

THE WAR YEARS - FREDERICK HOPLEY

Ann, you have asked me on several occasions why I don't write down my reminiscences of the war but writing everything down would be rather laborious and I thought perhaps I would have a stab at taping some of my experiences. I have been very reluctant to do so because I don't want to become an old bore, you know, like Uncle Albert in 'Only fools and horses' - the chap with the captain Birdseye beard who is always going about his experiences in the navy and telling rather tall stories. So I hope it won't prove too boring. It was a long time ago - getting on for 50 years or more. It will be a good test for my memory, and perhaps will exercise my brain a wee bit, but I'll have a go at it anyway.

CHAPTER 1

FROM 1938 UNTIL DUNKIRK

I suppose it all really started with the Munich crisis in September 1938 when Neville Chamberlain came back waving a bit of paper and saying "peace in our time". At the time of course everybody was very relieved because they didn't want another war only 20 years after the end of the previous one and for a while there was a certain amount of euphoria but eventually as things proceeded it became obvious that the war wasn't very far off. In the new year, 1939, young fellows were beginning to join up in the various territorial forces the RAFVR, the RNVR and of course the Territorial Army. In fact some of the chaps at my office said that the older ones, those in their late 20s and early 30s, joined the RAF Balloon Squadron because they had been promised that in the event of war breaking out they would handle the barrage balloons in the Manchester area and of course they wanted to stay in Manchester with their wives and families so they thought this was a jolly good idea. As it turned out they were amongst the first to be sent out to France to

protect air fields. So they had bought rather a bad bargain. In my own case, I rather fancied the Navy and I made enquiries and the nearest place to train was Liverpool but they wanted you to go twice a week in the evenings and of course you were supposed to pay your own railway fares which I couldn't afford at 20 so that was out. Then I enquired about the RAFVR and they trained at Ringway which is now Manchester airport but they wanted you to spend weekends down there and at the time I was very interested in sport and playing tennis and was also studying for exams so that was out. Then some of the chaps at the office and some of my old school pals decided to join the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) on Upper Chorlton Road. Well that would have meant I would have had pals and also of course it was only a comparatively short distance, a penny tram ride, or quarter of an hours walk from where we lived in 16 Clarence Street so I went along with one or two pals and we joined up. We used to say that if they felt you and you were warm you were in and that was about the extent of the medical they gave you. This was, I suppose April or May 1939 (*Enlistment date was 02 May 1939 Pte F Hopley S.81654*). (Fig.1a & b)

In July we went to a camp on the Gower Peninsula near Swansea where we were under canvas and there were so many others with so few trained Territorial NCOs and officers they didn't really know what to do with us so I spent a lot of time swimming and sunbathing on the various beaches nearby, and we had trips out to Porthcawl and Swansea and I remember going to Llanelli. It was a bit of a shambles really, we used to be wakened at 6 am or 06.00 hours by the bugle playing reveille and that was followed immediately by the regimental band playing the regimental march while marching up and down the lines of tents. It was quite horrible at that time of the morning. Then we had to go on dirty parade immediately, that was without washing or shaving, the padre said a few prayers and we sang the odd hymn and then we went back to attempt to get cleaned up, wash and shave and blancoing. What happened of course was that only Christians went on the dirty parade and everybody else, that is Jews and so on, were excluded so they could get on with their blancoing and washing and shaving while we were on dirty

parade. After the first parade of the camp the number of Jews and non-believers had increased enormously by the next morning and only about half the previous morning's parade turned out so of course the Commanding Officer cottoned on to this and had everybody out on dirty parade whatever religion they were.

In the middle of August I went for a fortnight's holiday with a pal of mine from the office called Dick Clunes and we went to Paignton holiday camp. We had a smashing holiday with lovely weather and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and then on the last Friday of the fortnight, which happened to be September 1st 1939, we had been out all day and we came in for the evening meal, a dinner, and the radio was on and it was announcing that Hitler had marched into Poland and that all Territorials and reservists were called up and had to report immediately. So, there we were in Paignton, Dick Clunes wasn't in the forces at all, but we had come by car as he was one of the lucky fellows who had a car. We had a chat to decide what to do and eventually came to the conclusion we should set off immediately back home. So we settled up at the camp. We put pieces of brown paper in the car headlights with slits in because it was the first night ever of the blackout and by about 8 o'clock off we set. Well it got darker and darker and with the blanked out front headlamps we were getting to the stage when we couldn't see where we were going. Then we saw a glimmer of light on the roadside, we must have been somewhere in Somerset by then, and we came up to a pub so we decided we couldn't do any more under those circumstances. We parked the car, went in the pub and explained our position to the landlord and asked if he could put us up for the night. He very kindly offered to do so. He then gave us a bit of supper, bread cheese and pickles, and a glass of shandy and then went to our quite nice rooms. He woke us up next morning with a cup of tea, we went down and we had a slap up breakfast, mixed grill with sausage and tomato, egg bacon fried bread and then when we came to pay the bill he said if you are going back to join the forces have this on me. This of course was very generous of him but we didn't like to scrounge like that so asked him how much he would take and he said "*Give me half a crown each, that will do*".

We eventually got home about the middle of the Saturday afternoon and on the table when I walked in was a long blue envelope with my 'Calling Up' papers inside. They instructed me to report immediately to Old Trafford cricket ground which had been taken over as the barracks on the Chorlton Road obviously would be much too small when we were all called up, about a thousand of us. Old Trafford cricket ground became our headquarters. So as I was in sports coat and flannels I dashed off to Old Trafford cricket ground which wasn't all that far away and eventually found the adjutant and reported to him explained why I was there in civvies and he said that's all right go home get all your kit together change into uniform and report tomorrow morning at 09.00 hours. This I did after bidding fond farewells to everybody assuming I would be on my way to France the same day. I finished up sitting in the car park at the back of the cricket ground. Nobody seemed to know what to do with us and then at about 11 o'clock somebody came out and said they had been listening to the radio and war had been declared. Not long after the air raid sirens went and of course nobody knew what to do so we just sat there until they eventually ceased. We found out later of course that it was a false alarm. Well from then on for another month I stayed at home and reported every day, did a certain amount of drill, got used to gas masks and so on and most evenings went home by 5 o'clock and reported the next morning. Just occasionally we had to stay overnight at the ground when we were doing guard or picket duties. This went on for a month and then one morning I set off saying cheerio in the ordinary way and I didn't come back. When it became dark, perhaps about nine or 10 o'clock in the evening, we all marched down from the cricket ground to Victoria station in Manchester. I remember singing 'roll out the barrel' and all the popular tunes of the day as we marched along. We got on the train and didn't know where we were going and finished up at Morpeth in Northumberland. We were billeted in an old farmhouse a mile or two outside the town. I slept on a palliasse in a horsebox in the outbuildings which wasn't very comfortable. But Morpeth was a very kind friendly place. The people were only too glad to make us welcome. We had, in fact, replaced their own Territorial Army division which was I think the 50th Northumbrian division which had moved south. In effect they sought of took us

over as their sons and their local Conservative club opened the club to all soldiers irrespective of rank and we could go and have a drink there or a game of snooker or billiards. There was a local cinema which was quite good and there was a pub called The George and Dragon which became our sort of headquarters with a nice warm fire and was very cosy. We had the occasional trip to Ashington which of course was only a few miles away but is in a mining area and we went to a dance there and were surprised to find that young chaps were dancing together and we wondered what on earth we had let ourselves in. In fact one of them shortly after my first visit walked up to me and asked me for a dance. I have to admit after a few enquiries about this rather peculiar practice we found out that being a mining town there was a huge preponderance of young men to girls so the young fellows were always short of partners and it had become a practice over the years for them to dance together so it was all quite aboveboard and respectable but rather odd. However, as what few girls there were seemed to prefer to dance with the soldiers and the local lads began to resent it we decided to stop going. We had trips out to Blyth and Newbiggin by the Sea on the coast but they were pretty dreary places.

At the beginning of the war the unit only had a few basic vehicles, about half a dozen, and these obviously were far too few for us to carry out our duties supplying the whole division of about 18,000 troops with food so what happened when we moved up north was that the army requisitioned lots of civilian vehicles. I remember Binns of Newcastle upon Tyne, that's similar to Lewis's, supplied us with quite a lot of delivery vans which we used like army lorries. Also, there was a shortage of cars for officers and any of the men who had cars could volunteer to hand them over for use by the army and get paid quite a substantial sum by the day. However, by about November they no longer needed these cars and anybody who had handed one over was given a 48-hour pass to drive it back home and the petrol of course. One chap invited me to join him and I managed to wangle a 48-hour pass with another chap and the three of us set off in the dark in the evening had to drive back to Manchester from Morpeth. We did fine until crossing over the moors near Oldham and of course with the blackout were driving very

slowly and then unaccountably we left the road and just rolled over onto the car top quite gently. We scrambled out and tried to upright the car but couldn't and then a lorry fortunately came along with three great big chaps in it and in no time at all they got ropes and turned the car back on its wheels. They pushed the car back onto the road and made sure it was going all right and off they went with our grateful thanks.

About this time also we were instructed to take the little brass 'Ts' off our shoulders and only have RSC. There was almost a riot because nobody wanted to be mistaken for regular soldiers. We used to do our foot and rifle drill in a small side street, a quiet place just off the main street in the town which consisted mainly of cottages and the odd shop. We had a sergeant who took the drill who was a very decent fellow, very well liked, but of course when he was drilling us he came out with the usual shouting and bawling and the general mayhem that goes with foot drill and on one occasion whilst he was shouting and bawling one of these cottage doors opened and a little old lady came out and marched up to him, called him a bully and said he ought to be ashamed of himself, what was he thinking of to be shouting at these young men who came from decent homes. If their mothers knew what was happening to them they would be most upset and so on and so forth and then she about-turned and walked back into her cottage. While all this was going on the sergeant's face got redder and redder, his mouth kept opening and closing like a stranded fish and nothing came out. Of course we were trying to keep our faces straight but we weren't very successful and eventually everybody burst out laughing and the sergeant bristled and said "*So and so off the lot of you*" and stalked off in high dudgeon. It took him a long time to live that one down.

When Christmas came along the married men were given leave but the single men were only allowed one in three so that there would be a skeleton staff. What they did at a local dance just before Christmas was a raffle draw with all the single men's names put in the hat and so many were drawn out. I couldn't attend the dance as I was on duty but when the letter came back I was very happily informed

I was one of the guys drawn out off the hat so I did get home for Christmas 1939. For the New Year or as the Geordies (like the Scots) call it, Hogmanay, I was lucky enough to be invited to a miner's cottage in a nearby village. They were back-to-back cottages with outdoor toilets and rather primitive but they all had a huge fireplace where they kept a fire going all year round - it only went out once when they cleaned the grate and everything out. What this Hogmanay celebration seemed to consist of was to go to the house that you were invited to where you had a drink and mince pies and then the whole family moved down the street to friends where you had another drink and a mince pie and then that family joined up and moved onto another house and the same again and that family joined up and so it went on. This continued until about three quarters of the village was left wandering around the few houses left to visit. By this time my memory starts to get a bit hazy and I vaguely remember being at the local village hall dance after that and waking up on the settee in front of the big roaring fire the next morning.

