prior to Thursday drill nights.

I became one of a pool of officers capable of moving to any part of the world at a moment’s notice (in theory, only after necessary proclamations) but it was always to Germany.

I patrolled the West/East German border with one “up the spout” and shared a bed with the Patrol Commander somewhere in Schleswig Holstein; commanded a Boeing 737 from Heathrow, and witnessed the ultimate vandalism on their own country when, commanding an armoured platoon of the Royal Regiment of Wales, I was also given command of a platoon of Leopard II tanks of the Bundeswehr. We had no common means of communication and therefore had to rely on having German speakers sited on their tanks and English-speaking Germans on ours. We set off with the Leopards leading - it was like being on water-skis - they left camp in the wrong direction and it just got worse. At one stage we were ahead but I judged that the tanks should lead. I beckoned them forward, our APCs being pulled well off the road, only to witness their massive 50+ton tanks demolish some very well-established 30ft cherry trees, in order that they take up their preordained battle positions. This gives some credence to the then belief that there were two countries’ soldiers who were most prepared to cause the greatest damage to the German post-war environment - the Danes, and the Germans themselves. I was particularly struck by the casual way in which they would own up to having caused damage - making my way down a line of throbbing Leopards in the dark, I asked my interpreter to ask the driver of one if he knew anything of a telegraph pole knocked down at grid-reference such-and-such? “Oh, Yah” came the languid reply.

During my Territorial service I served on attachments in Germany, Malta, Cyprus, Germany, (Berlin 3 times) and, in case I didn’t mention it, Germany.

On the ceremonial side, I also had a second command of men of other nations, including Germany. As Assistant Chief Marshal of the Lord Mayor's procession, I was presented with three representatives from each NATO country in its twenty-first anniversary year. I mistakenly thought that, as they were representing their countries, they might have been selected for having some command of English. It transpired that only one in three understood English, so I placed the English speakers on the right, and when marching past Mansion House I gave the word of command for "Eyes Left" by marching backwards and miming the order, pointing to my eyes and then the required direction prior to turning about to pay my own compliment.

In respect of the three times I went to Berlin, one was an operational tour, but the others were for the Berlin Tattoo. The first, in 1969, was when, as Assistant Adjutant, I took the Corps of Drums HAC to act as the Corps of Drums to the Band of the Grenadier Guards. (Their uniform being indistinguishable from that of the Grenadiers from anything over 25 yards, though the cognoscenti would spot the absence of the plume in the bearskin cap.) I was roped into playing the role of Officer in the English Camp (of bell tents pitched at one end of the arena in the Olympic Stadium) where I and my merry men, drawn from the Lancers and the Staffordshire Regiment, would disport ourselves before retiring into said tents prior to the massed bands embarking on a major tableau piece entitled "The Soldier's Dream" - fortunately the rain held off! On the main performance, just as I was the last to retire to my tent, I made to feign a mighty yawn and stretch, which could be seen as somewhat casual when dressed in frock coat, sword and sash. This clearly appealed to the Berliners because, having performed my little bit of business, I was aware of a huge roar from the assembled audience. It wasn't until I had ducked into my tent that I realised that for half a moment I had held an audience of 80,000 Germans in the palm of my hand. After that, Four Elms Village Hall presented few worries to me.

I actually believe that nowadays there is very little difference between the Regular Army and the Territorial Army apart from the fact that the Regular Army has to administer itself for 365 days a year. The HAC currently has a role within the Allied Rapid Reaction Force that is unique in the British Army. The HAC, the oldest regiment in the British Army, has distinguished itself in the South African Campaign and both World Wars, and I am proud to have served in its ranks. I have known some remarkable men; one former Captain of Pikemen whom I am privileged to count as a friend, was a member of the pre-war HAC Infantry Battalion which marched from the Headquarters

at Armoury House in City Road to Waterloo Station to entrain for Annual Camp at Bulford. That was in September 1939, and that camp, in effect, lasted for five years. Many did not return, and two who did, came back with V.Cs.