Then came the big freeze. It was a very bitter cold winter after that and only a few days into the New Year we had orders to move south. It was a pretty hair-raising journey which lasted a couple of days with vehicles skidding off the road on the ice but we did eventually arrive in the middle of Savernake forest in Wiltshire, near Marlborough. It was a farm right in the heart of the forest, very desolate and bleak. We slept in barns, no heating at all just on straw and hay and at night rats were about and bit some of the chaps. When we went for our food it was on tin plates and by the time you found somewhere to sit down by a tree or something it had congealed to the plate. We couldn't take our clothes off as it was so bitterly cold and after a few days there was quite a lot of sickness and of course everybody was absolutely browned off to the teeth. Eventually it was realised that they must do something about it so we moved to Ashdown House, a small stately home about 3.5 miles from Lambourn on the Berkshire Downs. I have been there since as a member of the National Trust, It was some improvement but there was still no heating and it was very, very cold in the house and then whilst we were there, there was a thaw and it rained and then froze again. The result was that everywhere

was sheet ice. If we tried to walk along the drive to the house in army boots we couldn't stand on our feet. Trees and branches were crashing down in the woods and in the area and altogether it was an absolute shambles. There were no amenities, no heating as I said and the only light was provided when necessary by a generator in one of our workshops lorries. There was no entertainment of any sort but eventually they put up a marquee in the front of the house. Got a 36 gallon barrel of beer, set it up and we all lined up with our mess tins and mugs for a ration of beer. When they came to pour it out it wouldn't because the barrel had frozen solid. We even began to run out of coal for cooking purposes and I was told to take a lorry with a couple of loaders and a driver and to go out with a requisition and find some coal. I had no idea where to go so I first went to Marlborough but I couldn't do any good there so I looked up coal merchants in the telephone directory and then tried one or two but they hadn't any to spare. Eventually we ended up in Newbury where I noticed the piles of coal in the sidings of the railway station so I searched out the foreman and told him our plight, a real sob-story, and he eventually let us have a couple of tons of coal and I handed over the requisition. When I got back to Ashdown House I was treated like a conquering hero because now they could be certain of getting a hot meal. Incidentally during all this time we never had a chance for a bath, we never took our clothes off as it was too cold. We never had a change of underwear and in the morning when we got our mug of hot tea we would drink the first half as quickly as possible and use the other half to shave with and then rinse in cold water. We did occasionally manage to get into Lambourn although we had to walk 3.5 miles there and 3.5 miles back just to get into a nice warm pub and have a drink and a bit of comfort. After, I suppose, about a month we left Ashdown House and moved to a small farm at Foxfield, just close to Hungerford, but we were only there a couple of days and then at night time we went down to Hungerford station and then entrained and found ourselves in Southampton at night where we boarded a ferry across the Channel and round about dawn or shortly afterwards we were in Cherbourg.

1939-1940 France and Belgium with 42 Div

We marched with all our kit from the Cherbourg quayside about a mile up a hill to the top at which there was a NAAFI where we were given a good hot breakfast and you could buy fags at 50 for a shilling - very reasonable. We changed what money we had into French francs and marched back to the quayside which was also a railway siding and after that two or three hours of hanging about. We then entrained onto cattle trucks which apparently is the way they moved the French army about. They just had straw in these cattle trucks and on the outside were marked "*Quarante hommes ou huit chevaux*" (*Forty men or eight horses*). Of course everybody gets in and starts making animal noises just to show their disgust at having to travel in those circumstances. Then for several hours we meandered along through the French countryside till we came to a town called Laval on the river Mayenne between Rennes and Le Mans. We then moved on to army trucks and went through Sable sur Sarthe (Fig. 2) until we came to a little village called Souvigne sur Sarthe and there we camped in the grounds of a small château (Figs. 3-5). As usual we were in the outhouses in the horseboxes and the barns and so on. As soon as we got there we noticed that about a quarter-mile away was the river Sarthe and the weather was very mild, in fact some of the spring flowers were coming out, so we all chased off down to the river. We stripped off and dived in and swam for as long as we were allowed to just to get clean. The name of the château incidentally was Le Château de la Roche Talbot and we occasionally saw the Countess with her daughter wandering through the grounds. I think it was more or less a feudal system where most of the village was dependent on the château for work and even the local *estaminee* seemed to be connected with the château. We got on very friendly terms with the people in the *estaminee* to which we used to adjourn as often as we could. I managed to get the odd free drink from the landlord by singing French nursery rhymes, whatever I could remember from school. They seemed very surprised that an English soldier should know French nursery rhymes.

After several weeks at Souvigne sur Sarthe which were quite pleasant we said farewell to the villagers and we started to move north. The first night we stopped at a town called Évreux where we were in a French army barracks. We were actually in a big shed with straw on the floor and that is where we slept (typical French). We crossed the river Seine at Vernon and whilst we were held up in the traffic there we were in the back of a lorry. We looked out and there was a little French soldier propping up the wall nearby with a fag hanging out of his mouth looking as miserable as sin dressed in the same uniform as they had in the first world war and all of a sudden he said "*watcha cocks*" much to our astonishment. It turned out that he had been born in France and at about the age of two he moved to London with his parents. They set up a restaurant or something and he was brought up in London and was more or less a cockney. However, just before the war started, he had gone with some friends on a weekend trip to France and there I suppose having a French name and since it was a no-passport trip, and having a French name he was checked by the authorities and they discovered that he was on their lists for conscription. His parents had never been naturalised in England so that he also was still French and that was it. As you can imagine he was a very unhappy little fella. We moved on northwards until we came to La Bassee (south west of Lille) on the La Bassee canal. It was a mining town in the midst of a number of mining towns - a very unpleasant area a bit like the North of England in the mining areas there. Our billets were in a street at the end of which was a huge chemical factory and altogether it was not a very nice place. Although the people themselves were quite friendly most of the young women seem to be married to soldiers who were in the Maginot line so these girls began to be known as Maginot liners.

Until then of course we had been in what was known as the phoney war. Nothing much had happened and nobody thought much about fighting or anything like that. Then on May 8th we were told the Germans had invaded Holland and Belgium. We moved north from La Bassee and stopped at various places. I remember on one occasion we were running into difficulty in getting supplies because with the

german advance, Panzer attacks and so on our normal sources weren't available and we went into Lille, which is a big industrial city much like Manchester, and it was practically deserted. The people had all pushed off and there we found a NAAFI which we opened up and loaded our vehicles with anything we could find. We found another store full of French goods, tinned fruit and stuff like that and loaded it up. That was the stuff that we were trying to pass on to our soldiers. On another occasion we were told there was a railhead at a small town to the west of Armentieres and I went there with the supply officer and another chap to see if we could find this railhead. Whilst we were there shelling started and it must have been the tanks on the other side of the river. So we cleared out of there double quick. Then we moved over the frontier into Belgium. We were held up outside a town called Popperinge while the Stukas were dive-bombing it. We passed through the town afterwards and there were corpses of people who had been out shopping and children all lying about in the streets and that I think is the very first time that I realised what war was all about.

We pulled into a farm just north of Popperinge and dug in there and when we dug our slit trenches we were digging up bits of old ammunition, bayonets and rifles and even bones and a skull. It had obviously been a battlefield in the First World War. We stayed on the farm just for a few days and then moved out and from then on it was just chaotic. Nobody seemed to know what was going on; the officers least of all. We had lost all contact with the units we were supposed to be supplying with food and then we would stop and start. We got caught up in thousands upon thousands of refugees all scarpering away from Brussels and the northern towns of Belgium. They were in a pretty poor state - they had no food and were exhausted. We gave them food from our supplies until we were told we mustn't do it because we had run short ourselves. They of course were a tremendous obstacle on the roads. You were just trapped there in the midst of them just like you would be in a traffic jam on the motorways today. We lost our supply officer, a Captain, here. He was a very decent bloke and apparently what happened was that he got caught up in his car with his batman in a long line of

refugees and his batman got out of the car and walked some few yards away to see what the hold up was, and a Stuka dive bomber dropped a bomb right on top of the car. The batman, who was only nineteen, was blown into a pond some distance away and when he crawled out, not injured in any way, the car and his officer had just disappeared. All that was left was a huge crater in the road and he couldn't trace even any bits of the officer. Somebody brought him back to our location and he just sat there in his tattered uniform, wet through, with a blanket around him shivering and shaking uncontrollably. Every now and again he burst into tears. At that age, an experience like that must have been dreadful. He did eventually recover back in England afterwards and he was all right but I should imagine he lived with that experience the rest of his life.

There were many problems created by the refugees but it was quite interesting to talk to some of them. For example, there was an old Jew who had a chat with me and he had lived in Manchester for a good many years and knew it very well. Another chap who spoke very good English with a strong French accent, who I assumed was a Belgian, turned out to be an English soldier from the First World War who had married a Belgian girl and stayed in Belgium and got a job with the War Graves commission tending the graves in the various cemeteries. He had lived in Belgium since the First World War. He had Belgian children and very seldom spoke English which accounted for the fact that he had a sort of French accent. Another thing that happened was that quite a lot of young girls, quite decent girls from good families, approached some of our chaps and offered themselves in exchange for food for their families. This quite shocked our chaps because they were decent Territorial lads and the thought of accepting such a proposition was not on. I am happy to say nobody ever took advantage of that. We gave them what food we could without any conditions. Many of the refugees had brought their family pets with them and when they found they couldn't feed them they just abandoned them. Some of our chaps sort of adopted these dogs and cats but the one I remember most was a baby goat, a Billy goat - a kid, that was very affectionate and enjoyed being petted and followed us around and one of

its tricks was if you sat down it would approach you from the rear and start nibbling at your trouser seat. He was christened 'Abdul the damned'. Unfortunately, of course, later we also had to abandon these pets.

Eventually we came to a halt in a field where we stayed perhaps a couple of days and then we were told that we must leave the vehicles, destroy them and the officer in charge said just make for Dunkirk. We filled our packs and so on with the contents of the lorries as far as we could and gave the rest away to the refugees and the fleeing Belgian army and then set fire to the vehicles by firing into the petrol tanks. The officer who had the only map set off on his own and left us to it and we just started to walk. We really didn't know where the devil Dunkirk was we just kept going and found the odd military policeman and asked him if he knew the way. We asked local people in their cottages for directions. Incidentally the cottages all had white sheets hanging out of them which indicated that they had given up and they were surrendering. The Belgian troops were smashing their rifles against the walls in utter disgust and we passed through one area where French soldiers had released their horses and these horses were scared stiff of the noise of gunfire in the distance and they were dashing around all over the place - a danger to themselves and to everyone else. So some of the troops shot them for their own good. Another area we passed through was all flames where they had set fire to the French tanks. As we got near the coast they had flooded the low-lying area and we had to wade through that. Eventually we arrived at the beaches at a place called De Panne about 12 miles from Dunkirk and of course it was utterly chaotic with hundreds and thousands of men milling around in all directions. Nobody knew what was going or what to do. This went on, as far as I was concerned, for a couple of days by this time I had lost contact with anybody I knew and just wandered around on my own. I slept in the sand dunes at night. I had tins of Libby's tinned fruit, even pate de foie gras which I had never tasted before, didn't think much of and have never had since. But those tins soon ran out and from then on I just did without. There was a tap by the side of the dunes where you could get water. At night chaps would wander around down near the waters edge

and, something I have never heard anybody mention before, as they walked along their footsteps showed up in phosphorescence so they shone.. Another chap shouted for god's sake stop walking around or the Jerries will see us. We were frightened a plane would come over and bomb us. Dunkirk itself was a bit of a shambles and I learned that there didn't seem much prospect of getting away. There were huge petrol tanks on fire with the smoke coming up into the sky and there was a ferry boat beached nearby on fire to and it was all rather desperate.

Eventually I think it must have been the third day I walking on the beach and there was a chap in the water trying to drag out a Royal Engineers pontoon. They were flat bottomed boats that they used to use to cross rivers and they only had a very shallow draft, perhaps six to eight inches. He shouted out for me to help him and I went in and we dragged it out and emptied it and then he got one or two other chaps and said what about trying to get off in this. So we all piled in. The sea was literally like a millpond there was hardly a ripple on it and we started to row using the butts of our rifles as paddles. We made some progress but it was all very slow and very hard work until a launch came into view with a couple of civilians in it and they saw us and shouted "do you want a tow?" so we shouted yes and they threw us a line which we hung on to and the launch started to tow us towards a destroyer. But as we began to get near the destroyer the launch went a little bit too fast and we began to ship water which we bailed out using our steel helmets and we got to about 15 yards of the destroyer when we went under the water. Well, we were all heavily laden we had greatcoats on and steel helmets, our rifles of course went into the drink along with gas masks, big-packs, small-packs, water bottles, boots etc. We were all exhausted due to lack of proper sleep and food but the sailors saw what happened and several dived in as they were to help but I think one chap off the pontoon just went down and never came up again. I managed to reach the scrambling net over the side under my own steam and grabbed hold of it and sailors came scrambling down and helped me up until I got onto the deck. I just lay there waterlogged bringing up water. I must have drunk half of the Channel. I should imagine my stomach was as clean as it has ever been with no food and

cleaning out with the sea. I just lay there until I could pull myself together and then sat down somewhere. I felt in my pockets for some fags but of course although I had got several tins of fags from the NAAFI visits in Lille they were all full of water so although I had about 300 or 400 cigarettes not one of them was smokeable so I just chucked them over the side. A sailor gave me a fag and a light and I just sat there. Not long afterwards another sailor came along with a mug of hot Cocoa and thick slices of white bread and Bully beef. That was one of the finest meals of my life I think. After two or three hours while they brought other blokes aboard we up-anchored and set sail much to our relief. We wanted to get the hell out of it as fast as we could. We had an uneventful trip that must have taken about two and a half to three hours passing other boats going out to help and then we could see the White Cliffs of Dover. That is one of the finest sights I have ever seen in my life.

Back to England June 1940

We came into Dover Harbour which was full of shipping, mostly destroyers, and we clambered ashore over two or three other destroyers onto the quayside where we were met with cups of tea and sandwiches by the WVS and the Salvation Army and people like that. We were taken over to the railway, got on a train - didn't give a damn where it was going - and the train pulled out and that was the first time I had seen myself for sometime. I looked in the mirror in the railway compartment and I just didn't recognise myself. I was filthy dirty, soaked in salt and my hair was matted and I was completely exhausted.

We stopped at Salisbury station where ministering angels, in the form of girls in lovely summer frocks, came along and gave us tea and sandwiches and cakes. They gave us postcards which we could use to write home on and they promised to post them there for us and it was all rather incredible really, a complete contrast from what we just came from. It was a little beyond our comprehension. Eventually we got to Blandford Forum in Dorset where we are detrained and army trucks took

us up to an army camp a few miles outside Blandford on the Downs there. They had moved out the troops that were occupying the barracks into a tented camp nearby and we went into the barrack rooms. They had mattresses laid down on the floor and we just slept on these mattresses took our boots off and equipment and coats etc and went to sleep. We were there for a couple of days just lying on these mattresses. You had sergeant majors and sergeants and NCOs of all categories bringing us food and drink and nobody bothered us at all, just left is to it.

On the first morning that we were called out onto the parade ground after our two or three days resting, there must have been several hundred of us all lined up on the parade ground, a fighter plane appeared in the distance flying very low. From our experiences on the beaches the whole parade just scattered in all directions, took no notice of any orders and just ran for it, me included. It fortunately turned out to be an English plane but that came about because throughout the whole of the evacuation period we never ever saw an RAF plane so that we were completely at the mercy of the German fighter planes and bombers. As a result of that anybody in an RAF uniform, one of the *'Brylcreem boys'*, was in for trouble if he ran into any of the Dunkirk people. I remember being in a pub in Blandford one evening when a young airman came in; he looked as though he had only just joined up and was an Aircraftsman (an IRK) and absolute silence descended on the pub and all a soldiers just glared at that this poor lad and one of the older ones, showing a bit of compassion, told him to clear off whilst the going was good. It was just as well he did I think. This attitude of mind of course was quite unjustified as we found out later that what RAF aeroplanes were available had been carrying out wonderful work well behind Dunkirk attacking various units of the German army and helping to slow their advance.

On the third day they documented us so they could find out what units we belonged to after all we were a mixed bag from all sorts of units and all sorts of divisions. Then we were free to go to town, get the local bus and go on a spree and have a few pints in the pubs. In fact coming back to camp at night there were so many

drunks that the two old coppers there, I suppose the younger ones had been called up, lined us all up and anybody who was prepared to help a drunk onto the bus and see him home safely was allowed to get on in preference to others.

At the end of a week the documentation had been sorted out. There must have been dozens of places where these troops were being sorted out throughout the country. I got a travel warrant and an order to proceed to Esh Winning which turned out to be a little mining village 2 or 3 miles to the west of Durham city. Well I eventually got there and managed to team up with some of my old pals who I was of course delighted to see all in one piece. The local people, miners again, were absolutely magnificent. They all looked after us. The blokes bought us beer, the women cooked food for us. We were looked after tremendously. It was hard to believe that these were the forebears of Scargill and his thugs as they just seemed to be a different type of people from the present ones. There wasn't much we could do there so we spent most days down at the railway station waiting for trains coming in to bring the rest of our unit and looking for old pals. Two of these old pals who been in the same form as me at school I later found out had been captured and hadn't got away and they both spent five years in POW camps. One of them was a fairly bright spark and he seemed to have got through it all right but the other one, a bloke called Cardale, who was notorious at school for being the bolshiest sort of chap, had twice been sentenced to 2 or 3 months down the Silesian salt mines for fighting the German guards.

CHAPTER 2

UK TRAINING AS A SOLDIER

After about ten days at Esh Winning everybody who was likely to be joining us seemed to have come so we were put on a train which took us to Darlington. There we were in a schoolroom about a mile outside the centre of the town on the

great North Road, the A1. We had no bedding only a blanket and a groundsheet and Oh the floor was hard. I wrapped my coat around my boots and used that as a pillow but apart from that we found that the people again were absolutely marvellous whenever we went they made a fuss of us. If you went in a pub we weren't allowed to buy a drink. The blokes would gather round and treat us. The trams were free and we could go to the cinema in the afternoon free and all in all it was splendid. But having lost all our vehicles and equipment there was nothing we could do and all they had us do was marching and drilling and so on. When they asked for volunteers to do a PT course for about a week, having been very keen on PT, I volunteered just to get away from the boredom. Fortunately for me, after I had gone on this short course which was in Darlington the unit moved out into the wilds of the Yorkshire Moors to a tented camp several miles away from Bowes but to get there they marched everybody which was quite a long march the idea being to toughen us up after Dunkirk and to get some discipline back into our ranks which was very sadly lacking. As I was on the course I followed 2 or 3 days in an army lorry which was very fortunate for me.

This camp was a temporary camp so there were no amenities. The nearest pub was about 5 miles away. There was no entertainment, absolutely nothing, and I spent most of my time taking parades for PT. So I got pretty fit but everybody was absolutely bored stiff. Then after three weeks or so we began to operate again properly that is as an operational unit having got vehicles and equipment and so on. I then moved with Jackie Birchwood and some others to a farm at West Layton (Yorkshire) which is a mile or two up the road from Scotch Corner. It was only a little hamlet a few houses and this farm. There was a pub about a mile down the main road and the hamlet was situated equidistant between Richmond in Yorkshire and Barnard Castle in County Durham. On a Saturday they had a bus which ran between Richmond and Barnard Castle and depending on whether we were on duty or not we used to go into one of the towns and have a few beers and perhaps go to the cinema. Whilst we were there Jackie Birchwood had his girlfriend come along and stay in one of the cottages and I went with Joan, who

became his wife (and is now a grandmother of course), and Jackie to Barnard Castle. We went to the cinema to see a new film called the Wizard of Oz. These bus trips were rather comical really because the driver knew all his passengers by name. The route for the bus wasn't direct but went through all the local villages. The driver used to pick people up at their doors or put them down at their doors, address them by name and on the way back at night after the pubs had shut half the people were pretty tipsy and used to sing songs and have a jolly good time. There was one village called Smallways and they used to sing "*I'll be loving you Smallways*".

It was while we were at West Layton that Jackie and I were promoted from private to full corporal (Fig. 6). By the time the autumn came we had another move. This time we went down all the way to Suffolk to a little village called Woolpit which is 4 or 5 miles east of Bury St Edmunds. We were in a little old cottage which faced on the other side of the road to a local pub which seemed a suitable arrangement. It was a pretty dreary sort of place. The countryside of course is flat and uninteresting in that area and it was getting towards winter and very bleak. We occasionally managed to get into Bury St Edmunds or Stowmarket for a few hours. I went into a tobacconist shop to buy some fags and I asked the chap where I could get a bath. He called his wife who said that I could have a bath in their bath at the back of the shop for six pence provided I brought my own towel. So from then on, about once a week, I used to try to get into Bury St Edmunds and have a decent bath.