I went on to become a Special Constable and subsequently a member of the Company of Pikemen and Musketeers, the Lord Mayor of London's bodyguard - all under the aegis of my regiment. I have witnessed and taken part in some of the great occasions of State. I have wielded the regiment's Queen's Colour before the Queen, and had the late King Hussein of Jordan waft past me smelling of half the perfumes of Arabia when the HAC provided the Guard of Honour for him at Guildhall. The HAC provides the Guards of Honour for all State occasions within the City, and they also fire the Salutes at the Tower of London. It is the only TA regiment to have furnished two Royal Guards at Buckingham Palace.

I cannot other than give thanks that during the course of my service I was not called upon to undertake active service - and for this I come back to my birthdate. The balance of terror that was created by the atomic age did indeed, I believe, serve to maintain global peace during my formative years, a sentiment that is far more succinctly expressed by the motto of the HAC - "Arma Pacis Fulcra". However, to reassure those of faint heart, I was there - just in case - to repel those forces of evil that may have machinated to invade either the Surrey Commons Training Area or indeed Salisbury Plain where we were forever honing our skills of attacking hills adorned with bushy-topped trees!

Izod, A 23989339 and latterly 483386 (top bunk)

A SHORT SERVICE LIMITED COMMISSION WITH THE ROYAL ENGINEERS 1987-88

George Fowkes

Through this record of one of the shortest Army careers of all time (a year), I hope to portray a little of what the Army was like at the end of the Cold War – part complex multinational arrangements and joint exercises, part enjoyable travel and adventure, all with a strong sense of tradition.

First, a word on what a "Short Service Limited Commission" was. The SSLC was a bit of a Cold War animal, allowing young men to join regiments as officers for a year prior to going to University. The expectation was that about half would return to the service after their studies, while it was hoped that by their tales of derring-do in the Army or Royal Marines, those that didn't might inspire their classmates to join up instead. For Army SSLC officers the year started with five weeks at Sandhurst to learn the basics of infantry tactics, along with the standards of dress and behaviour expected of an officer. After a short period at Regimental HQ, they usually went on tour abroad with their units where they would remain for the rest of the year. SSLC officers mainly joined the major corps, and were posted as far away as Belize, Cyprus, Kenya, Germany and Norway. They were not expected to see service in a live conflict situation, although many joined very active units such as 59 Commando and the Parachute Regiment, where they were expected to pass the Commando course or 'P' company during their stay.

I should also introduce the AMF(L). Also a product of the Cold War, the Allied Command Europe Mobile Force (Land) was founded in 1960. A multinational, air-mobile force, its role was to establish a presence on the non-German border regions of the Warsaw Pact in times of tension. A shot fired in anger would thus be fired at the whole of NATO, thus guaranteeing cooperation between NATO members. In 1987 the British supplied the Engineers, Reconnaissance units (Lancers), and an infantry battalion (RRF). Of the other countries involved, I met Italians, Canadians, Americans and Danes in Norway; more were involved in other theatres such as Turkey. The AMF(L) is currently being reorganised to fit into NATO's Immediate Reaction Forces.

The Start

Like many Army recollections, this one starts at Sandhurst, and I am sure that this scenario will ring true with many. On a sunny October day in 1987, 25 fresh-faced 18 year-olds and their suitcases were brought to the "Redoubt" (a prefab set of buildings up the hill in the Sandhurst compound) by their parents. Dressed in suits and with freshly-cut hair, they were more than a little cocksure after gaining places at good universities. Cups of tea were drunk by the parents as the boys introduced themselves. The sun shone and the parents departed – it looked like a glorious sunny year was about to open up.

Then Staff Sergeant Archibald arrived. Three minutes later we were being force-marched around the whole of Sandhurst, still in our suits, to collect enormous quantities of webbing, gym kit, No. 2s, shoes, boots, helmets, hats, badges, binoculars and chinagraph pencils, which were to be taken back to the lines to be cleaned, polished, ironed, buttoned, buffed, blancoed and ironed again. We didn't stop running, ironing or polishing for five weeks.