We went to Stowmarket occasionally and used their British Legion club which was a very good one. They had dances in it and I remember another occasion when we had lorries to take us into Ipswich for a Gracie Fields concert in the local theatre. All I can remember about that is that she turned cartwheels on the stage. I think I mentioned earlier that we were a supply unit, that is we supplied the food for the whole division and occasionally we used to scrounge some steak from our butchers and pop it across into the pub opposite our billet. After the pub closed that

evening we would go into the kitchen at the back of the pub and the landlord's wife would serve up steak and onions and lots of vegetables which she supplied and perhaps apple tart and cream. After army grub meals like that were fit for a king. If you got friendly with civilians and visited their houses or in this case the local pub it was known as *getting your feet under the table*. I went on leave from Woolpit and on these occasions we usually took some food home from our supplies - strictly legal of course - I had a huge gammon and several pounds of tea in my big-pack. Well the journey was through the night and we were held up outside Sheffield for about two or three hours whilst it was being bombed but fortunately the railway line wasn't hit and I got into Manchester about 6 o'clock in the morning. I walked down the approach in army boots frightened I would fall over backwards with the weight of this gammon and scared of being picked up by the military police. I came into Piccadilly and there all around the gardens where there used to be big cotton warehouses was just a heap of smoking rubble. Apparently Manchester had been raided not that night but the night before and as you can imagine this was something of a shock to me and I was very glad when I got home to find everybody was all right. Shortly after I got back I was sent to a command interview board to be interviewed in respect of the possibility of taking a commission. The board consisted of a brigadier and two colonels which to a mere corporal was a terrifying sight. However, they were very pleasant and free and easy and sat me down and just chatted to me, wanted to know what I did in Civvy Street, what exams I had taken at school and in my business and additionally they were anxious to know all about my sporting activities. The brigadier asked me why I had got a moustache and was it to make me look older? I told him that being a Mancunian I suffered from catarrh and in the army in the winter shaving in cold water I used to get a permanently chapped upper lip which was aggravated every time I shaved. This caused quite a lot of merriment with the board. A week or so later I was told I had passed the board and an entry was made in my AB 64 (my paybook) that I was suitable for training at an Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU).

The unit then moved to Arborfield which is just south of Reading. There was in fact, and still is as far as I know, a permanent camp there but we were not connected with them. We were in a big house in its own grounds about a mile away from them but they did offer the use of their cinema and we occasionally visited the cinema as guests. We used to get lifts into Reading by thumbing on the road outside our billet and on one occasion it might be a coal lorry and then next it might be a Simmons beer lorry and once we got a lift in a Rolls-Royce. We used to go to dances in Reading at a time when "In the mood" was all the rage and on one occasion there was a fight between French Canadians, who were absolute blighters, and when the knives came out we decided discretion was the better part of valour and left the dance. We drew our supplies from a supply depot in Slough and we used to leave Arborfield about 6.30 in the morning and get to Slough about half past seven ready for the depot to open. The depot was at the end of a cul-de-sac on the right-hand side and immediately opposite was the main entrance to Mars confectionery Ltd and the night manager every time we went there used to open up the gates, invite us in give us a nice cup of tea and a Mars bar each so I have always been friendly disposed towards Mars. Whilst we were there on a couple of Sundays we managed to meet up with Jimmy Birchwood (Jackie's brother) who was stationed at Southampton. He would come up from Southampton to Basingstoke and we would go from Reading station to Basingstoke and spend the day together.

We then moved back up into Yorkshire and found ourselves back at West Layton the place we had left only a few months before. I wasn't there very long because I was sent on detachment with a supply officer, a sergeant and a couple of men on a lorry down to Northleach in the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire. I forget what the detachment was all about but it involved going into Cheltenham every day and coming back again. We slept in a barn on the outskirts of Northleach and the barn is still there. I have passed it several times in recent years. One of our problems was that we had no money, or very little, as we had left just before payday from Yorkshire and the first night we went into a local boozer we had just enough for a

couple of pints each, the sergeant and I. The locals challenged us to darts for a pint. If we had lost that was us finished we wouldn't be able to get a drink for the rest of the week but out of desperation we managed to survive several trips to the boozer winning every time. The officer eventually cashed a cheque and loaned us a pound each so we then went along to the boozer, played the locals and lost. I suppose the need to win had gone.

Incidentally you probably have noticed since I began this tape that wherever we were I have always talked about the pub. That isn't because we spent all our spare time in pubs it is because being a field unit we were usually stationed out in the country somewhere in the wilderness and the local pub was the only place where we could go and find some entertainment and in the winter particularly some warmth and comfort. The average soldier couldn't spend much money on drink because his pay at the beginning of the war was two shillings a day (10p or 70p a week). From that was usually deducted a shilling towards barrack room damages and other odds and ends. Married men got family and children's allowances but I think these were paid to the wife and I think a third of his pay also went to his wife so he was even worse off than the ordinary single man. I was lucky because the firm (Refuge Assurance) had decreed when war broke out that all those in the forces before the war broke out would be paid full salary while they were in the forces and those who were called after war broke out would get full salary less their forces pay. So in my case I was better off in the army than I was in civvie street. However, once your forces pay exceeding the salary from the Refuge then you were supposed to report it and the Refuge stopped paying you any money.

We left Northleach not to go back to Yorkshire but to rejoin our unit at a village called Stisted that was a village in Essex 2 or 3 miles to the east of Braintree, on the Coggeshall-Colchester Road. Shortly after arriving there Jackie Birchwood went on leave to get married. Whilst he was away he sent me a card saying that he wanted to bring Joan back with him to Stisted for another week for a honeymoon and could I find them some accommodation in the village. By the time I got the

card I had one day to find somewhere for them before they arrived. I wandered around the village calling at all the cottages explaining the situation and asking if they could provide accommodation for Jackie and Joan and nobody seemed to want to know. It was getting pretty desperate thinking what on earth would happen if I couldn't find somewhere for them when I came to a cottage and a rather charming lady about 30 who, when I told her the story, was quite romantically inclined and was only too happy to fix them up with a room. Then the problem was to let Jackie know. The village had two ways in from the main road and I assumed they would be coming from Chelmsford by road so I put chaps out on both roads both ways and eventually Jackie and Joan turned up in a taxi from Chelmsford and were duly escorted to their love nest amidst a great deal of leg pulling. A week or two to later I was ordered to appear in the presence of the adjutant who informed me that I had been selected to go to pre-OCTU which was a place you went to for several weeks to see if you are fit to go to OCTU. Those who turned out to be unsuitable could be sent back to their units without further ado. Unfortunately it turned out that the pre-OCTU I was being sent to was for the Royal Artillery and I had no desire to join the gunners. What had happened was that when I first went for the interview at the Command Interview Board I had to fill in a form in which part of it you had to state your preference with regard to regiment and you had to put three preferences. So when I filled the form in I just put RASC and nothing else. When the adjutant saw the form he hauled me up and said I had only put RASC and must put two more regiments. I said I wasn't particularly keen on going to any other regiment. However, if you want to go for a commission you have to fill the form in properly otherwise they would turn it down. So just to fill the space in I put after RASC, RAOC and RA and unfortunately for me they had chosen me to go to RA. I protested rather vehemently about this reminding him that I hadn't particularly wanted to go to anybody else but he said "well it's a posting and you have got to go". So I packed all my kit up and set off to a place called Bonhill which is a small town south of Balloch which is at the southernmost tip of Loch Lomond and after travelling all day I eventually arrived at Glasgow Central railway station came down the approach and I had to get to St Neots station. There was a chap

propping up a lamp post just outside the station and I asked him if he could direct me to St Neots and he looked at me, straightened up, and was just about to point the way when off he set staggering across the road through the traffic and finished up flat on his face on the pavement opposite outside the railway hotel. Apparently like many Glaswegians he was a drunk.

Eventually I found the way to St Neots where a very kind WVS lady made sure I had a meal. Then, as I got on the train about 6 o'clock in the evening it was dark but a very beautiful, brilliant moonlight night the air raid sirens sounded. By the time the train had got out of the station you could hear the bombs coming down and I found myself in the middle of the Clydeside blitz (March 1941). I had to go the full length of Clydeside through Clydebank to Alexandria whilst this raid was going on. It was pretty hair raising the train was rocking from side to side with blasts from bombing. The driver put his foot down and was going like hell. You could see the huge petrol storage tanks going up in sheets of flame and the train stopped for a very short time at Clydebank and off we set again and arrived safely in Alexandria. Alexandria is on the opposite side of the river Leven to Bonhill so it was only a short walk with all my kit to this large mill which had been taken over and was being used as a barracks and to which I had to report. When I got to the main gate there was a sentry on duty and I explained why I was there and he said "oh well everybody's been evacuated up the hillside opposite you had better go up there and leave your kit with me". So I went up the hillside. As I said it, was brilliant moonlight night and you could see for a long distance. Eventually I found an officer and reported to him and we stayed up on the mountainside until dawn and then came back again down to the barracks. There was a raid the next night and we again went up on the hillside and the following day we were informed that several hundred of the people who had been bombed out were being evacuated and that they were coming to Bonhill and Alexandria and would we help by cleaning out village halls and places like that ready for their arrival. So in our spare time we went to these places and we scrubbed everything and prepared everything ready for them arriving which they eventually did. Incidentally, we had also been asked if we would agree to go

on half rations so the other half could be used to feed these people in view of the difficulties of transport because the railway line which I had travelled along on the first night was no longer in use. It must have been a fortnight before it was usable again. That was all right, everybody was quite happy until we went out in the evenings for a drink in the pubs and the men from Clydebank turned out to be absolute reds. When they saw us in uniform they cursed the King and Queen. Their whole attitude was that why should they be bombed. Of course in England many cities had been bombed for months and months beforehand so this was their first experience of it. I suppose they had thought that being so far north they would escape the Blitz. However, before long this sort of talk annoyed a lot of the troops and fights broke out and chaos prevailed. The result being that we were all confined to barracks until these people were moved out and that was all the thanks we got for what we had done for them. As a matter of interest, the mill that had been made into a barracks at Bonhill I was informed by uncle George after the war was one of the mills owned by the company he worked for when he lived in Glasgow at Rutherglen and he knew the mill quite well.

I was at Bonhill for six weeks (March, April 1941) being initiated into all things relative to the Royal Artillery but I did manage a couple of trips into Glasgow once the railway line had been reopened going to Queen's Playhouse and dancing to Harry Roy and his band and to the Mecca ballroom in Sauchiehall Street. Having apparently proved satisfactory I was then posted with others to Catterick camp to the Royal Artillery OCTU there. To get there we went from Glasgow to Edinburgh where we stopped overnight. A very kind WVS lady at the railway station directed us to a WVS dormitory they had rigged up on Princes Street where you could get bed and breakfast for about a shilling and we then went on the town and two or three of us booked at the main theatre (I forget its name now) in Edinburgh for the variety show. At the interval we nipped out of the theatre to a pub opposite and decided we would sample chasers: that is you have a glass of whiskey and then you drain the dregs into a pint of beer and knock back the pint. Well we had never had this before and we had a couple of these during the interval very quickly, went

back to our seats and the main attraction on the bill was Evelyn May who was a very famous singer and quite a star in those days. When she started singing we joined in - needless to say we were asked to leave. The next morning we proceeded to Catterick camp and to the Royal Artillery OCTU and from then on I didn't have a very happy spell there. To begin with I was there under protest and also I didn't like being in a permanent barracks having been with a field unit all my service to that date and the whole attitude of the place was most restrictive. Wherever you went and whatever you were doing there were officers there with little black books in which they kept making notes so whatever you were doing you were never quite sure whether some adverse remarks about you were being put into the black book. These people were known as the Gestapo. The only recreation we had was an occasional visit to Richmond and you weren't supposed to be seen talking to other ranks again you might be put down in a little black book. You weren't allowed to go into an ordinary pub you had to use the bars of two hotels only. You were restricted to those and to the Catterick Bridge House hotel if you could get that far out. From the word go you might be doing gun drill, or at a law lecture or something and an orderly would come from the battery office and ask for a certain cadet to report of the adjutant and when you got back to your barrack room all his kit had gone and so had he and you never even had chance to say cheerio. Presumably he had proved unsatisfactory. This went on all the time I was there until eventually we were reduced after about two months to about two thirds of the number that we originally started on the course. I worked hard and swatted hard and did my best to make a go of it.

About the only amusing thing I can remember about that place was on adjutant's parade on one occasion, this took place after the midday meal every day, where the whole of the OCTU turned out the battery sergeant major reported to the adjutant "*all present and correct Sir*". Well, on this occasion the battery sergeant major who was a very stiff upright old soldier type with waxed moustache must have had a pint or two of beer at lunchtime in the sergeants mess and he had fallen asleep and someone had given him a dig when the adjutants parade was due and

he had come chasing out on the parade. As he marched towards the adjutant in full view of everybody normally his feet would go bang bang bang with his army boots but on this occasion learned there wasn't a sound. He reported "*all present and correct Sir*" about turned and marched back again without a sound and much the amusement of the whole parade he had carpet slippers on. Apparently he had come dashing out and forgotten he hadn't put his boots back on! One of the cadets on my course was a very intelligent chap who was jewish and his sole object in life he told us was to kill Germans. He had a problem with his drill; his arms and legs were never properly coordinated so when he about turned his left leg and his left arm came out together and he sort of waddled. We used to spend hours trying to train him to about turn properly. About a couple of years later I read in the paper that this chap, who was then a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery, was awarded the military Cross in North Africa for opposing an attack by German tanks by firing at them with his battery over open sights (that is direct at the tanks) so he got his wish to kill Germans.

I received a telegram from your grandfather telling me that your grandmother had died and I went along to the adjutant and showed him the telegram and to give the chap his due he made every effort to accommodate me and arranged transport for me to go to the railway station. He gave me a travel warrant and a leave pass for 72 hours and I dashed off straightaway back to Manchester. After I got back to the OCTU I was called for by the adjutant who informed me that because I lost 72 hours I would be put back a fortnight to the following course. Well on top of your grandmother dying and my general unhappiness of the place and the fact that I would lose all my pals that I had made there I went away and thought about this and then I asked to see the adjutant and told him that if he insisted on me going back a fortnight I would much rather return to my unit. This causes a certain amount of consternation because I don't think anybody had ever told them more or less what they can do with their OCTU. It was usually the other way round and they saw anybody off they didn't like. The next thing that happened is that I was sent for by commandant, a full Colonel, who did his best to persuade me to stay.

He felt because of the upset of losing your grandmother letter I wasn't thinking straight. However I insisted and after further argument off I went back home. When your grandfather saw me he looked at me, I had only been 2 or 3 days away, and said "*you haven't packed it in have you?*" So I said "yes" and his remark was "*what am I going to tell the chaps at work?*" I suppose he had been boasting to them that his lad was going to be an officer and he would feel a bit of a fool if his lad had packed it in. What upset me of course is the fact that he never bothered to asked me why or how I felt about it. He was alright afterwards when I had explained everything but I was a bit put off to begin with. From then on I was a bit in Limbo. I went to the Chorlton Road barracks from which I had started to draw pay but otherwise I was just at a loose end. After about a fortnight I get instructions together with a travel warrant to report for interview to Halifax in Yorkshire so I duly toddled off there. I was interviewed by a major in the RASC in a big mill at the opposite end of the town to the railway station who was rather rude to me and wanted to know what the devil I was playing at. What did I want and why could I not make my mind up and this went on quite a while and I got rather angry. I was getting rather fed up being pushed around by all and sundry so I asked him to look at my papers and he would see from my original form that my first choice of regiment was RASC and that I had been forced to put RAOC and RA by the adjutant at my unit and when I was posted to the RA pre-OCTU I had protested vehemently about it but had been told I must go. I had only ever wished to be an RASC officer and if I couldn't be an RASC officer I didn't want to be an officer at all. From then on he became much more pleasant and friendly and eventually told me to go back home and he would get in touch with me. After about a week or 10 days I got orders to report back to my unit in my previous rank as Cpl and they were still at Stisted in Essex. Most of the chaps were quite amiable about it. They didn't take too much Mickey out of me and the officers too but there was one officer, the bloke who had left us to it to find our own way to the coast and Dunkirk, who was extremely unpleasant. As far as I was concerned he wasn't an officer anyhow so it didn't matter.

CHAPTER 3

RASC OFFICER CADET TRAINING UNIT (OCTU 202, 1941-1942)

I was a bit peeved to find out two chaps who had their interview at Command Board long after I did had been posted to an RASC OCTU which was all I had wanted from the beginning. So I settled back into my old routine doing my job and tried to put the past few months of misery behind me. After three or four weeks I suddenly got a posting to the RASC pre-OCTU out of the blue and this was at Halifax in the very place where I had been interviewed by the major who had presumably given me a good report. So off I set for Halifax, spent six weeks there training - quite happy now. After six weeks the course went down to Clifton College in Bristol where the RASC OCTU was and from then on I was in my element (Fig. 7). This was just what I had wanted and I had got all the experience of the previous OCTU. The whole attitude and feeling of the place was totally different from Catterick. It was in civilised surroundings instead of being out in the wilds. It was in the college rather than in barracks and all the permanent staff seemed very anxious to make sure that you actually passed and became an officer so that I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Clifton. It was hard work with plenty of swotting and not a great deal of time off. I managed to get to the theatre occasionally on a Saturday when I wasn't on duty. I went to Bath on two or three occasions to visit aunt Annette. I climbed the Clifton Gorge on many occasions first in PT kit, graduating slowly but surely until I planned it in full battle orders steel helmet and rifle. We had seven days leave to be home over Christmas and New Year (Christmas 1941). In the new year 1942 we did exercises in the area just behind Portishead in the Gordano valley and the villages. We learnt to motorcycle and to drive three ton lorries. We motorcycled out to the Cheddar Gorge where we had char and a wad (tea and cake). I never got to the coast at Portishead or Clevedon the nearest I got was Avonmouth if you can call that the coast.

One rather hair raising experience occurred when I was out learning to drive a 3 ton lorry. We were in convoy and it was winter of course and the roads were very icy. We were up in the Mendips near Midsomer Norton when coming down a hill the vehicle got out of control. There was another cadet just in front of the vehicle riding a motorbike very gingerly with his feet on the ground and the lorry just ran away and the instructor shouted "*for god's sake don't touch the brakes*" and the only way I could avoid hitting the motorcycle was by running into the side of the road, bouncing off into the opposite side and I kept doing this until we got onto level ground and everything was OK.

As cadets we had the courtesy title of Mr so that all the NCOs and officers always referred to us as Mr Smith etc. Somehow or other the instructors always seemed to make the Mr sound like an insult. My fellow cadets on the course were a mixed bunch but on the whole a very decent crowd and we all got on very well together and helped each other. There was one chap who spoke normal, well-educated english but in fact he had come from Brazil. He belonged to an anglo-brazilian family who had gone out there generations ago retained their British habits and customs and when the war broke out this chap, at his own expense, made his way to England and joined up although he could have stayed in Brazil and safety. When we were first learning to motorcycle we started off around the paths on Clifton Downs, well, one of our course had been in the Military Police and was an experienced motorcyclist and started to show off while we learners were gingerly going around and he was going much too fast when he ran off the path, hit the railings overlooking the Avon Gorge disappeared over the top and both he and the motorcycle were write-offs. We were therefore one cadet short on the course. As you know Bristol had been heavily blitzed and by the time I got there quite a large part of the centre had been destroyed but Bobby's departmental store survived and some of us, if we had the Saturday afternoon off, would go down there for afternoon tea and listen to the music played by an orchestra consisting of three rather elderly ladies. On each table, there was a numbered list of musical items and you could send, via the waitress, a message over to the violinist and give the

table number and the number of the musical item you requested. Eventually it would come to your turn and the violinist would bow to your table and then play your selection. When we went to the theatre and bought a programme, at the bottom of the programme there would be a note saying that all the members of the cast were either too old or were medically unfit for active service and I suppose that was to ensure that if any of the cast were young men they wouldn't get the bird from the audience.

After four months we were all subjected to a variety of tests and examinations. We had to pass foot drill, rifle drill, weapon training, stripping down Bren guns and reassembling, motorcycle tests, driving tests, military law, administration, they seemed to go on for ever! Those who passed when then classed as senior cadets and allowed to wear a collar and tie and carry a cane and were moved from the main college to a smaller building some distance away where you spent the final month fully concentrating on the technical side of vehicles.

Also in this final month, we were measured for a uniform and had to go to tailors who had taken over houses close to the college and they represented most of the big London tailors like Moss Bros. You had to go along to the tailor you had chosen with the advice of your course officer, a captain in the RASC, and be duly measured. You had four fittings and then on the fifth fitting your course commander came along and checked that he was satisfied they made a good job of it. If he wasn't, he would tell them to make whatever adjustments were necessary and eventually you collected all your kit which consisted of a peaked hat, forage cap, a greatcoat, service dress, Sam Brown, two shirts and collars, two ties, khaki socks, brown boots, brown shoes and all the insignia that is pips and badges and so on. The whole of this has had to be supplied within a budget, I forget the amount now, but if you went beyond that budget you had to fund the difference yourself.

CHAPTER 4

A COMMISSIONED OFFICER (1942)

Eventually the great day arrived when you were gazetted and took the King's commission (*Lt FA Hopley 229300*). There was no elaborate Passing Out Parade such as in peacetime where the adjutant rides up the steps on a white horse as in Sandhurst. In wartime OCTUs were really like big sausage machines that had to turn out well trained officers in a few months when it took a couple of years in peacetime. All that happened was that you were congratulated by the commandant, you assumed your second lieutenant's uniform, all the permanent staff made a point of coming to congratulate you. They would salute you then shake hands and call you Sir. We were then transported with all our kit, including all our other ranks kit, to Temple Meads station when we caught various trains to different parts of the country for seven days home leave. The train I got into with one or two others in the compartment was a lieutenant colonel who beamed on us very pleasantly and so obviously from our appearance he asked if we had just been commissioned which we said yes. He proved to be a very pleasant and informal sort of chap who chatted with us and that was the first time we realised we had joined the club. Added to the fact of course we were travelling in a first-class compartment - very different from the cattle truck in which I had travelled from Cherbourg to Laval in early 1940. Incidentally I had been posted to 125 Brigade company RASC of the 9th Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division. That was a regular division and it so happened that the top three of the course, I came second, were posted to this division. Later of course it became an assault division so perhaps they wanted the top people from the course to strengthen their team. After the leave, a few of us had agreed to stay at the Euston Hotel by Euston station and we had an evening in London, enjoying a few drinks and next morning we moved over to Waterloo station, proceeded to Slough station where the three of us were picked up by three different cars because we are going to 3 different companies. I was taken to Stoke Poges where Gray's elegy was written and I joined my company.