When people ask me what it was like at Sandhurst, I normally say that it was the worst five weeks of my life. What I really mean is that it was the biggest shock. From being kings of the castle at school we went to being the lowest of the low at Sandhurst, capable of doing nothing right. Our mentor, Staff Archibald, was a hardened Gordon Highlander with two Northern Ireland tours and the leadership of a crack Milan unit to his credit. He was immaculately turned out at all times, even after a 4-day exercise. He could read a map in pitch darkness, recall complex instructions while under attack by Gurkhas, and stay awake in a lecture after days of no sleep. And he never got blisters. We, meanwhile, could not be relied upon to iron a pair of trousers without tramlines, nor clean our basins properly. We were an embarrassment on the parade ground and were liable to get lost if allowed outside the confines of Sandhurst. He was better than any of us at everything, and he didn't have to tell us.

Staff Archibald's not inconsiderable task was to turn us from schoolboys into young SSLC officers, and he had his work cut out. It says a lot for his expertise, teaching skills and threats to send people to jail that as we passed out on the parade ground in front of New College five weeks later we no longer marched like puppets, would never again forget the whereabouts of a GPMG and now – most

importantly – could wash and shave out of a mess tin. We were almost indistinguishable from the real thing.

As far as I remember my two-week introduction to the Corps at Chatham was mainly spent catching up on sleep, and I was soon on the move again, this time to 22 Engineer Regiment at Tidworth.

The Independent Field Troop

The Royal Engineers has always been a busy Corps, and at that time '22' was an example of just how manic things could get. I think it had four squadrons, at least two of which would be on tour at any one time. The rest were either repairing and repainting their kit from the last tour, or training to go off again, which gave the Regiment the air of a transit camp. The Independent Field Troop AMF(L), a troop of 50, was no exception. As part of the defence of NATO's northern flank (responsible for route denial and bridging), it spent four months each winter in Norway, returning for ten weeks' construction work there in the summer, and the occasional spring tour to Turkey. I was to be the second officer there, reporting to a young captain.

As I joined in mid-November, preparations were already afoot for the forthcoming winter. The troop was already wearing their ski-mountaineering boots to break them in, the tracked oversnow vehicles were being overhauled, everything was being painted black and white. Finding the OC absent I volunteered to help, and it was suggested that I paint the bar-minelayer. Half an hour later, dressed in overalls, I was happily doing my bit when the OC approached.
"Are you Lieutenant Fowkes?" he asked.
"Yes, sir."
"WELL WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING PAINTING THAT MINELAYER?"
He had other plans for me, and in a stroke of genius put me in charge of the armoury and the troop bar. I learnt that not only would every weapon and round have to be accounted for over the four months, but so would every bottle of beer. This was a source of some stress. However it meant that I had some real responsibility, and very quickly got to know the men.

The troop itself took a long time to win over. Everyone apart from myself had done at least one tour prior to coming to the unit, and it was well known in the Corps as a proud outfit. It was very

strongly led from the top: the OC was the fittest man in the unit, the Staff Sergeant could have been Staff Archibald's twin brother, and the Recce Sergeant was almost permanently off on Arctic survival courses, after which he would relate tales of nights out in arctic Norway with only a biro and three Danes for shelter. The rest – combat engineers, drivers, signallers, fitters, REME – were supremely competent, and most were proficient in a trade other than their own. Preparing a bridge for demolition, laying and lifting mines, or putting an air-portable bridge across a waterfall, everything seemed to be done rapidly and always worked. Wherever the unit stopped it was never long before someone had rigged up a shower tent, field kitchen or card school. A young Second Lieutenant was easy picking for these guys, and I lost count of the times I forfeited weeks' of chocolate rations at cards, or skied down hideously steep slopes "to show that it could be done, Sir." I once even found my lightweight trousers in flames – while I was still wearing them – with no-one else in sight (how this was done was never revealed to me.) It was an exciting troop to be in.

Winter Norway

The unit was too busy to pay me much attention before we left for Norway on Boxing Day, but that soon changed when we got to our low-slung barracks outside Voss. My mini-container holding our weapons lurked outside the front door, but the supply of boxes from the NAAFI that nestled behind the bar was very popular. Before long the Troop notice board had been placed opposite. If you got a letter from home that was particularly racy (or a 'Dear John' letter), you got bought a drink for posting it on the 'Announcements' part of the board. This started such serious letter-writing competition from wives and girlfriends at home that the BFPO thought our unit was twice the size it was.