They were in a big house in its own grounds. The house was fairly modern, it wasn't a stately home but it was well appointed and I had a room with a bathroom attached and the bath was sunken. The people in the mess were quite a decent crowd as far as I could make out. The OC, Major Yapp, had been catering adviser to the Metropolitan police and the others had various jobs. One was a solicitor and the workshops officer, Capt Owen, had been at Fords. One had been a schoolmaster in Stow in the Wold and the Padre, who was in his 40s, was the rector for some of the Gordano Valley churches. He had been a young soldier towards the end of the first war and served in the trenches so he knew all about warfare and he had the two service ribbons up Mutt and Jeff. Of course in the Mess there was a certain amount of bad language and if anybody swore they always said "*sorry padre*". We also played tennis on a court by this house. We had borrowed tennis rackets and balls from neighbours and he was a very keen tennis player and when he got really excited he would drop the odd curse word himself and then be covered in utter confusion at his wickedness. Unfortunately after a couple of months he had to leave the unit because of his age and he was replaced by a younger man who was a bit of a twit but more about that older padre later.

When I arrived I handed over all my other ranks webbing and equipment to the CQMS and he requisitioned officers webbing equipment, pistol and camp kit which I eventually received. They also asked about battledress and of course I only had the battledress I had been wearing at OCTU so he said we will soon fix you up with a new one and I got new boots and everything that other ranks had that officers could wear but you are supposed to pay for those. He just laughed when I asked how much I would have to pay. I also acquired a batman, Fraser, who had been a post office driver in Stoke-on-Trent but in his youth he been a boy soldier and then a young regular soldier who had served on the North West Frontier fighting the Afghans. He was quite a bit older than me but he had been called up as a regular army reservist at the beginning of the war. He stayed with me through whatever moves and units I went to and he was with me right up to his demob in late 1945.

He was a bit of an old woman at times but he looked after me like a mother and one of the funny things about him was that he would never actually touch me. To him, officers were different flesh, different beings from other ranks and if I had been out on the beer for example and was sleeping heavily in the morning he would just bring me a mug of tea and whisper in my ear "*time to get up Sir*" and of course sometimes he had some difficulty waking me up. When I told him he ought to give me a good shaking of course he was quite appalled at the idea of shaking an officer and could never bring himself to do it.

Fortunately for me I managed to make a reasonably good start with the unit. One of the soldiers had had a terrific row with an NCO and in protest he had climbed up a tree and wouldn't come down. Despite everybody's effort he stayed up there and then the NCO sent for me and after a certain amount of argy-bargy he agreed to come down. He was then put on a fizzer (a charge) and he got 14 days CB (confined to barracks). I had been placed in command of a transport platoon which consisted of 30 three ton Bedford lorries, a water truck and a 15cwt truck. When I first carried out an inspection of the sleeping huts there was a rather miserable looking chap there who was hut orderly so, trying to get to know all my men, I asked him his name and where he came from. He said Manchester and I told him I came from Manchester too and started having a chat with him and asked him how he was getting on. He said he was fed up to the back teeth and all he wanted to do was to go back home to his wife and family and I suppose that attitude had made him permanent hut orderly. I then asked him what his job was in civvie street and he said he was a motor mechanic. I couldn't believe this, here we were in a transport unit crying out for skilled men and all he was doing was sweeping out huts. I pointed out to him that everybody pretty well was in the same boat that we had all been called up or joined up and they all wanted eventually to go home to their wives and families or girlfriends but there was a war on and we all had to muck in. The only way we could do that was to do the job we are best suited for and he ought to remember that he would get trade pay so he would get better pay in the workshops also he would be doing the same job as in civvie street so

keeping his hand in for when he was demobbed. I asked him if he had any objection to me mentioning the matter to the workshops officer and perhaps have an interview with him and in a very matter-of-fact tone of voice he said "*well if you want to sir*". So, at lunch that day I said to Ronnie Owen the captain in the workshops that I had got a chap who is doing hut orderly who is a qualified motor mechanic. Of course Ronnie's face lit up and he said "*What*". I explained that he had served his apprenticeship and spent a good few years as a motor mechanic and asked "*would he be any use to you*"? He said "*send him straightaway*" and what happened eventually, to cut a long story short, was that this fellow became one of their best chaps and in a very short time he was a full corporal and then promoted to sergeant and when I left the unit eventually he was a staff sergeant. He had changed from being a miserable downtrodden chap to a really first-class soldier. The major used to complain to me that my car got far better attention than his did. This Mancunian also later had his wife and family to stay with him nearby and insisted that I met them was introduced to them.

We had a supply depot at Gerrards Cross a few miles up the road and the local police got in touch with us to say that they suspected that army supplies were getting into the hands of some of the local people. I went along with a police inspector and a warrant and we searched one or two places including the local pub where we found a great chunk of beef tucked away in a coal scuttle. The result of this investigation was that the person responsible in our unit was a supply staff sergeant and he was promptly placed under close arrest. The problem was that according to the OC only people of equal or senior rank could act as guards to him. There were only the CSM, the quartermaster sergeant and two staff sergeant from the workshops who could act as guards and this put quite a strain on them. They brought over the RSM from divisional headquarters to ease the situation but I had something stirring in my mind that I'd read something in KRRs (Kings Rules and Regulations) when I was swatting at OCTU so I went in the orderly room and looked at the KRRs and browsed through them until I found a section that said that in the event of people of the same rank or senior rank not being available then

NCOs of a lower rank could act as guards. The OC of course was delighted with this because that meant he could use sergeants to ease the situation somewhat. The staff sergeant involved in this food racket was court-martialled and reduced to the ranks and sentenced to a year in the civilian jail.

Another incident I got mixed up in about this time was in respect of an orderly room clerk, he was about 21 and came from the Forest of Dean. He had apparently been on leave and gone to a dance in Cinderford, parked his car and the police had checked the car and found that it had not been immobilised. During the war you must never leave a vehicle unattended that could be taken and driven by enemy parachutists or 5th columnists. To immobilise you had to remove the rotor arm and he had failed to do this and therefore had committed a crime. He got a summons and the OC asked me to go along with this lad in my car with Fraser driving to the local courts at Cinderford and act as guardian for the boy. So off we set one morning and drove all the way from Stoke Poges to Cinderford where I attended the local court with the lad and it was really a bit like a Will Hay comedy. The court consisted of three lay magistrates, the senior one appeared to be a rather old retired Colonel with a military moustache, there was an old battleaxe of a lady who looked like a retired headmistress and the third one was a man who looked about a hundred who was very deaf and everything that was said in the court had to be repeated very loudly for his benefit. The clerk to the court was a tiny little chap with a face like parchment and half moon spectacles. Well the proceedings carried on, a number of people came for very minor offences, the theft of a chicken or something like that, and then the lad's case came up and he was charged as I stated and then the Clerk to the court informed the magistrates that the defendant's officer was present. The old colonel chap asked me to stand up and to give the court a report on the lad's character. I hadn't expected to be landed with that sort of a task as I had merely gone along as a spectator so I duly stood up and said what a fine chap he was, an excellent soldier, marvellous conduct, no complaints at all. The fact was of course I hardly knew the lad and had only spoken him to about once because I had only recently joined the unit. The three

magistrates then had a confab which everybody could hear because they had to shout for the old chap to hear. The senior magistrate said that in view of the youth of the defendant and his previous good record and the remarks of his officer the case would be dismissed. When we left the court we were met by his father who invited us to lunch at his farm and when we arrived there it turned out to be a lovely country house rather than a farm and obviously the chap was very wealthy. He gave us a slap up lunch and in view of the rationing it was really quite remarkable. Then off we set back to Stoke Poges. The only thought I had was what a waste of time and above all a waste of valuable petrol in wartime.

One of the officers in the mess was a little religiously inclined and had been organist at his own local church in civilian life and he asked me if I would like to join him in a visit to Windsor Castle to a service at St George's Chapel. So one Sunday afternoon we hopped on a bus outside the location - it was only 4d (four pence) to Windsor. It passed through Slough and Eton and over the bridge into Windsor. We walked up the approach to the castle and there was a guard outside and he popped out of the box and gave us a butt salute and then although he was in khaki not in bearskin and the red tunic it gave me a bit of a thrill because I had only recently been commissioned and to see this guard giving a salute to me as an officer when only a few years ago as a schoolboy I had stood outside Buckingham Palace and seen these huge guardsmen marching up and down. It was quite a moment. Another thing that gave me a kick was when one or two of us, when we had time off, would go down to Maidenhead and get a punt out and punt up and down on the Thames and then go and have afternoon tea at Skindles I think it was called, a famous place that all the society people used to go to. We also went on a three-day exercise which took place in the Berkshire Downs, the area I had been in just before I went to France in 1940. Although I didn't get to Ashdown House I went to Newbury and Foxfield, Hungerford, Lambourn and all around there. Of course the country was very much different in appearance as it was summer as compared with when I was there before when it was thick in snow and ice. Some bright spark at Brigade Headquarters had decided that it was a good idea for a

number of infantry soldiers to learn the rudiments of driving a three ton lorry. The idea being that in the event of the regular drivers of the infantry vehicles being incapacitated in any way on active service there would be a number of soldiers who could, at a pinch, takeover driving on a temporary basis. I set up a sort of driving school picking the best drivers to act as instructors and three sergeants and me to test the infantrymen at the end of their short course. So what happened was about a dozen of the soldiers from each of the three infantry battalions in the brigade would come for a week at a time and the driving instructors would take them out on the road and teach them to drive. Obviously in a week they wouldn't be absolutely perfect drivers but they would have a jolly good idea of how to start a vehicle up and drive it and manoeuvre it. Sufficient for the purposes intended. Some of the infantrymen turned out to be really very good and others were quite appalling and when I took some of them out on test round Chalfont St Giles and Amersham and places like that I was extremely glad to get back in one piece.

CHAPTER 5

THE FIELD AMBULANCE (1942-1943)

After some three months with the brigade company the OC told me that he was sending me to take over the transport section of the brigade field ambulance. At first I thought he was trying to get rid of me but he assured me that the reason was because he thought that I would do very well running my own show and that I would get on splendidly with the medics. So off I went, they were stationed 2 or 3 miles from Gerrards Cross and I took over from the chap who was running it who happened to be a Scotsman from Clydebank of all places who was very interested to hear my experiences in the Blitz. From then on I had some 11 months with the field ambulance which I think probably was the happiest and the most enjoyable part of the time I spent in the army. The CO and the second-in-command were regular soldiers and there were more soldiers than doctors. All the officers apart

from the lieutenant quartermaster were GPs who had been in the Terriers or in the reserves and had been called up and they were not very military inclined and one of their joys was the fact that they could go out off duty and have a few pints in the local which would have been frowned upon in the days when they were back home as general practitioners. In addition there was a dental officer Jimmy Hutton. I had, as my second-in-command, the company sergeant major who was also a regular soldier and some NCOs and men, about 90 in number, and we were responsible for all the ambulances and other vehicles and the motorcycles and naturally we worked in very close conjunction with the medical people.

I ran my own show completely. I had my own orderly rooms and I had a certain power of punishment that is to inflict CP (Close Protection) on some of the more recalcitrant members of the platoon and paid out my own men. This suited me marvellously. Less than a week after joining the field ambulance two things happened, first the division instead of being an infantry division was classed as an assault division that meant they had to go into the beaches and for that of course there had to be there a lot of training with landing craft so that the second thing that happened was that we had orders to move to the Isle of Wight. Well the Isle of Wight is quite a small island and only a limited number of vehicles from the unit were allowed to go onto the island for training purposes and the rest had to remain on the mainland. Some of my vehicles went over to the Isle of Wight and for some reason some were sent to the suburbs of Bournemouth and the others into woods near Romsey. I found out later that these woods form part of the estate of Broadlands which was the home of Lord Mountbatten. The Isle of Wight in those days was what was known as a restricted area. To get into it you had to have to have official passes and any unauthorised person was not allowed to board the ferries. You couldn't get onto the beaches on the southern side of the island (the channel side) because the beaches were mined and Dannett wired and other forms of protection against an invasion force but the northern side of the island (the side facing the Solent) was free because at each end of the Solent there were antisubmarine nets. We were stationed in a big house at East Cowes overlooking

the Solent and it really was a wonderful situation where we sat for our evening meal and the house had big picture windows you could look out whilst you were eating and see the sun beginning to set over the New Forest. We could walk down the slope and the cliffs to the beach just below and go swimming.

We trained with the very first (Mark 1) landing craft tank (LCT) off the beach just near where they have the gun that sets off the yacht racing at Cowes. On one occasion a lone Messerschmitt had a go at us, cheeky devil, but didn't do any damage. We embarked on a three-day exercise which started at Totland Bay and worked across the island to Shanklin and Ventnor and that area and the first night we stopped at Totland Bay and just down the road from where we were parked was a military hospital. Because the Medical Officers (MOs) of our unit made contact with the hospital the officers were invited to spend the night in the hospital in little private wards in great comfort in proper beds. In the morning nurses brought us cups of tea to waken us up. This was a very gentlemanly way to start an exercise. Each Friday I would draw money from the company office and motorbike down from East Cowes cross the Medina River by ferry to Cowes and then head off for Yarmouth, where I could get the ferry to Lymington and then take the road to New Milton, Christchurch to the outskirts of Bournemouth. I would pay the men who were there, have some grub with them and then go through the New Forest via Lyndhurst to Romsey where I would pay the men at Romsey and have some tea with them. Then carry on down through Southampton to the docks, get the ferry to Cowes, cross to East Cowes in nice time for dinner at night. It was July at the time and it was particularly nice weather so that was a pleasant way of spending a day.

At the end of the month all the landing craft were suddenly withdrawn and in effect we were left stranded on the Isle of Wight. We found out later that the reason for the withdrawal of the landing craft was that they were to be used in the assaults on Dieppe. So what happened then was that the three ferries plying between Portsmouth and Ryde, Southampton and Cowes and Lymington and Yarmouth

were withdrawn from normal service and they all went to Yarmouth and we took our vehicles off using these three ferries. On one particular day I must have gone from Yarmouth to Lymington and back again about half a dozen times. Our next location was at Bassett Wood on the northern outskirts of Southampton. This was quite a nice large house and it was next door to a market garden that supplied us with fresh vegetables and fruits and it was the first time I had ever sampled asparagus. Shortly after settling in there the CO, Lt Col Black, was posted to Staff College, at Camberley, and we got a new CO who turned out to be an ex commando. He was very nervous about taking over because apparently only about three months before he been a captain, then been made a major and was now promoted Lieutenant-Colonel. He had been with a commando unit so that his knowledge of a field ambulance was nil and when he arrived he threw himself on our mercy and asked us to give him all the help that we could so that he could do the job properly. He turned out to be a smashing chap I got on with him extremely well and from then on the only real fly in the ointment had been removed with the departure of Lt Col Black. In civvie street the new colonel had been police surgeon to the Hastings police, he was a very keen yachtsman and in the army, as I said, he was a commando and had taken part in a number of commando raids including the Lofoten Islands on the Norwegian coast near the arctic circle.

Southampton proved to be a very pleasant place to be stationed. When we had a free evening we would go into the town and there were a number of nice hotels and pubs to visit. There was one hotel, I think it was called the Atlantic, but whatever the name, one floor had been completely furnished with all the trappings from the original Mauritania and they more or less reproduced part of the Mauritania in this room and they had a lovely civic hall where they had dances occasionally. One pub we used to go to which wasn't all that far from where we were stationed was right in the middle of Southampton common. It was a free house so you had a good choice of beers. We did various exercises in the New Forest and slept underneath the trees and I got quite an affection for the New Forest as a result. Eventually we got back some landing craft and we trained with these craft at Stokes Bay which is

just at the back of Gosport. Then for the first time I became aware of a gentleman now known as Monty - Field Marshal Montgomery - who at the time was a general in command of Southern Command. Nobody had heard of him of course as far as the public were concerned, but he got the bright idea that all non-foot troops that is all those who moved about the place in transport instead of on their feet should do a seven day route march to get them fit. This applied to us as well and I went out with one of the captains in the RAMC (Capt Branwell) to recce a route of approximately 120 miles and to make arrangements to stop at various places for the night and to obtain accommodation for the troops and if possible to lay on some sort of entertainment. Nobody had said that we shouldn't enjoy this so we set out with the intention of making this a very pleasant experience. We weren't going out as a unit of course as there would have been far too many men trudging along the road so we split into parties and I was to go on the route that we had chosen with this RAMC officer and about 40 men. Our first night we decided would be at Stockbridge, that's a rather pleasant little town on the River Test which is mainly given over to fishing. Just outside Stockbridge this RAMC officer had an uncle and we visited him, He had a very nice house in about an acre of land. An old bachelor with a housekeeper and despite rationing he invited us to lunch which proved to be quite a pleasant one. Just to digress, when I moved into my flat in 1964 in Stratford upon Avon, for some years I had seen a chap about the town who I felt sure I recognised but couldn't make out whether I really knew him. His secretary moved into one of the other flats and one day shortly after she said to me that this gentleman thought he knew me. This set my mind ticking over and a couple of nights afterwards whilst lying in bed it suddenly dawned on me this was the chap who had been with me on the route march, the RAMC captain who was now the local medical officer of health for Stratford and District. After that we met and still meet quite often and chat about old times. He was a bigwig in St John's ambulance and only a couple years ago although he was retired he was awarded the OBE for services to the community.

To get back to the route march, we eventually set off having sent a 3 ton lorry ahead, with a cook and a spare bod, which was loaded with cooking equipment, food and the men's bedding and equipment. This we did each day and the lorry would go to whatever our destination was and have a hot meal ready for when we arrived. When we left in the morning they would make sandwiches for us and haversack rations to take and then go on to the next location. We marched quite steadily taking it very easily. It was lovely weather, September, with a ten minute break in the hour when they could have a smoke and a sit down. At lunch time we would find a pub and the men would sit outside eating their haversack rations and having a pint of beer and we would eventually get to our destination where we had already arranged entertainment and accommodation for the lads. Capt Branwell, and I would make for the nearest decent hotel and have a nice meal.

Some of the places we stopped at were Stockbridge, Basingstoke, Hope Basing, Bishops Waltham and after seven days we eventually got back to Bassett Wood in Southampton. The men then put in a petition asking if they could do it again sometime as they had enjoyed it so much that they wanted another go. All in all it had proved a great success when originally we had objected very strongly to the idea of it. Not long afterwards we were freed from the fear of any of Monty's peculiar ideas because he was posted out to the middle east to take over the Eighth Army and he then became a very well known figure. In early October we were on the move again. We left Bassett Wood in the early evening and travelled through the night and about 6.30 to 7 am we found ourselves on the coast road at Sandgate just outside Folkestone where we stopped for a while. The mist was beginning to clear and all of a sudden out of the mist appeared a Messerschmitt fighter plane which spotted our convoy and had a go at us. Fortunately he was well wide of the target and as he veered, over either to have another go at us or to clear off to France, out of the clouds came a couple of Spitfires who as soon as you could say "*Adolf Hitler*" shot him into the sea amidst the cheers of the assembled multitude.

For two or three weeks we were in Shorncliffe Barracks and then we moved into Folkestone proper to the Metropole hotel which was a very large four or five-star hotel but which had been completely vacated and was absolutely empty. It was a very well-known landmark particularly from out at sea because the top of the hotel was a big dome of copper which had gone green in the sea air. We only had a small portion of it and the rest was completely empty. Floor upon floor of empty bedrooms. We had a very nice room for a mess. It overlooked the sea and had a balcony which you could sit out on and fortunately for us it turned out to be very mild winter. I remember only once having to wear a greatcoat. The Field Ambulance acted as a CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) and the whole area, I don't know how far it stretched, was a restricted area because it was so close to France. Although people could come and go they couldn't reside in the area unless they had been there before the war or had moved in soon after the war began. The result was that a lot of the supply of food et cetera was based on the pre-war population, but probably taking into account holidaymakers, so that everything was very plentiful. For my sins I had been elected PMC (President of the Mess Committee) and I was landed with the job of running the mess, making sure everybody pay their subs each week, and that additional food was bought to supplement the army rations. I kept an eye on the catering staff and the mess servants and, most important of all, I ensured that there was no shortage of booze in the mess. I had to get our supplies of beer and whiskey and gin and anything else that was going and made contact with Mackeson's brewery at Hythe, just along the coast. We had been used to being strictly rationed, particularly for whiskey and gin at Southampton and other places, but when I went along to Mackeson's I saw the chappie there and ordered beer for the sergeant's and officer's messes and the sergeants were also entitled to rations of whiskey and gin so I asked him what the ration was. He said "well as much as you can afford. You can have a crate of each if you like." That's how it was all the time we were in Folkestone, we could get as much whiskey and gin as we wanted.

Folkestone, like Dover was subjected to shelling from the French coast. They had their long-range guns over there just as our guns used to fire on them. The warning of impending shellfire was a sort of bird warbling sound quite different from the ordinary air raid siren and when that happened, if we had nothing else to do, we would go and sit on the balcony and watch the fireworks. It was all rather comical in a way because the guns on each side were under observation from the opposing side so that they there were well aware of when any shelling was to come because they would see the 'moon' around the guns. As you sat there you would see a flash on the French coast which was quite visible from where we were and then you would hear a bang and then a whistling sound as the shell came over. Then you would see a flash somewhere in Folkestone harbour area and then hear another bang. Then our guns would fire and it would be reversed: a flash then a bang then hear the shell going away from us then a flash on the French coast and then another bang. They would keep this up for perhaps for half an hour. I suppose they were pretty big shells so rather expensive and then as though at a prearranged signal they would each stop firing.