However the serious part of the tour was quickly underway. In the eight hours of light each day we cross-trained with Norwegian explosives, and the creepy feeling of placing a detonator into a live cratering charge the size of a dustbin is still with me - when detonated the charge makes a hole in frozen ground eight feet deep. We built Bailey bridges and constructed reinforced-ice fortifications capable of withstanding sustained small-arms fire. A large part of the British Army's skill in cold climates is originally based on Norwegian techniques, and we went almost everywhere on skis, using our leather ski-touring boots and the traditional Norwegian telemark binding.

While the others continued training, the 23 of us on our first winter tour undertook the 6-week Arctic Warfare course, to teach us to 'survive to fight', not the other way round. It was a mild winter (only minus 10°C most nights) but there was a lot to learn. Divided into 'tent groups' of six, we learned to travel far using a pulk (man-pulled sledge) to carry our gear, breaking trail through the deep snow. We learnt how to protect our toes from frostbite when on stag, yet to strip off underneath our windproof jackets before moving to stop sweat condensing in our clothes. We melted snow to rehydrate our Arctic rations, which we made edible through the addition of lots of curry powder from home, and learnt through bitter experience not to touch metal with bare skin. Finally we slept – exhausted after many miles of trail breaking – in many combinations of shelter, from canvas tents to snowholes. By far the easiest, but also the coldest of these was called a 'tent sheet'. An American invention, every man in the tent group has a kite-shaped sheet that they button together to make a flattish flysheet. The group then digs a shallow hole in the snow and the tent sheet fits over the top, with the middle held up tied to a branch. During the night the coldest air in Norway would pour into the hole and into my sleeping bag. I pitied the Soviets if they had to use tent sheets too.

But all this had just been training for the multinational AMF(L) exercise, and in early March the troop moved up to north of the Arctic circle to support the rest of the battalion. Here things were different – it was flatter, colder, and the sun barely rose above the horizon. We were almost in the permafrost, and there was no colour in the landscape - everything was black and grey. We were also 'tactical' all the time – no lights after dark, no smoke during the day – and frequently had to wear our NBC (chemical warfare protection) kit as the exercise progressed. Living in a respirator in Arctic conditions is no fun at all, and the poor signaller who decoded such an order was almost as unpopular as the CO who had issued it. As with many exercises, there was a lot of 'hurry up and wait'. My main recollection is of long radio stags and helicopters flying overhead day and night. Probably my most popular moment of the year was nipping into the local village after about two weeks of exercise and coming back with a troop-sized string of sausages and forty burgers.

At long last the 'Orange' forces were beaten back across the Iron Curtain, or we ran out of money, and it was time to go home. The drivers went by boat to Grimsby with all the plant, and the rest of us went home via RAF Lyneham in the luxury of a Hercules. As a last concession to the Arctic winter there was something wrong with the heating in the plane. It was tropically hot at the front, and the lucky few sat there in their underpants, while those at the back needed all their Arctic gear and sleeping bags to keep warm.

Summer Norway

Although there was a lot to do in the spring, it seemed like no time at all before we were preparing to go off on the Summer tour in June, when the troop would build roads and buildings as a sort of 'Thank you' to the Norwegians for having us for the winter. We were to be stationed near Bergen, and I was to run Adventure Training during the Troop's R&R. Signing out my complement of canoes, climbing equipment and maps I was made to fill in as many chits as for the troop's entire cache of weapons.

In a few short months, Norway had transformed itself. This time it was almost permanent daylight, and beautifully warm. The construction jobs were straightforward, Bergen and its nightlife was around the corner, and the lads played as hard as they worked. I had a team of three, and we quickly put together a week's programme of walking, climbing and canoeing, capped by abseiling off a high bridge with a huge drop into a fjord, which we imposed upon most of the troop. It was a perfect summer.

Finally

On return to England in August, it was time to move on. I would be at University long before the next winter tour got underway, and after the free spirits of summer Norway the constraints of guard duty and tea with the Colonel were beginning to chafe. As Tidworth thinned out onto summer leave I lugged my last telegraph pole round the assault course, gave a final kick to the bar-minelayer and departed with cries of "and don't let your hair get any longer than that, Sir." ringing in my ears. A glorious career indeed.

The branch book of service stories