Another pastime of ours was watching shipping being bombed out in the channel. There was always something going on in that area. From a social point of view we used to arrange little dances in the ballroom of the hotel, we didn't have an orchestra but we had a gramophone, and on a Saturday afternoon, if we were free, some of us including the CO would go down to Bobby's where they had tea dances and we would invite any of the young ladies there who were dancing with us to join us over at the Metropole hotel in the evening for our little dance. After the tea dance we would go and have a drink in the hotel opposite and we would go and choose a nice steak which was on display down in the Grill room and round about 7.00 o'clock they would let us know and we would go and have a nice grilled steak with all the trimmings. By this time I had become a full lieutenant. Whereas previously it took 18 months to be promoted from 2nd lieutenant to full lieutenant (substantive). Fortunately for me they had reduced the period to 6 months so that by the October I had completed six months in the rank of 2nd lieutenant.

The beaches along the coasts were all heavily mined with obstacles placed on them and barbed wire entanglements so they weren't accessible to the public and you couldn't go swimming. We were told after dark to keep away from coast roads because there was always a risk that a German raiding party might pick you up and take you across to the other side of the channel so they could find out what units were facing them across the channel. It was rumoured that this had happened and that some soldiers had been taken away after a night on the beer and spent the rest of the war in enemy hands. In the January (1943) we had an exercise which covered parts of Surrey, Sussex and Kent where we fought the enemy, who in this case was the Canadian Army. Whilst on this exercise I began to feel rather groggy and poorly and when we got back to Folkestone we were having a post-mortem on the day after we got back discussing what we had learned on the exercise and the CO spotted me looking very groggy and obviously not fit to take part in the discussion. He told me to go to bed. After the conference five of the blighters, all MOs, came along and checked me over and I had got tonsillitis. It was the first time I had really been ill in the army, apart from the effects of various inoculations and vaccinations and an occasional cold, and I remained in bed for five days and they couldn't get my temperature down and at the end of the five days apparently being a CCS they were restricted to how long they could hold a patient and much to my annoyance and indignation I was carted off in one of my ambulances to Leeds Castle just outside Maidstone which was an officer's hospital. It been converted from a stately home. They had awful difficulty in getting the ambulance once it had crossed the bridge over the moat through the gateway into the castle itself. I was there several days and began to feel a lot better and I managed to go out to Maidstone just for a bit of a change. Officers were supposed to put a blue band round their left arm to indicate that they were hospital patients and other ranks wore the old-fashioned blue uniform, jacket and trousers, white shirt and red tie. This was all a hangover from the First World War and we never knew quite what the object was other than to ensure they weren't allowed to drink in pubs and they were known to be either wounded or patients of some sort. Well I then found out

that after seven days away from the unit you might be posted away from your unit to another one and if you held a temporary or acting rank of any sort then you would lose that because that went with the job you were doing. Although this didn't apply to me I didn't fancy being carted off to a strange unit so I immediately phoned up Folkestone asked them to get in touch with Fraser and tell him to come and get me. I hightailed it back to Folkestone as fast as I could. Leeds Castle, when I was there, would have been very different from now. There were no fixtures and fittings in the place. It had been stripped bare and kitted out with hospital beds and other hospital equipment. The walls were covered with boards to stop any damage to the panelling. It used to belong to Miss Dorothy Padgett and she was a very wealthy woman, well known as a racehorse owner but she died some years ago and I'm not sure who owns it now.

I went on a number of courses, three I can recollect, during this period. The first one was to Norwich which had recently been blitzed rather heavily on what they called Baedeker raids. Baedeker was a travel guide issued by the Germans. We apparently had bombed Dresden and almost destroyed it, a beautiful mediaeval city, and in retaliation the Germans bombed non-military cities like Bath and Norwich because they were tourist centres. This first course was on aircraft recognition and camouflage which I enjoyed very much. It was only 5 days and the only thing I can think I can remember about Norwich was a pub called the Samson and Delilah with an enormously long bar. The next course was in Mytchett in Hampshire close to Aldershot. This was a field hygiene course and again only five days long. The best part of this course was that on a couple of occasions in the evening we managed to get into London and do a show and have a few drinks. The best course from my point of view was in Southend-on-Sea. This was an RASC supply offices course that lasted three weeks and as I had been very much concerned with supplies with the 42nd Div in France and Belgium and had studied it at OCTU, it really was a bit of a doddle which meant that I didn't have to do much swatting and I could concentrate on enjoying the place I was in. It wasn't too bad in Southend and we did get plenty of trips into London to do shows. On the course,

we went to a slaughterhouse which wasn't very pleasant watching pigs being killed and we went to Ascot. The racecourse had been turned into a command supply depot and we went along there one day to see how it operated and naturally on the way back we stopped off for a few hours in London. I managed to get a distinction on this course so that the whole trip proved to be very satisfactory.

In March 1943 we were equipped with new vehicles and motorcycles and to get these I had to go over large parts of the south of England as far north as Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire and bring them back to Folkestone. On one occasion going through East Grinstead with 20 vehicles behind me I only had a small scale map. There were no signposts in those days because during the invasion scare of 1940 all signposts were taken down so they wouldn't be of any help to possible invasion forces or parachutists or 5th columnists. As I proceeded along the main street I had to make a left turn and I came to what I thought was the road I required, turned left and finished up in the car park of the local cinema. Fortunately it was empty so I just drove around the park, all the vehicles followed me and there were quite a few rude remarks as they did. I formed them all up in the car park and then drove out again, turned left and fortunately found the correct turning. On another occasion, this time I was just travelling in my car with Fraser driving and we went along a road and suddenly found ourselves driving into the middle of a United States air force base with their flying fortresses manoeuvring around. We were stopped by the military police who were known as snowdrops because of their white steel helmets and I had quite a lot of explaining to do. I checked on the map and I was perfectly alright it was just that the airfield had been created since the map had been printed.

While I had been with the field ambulance my OC at the brigade company, Major Yapp had been promoted to commander RASC known as CRASC and in command of the divisional RASC at divisional headquarters. During this time, March 1943, he sent for me and told me that I had been promoted to captain but it would have meant me being posted away from the division and therefore he had

asked the authorities to stop this promotion. Of course my face dropped when he said this because naturally promotion is promotion but he hastened to assure me that it was in my own best interests and that he hoped before long to have some very good news for me and that I would then agree with him that he had done the right thing. I went away with mixed feelings and just get on with the job. At the beginning of April we were once more on the move and this time our destination was Scotland. It really was quite an unusual move. I found it very interesting as we travelled north in convoy - the whole division. On the trip I had 12 new motorcycles which I had collected recently and went almost the entire way up to Scotland riding one or other of these motorcycles to check if they are all right and making a report when I got back in my car. We got to Sydenham, where the Crystal Palace is, on the outskirts of London where we were met by the police and our vehicles were split up, about 10 a time, and the police told us to drive nose to tail following a police motorcyclist. We went from Sydenham to the far side of London on the Watford bypass without a stop. We drove right through central London, past Hyde Park corner, Park Lane, Marble Arch, up the Edgware Road until we got to the bypass where we stopped and when we got the complete lot of vehicles through we carried on. The trip through London was quite remarkable because we were waved through traffic lights. The police were lining the route all the way along to make sure there was nothing to stop us and we must have got through London in record time which was probably never repeated.

We stopped the first night at Stevenage which was rather a pleasant town as it hadn't yet become a new town as it is now. At that stop I had a message come through that I had promoted to captain this time to remain with my unit. What had happened was that (now) Lt Col Yapp knew about this when he interviewed me but as it hadn't been officially published he wasn't able to tell me. The reason I was pleased about it was the fact that it was backdated to long before the promotion which I would have taken and it meant in effect that I had gone straight from 2nd Lieutenant to captain and never really been a lieutenant at all and of course I had a nice hefty chunk of back pay. The quartermaster had some pips in stock so

immediately Fraser sowed the extra pips on my shoulder so we went out to a nice hotel in Stevenage and celebrated my promotion. The reason for the backdating was because the job I was doing with the field ambulance had been, if you like, re-graded some months back and instead of being a lieutenant's job it was classified as a captain's job.

The next day we proceeded northwards and stopped the second night at Doncaster racecourse which had been converted into a transit camp. There were Nissen huts there and you could get a meal and a bed. We continued the move until we came to Barnard Castle, again that reminded me of 1940, and this time we stopped at the Green Howard's barracks. They invited us into their mess and gave us a good dinner and we really had a most enjoyable evening with them. The next day we went right through the Dale country over to Carlisle and again the process of being seen through by the police with the town closed down for ordinary traffic was repeated so we whisked through there very quickly. Our final destination was a stately home called Bowhill which is 2 or 3 miles just outside Selkirk. It is one of three stately homes owned by the Duke of Buccleuch this one and another one in Scotland and he also had an English one in Northamptonshire. The officers each had a room of their own and the room I had was enormous though with just my camp kit stuck in a corner it looked rather ridiculous. In fact the clothes closets at the end of the room would have been quite big enough to sleep in. The first morning when I opened the shutters to one of the windows I thought it had felt rather cold and everywhere was covered in snow. After having a very mild winter down in Folkestone where by the time we left all the spring flowers were coming out it was something of a shock and in fact we seemed to have another spring when the snow went and the spring flowers came out. I spent a month at Bowhill and during that time we sometimes went out in a boat on a small loch, forming part of the estate, and fished for trout and if we were lucky and managed to catch some we would have them for breakfast. I never really liked them much as they are too full of bones. Being a loch rather than a river the trout were a bit muddy in taste. I also went shooting over the moors near by and shot rabbits and a couple of hares

which went into the pot. We also occasionally had salmon which we obtained from the local poacher at a pound a time. We did hear that this poacher was almost like an established position. He used to get caught occasionally, go before the local magistrate when he would be fined five shillings, or something of that nature, and after the court was over he go round the back where the magistrate would meet him and surreptitiously refund the amount of the fine. The reason being that the magistrate was his best customer. Whilst I was there, the Duke of Buccleuch turned up on a visit and accepted our invitation to join us for dinner in the mess one evening. He was a most unassuming chap, in his mid forties I suppose, and after the meal he chatted to us for an hour or two and commented on the fact that everybody thought he was an extremely wealthy man having three enormous estates. He said, in fact, the estates had to be run as a commercial proposition and that all the money that was made was ploughed back into the estates. He lived very modestly and that far from being a gentleman of leisure he worked jolly hard to make sure the estates were run properly. He died some years ago and his son became the Duke and he had a riding accident some time ago and is now confined to a wheelchair.

CHAPTER 6

BRIGADE COMPANY RASC

After the best part of 12 months my time was up with the Field Ambulance and I returned to my brigade company RASC and another officer took over from me. I was then stationed at Hawick and the unit was located in a large mill just on the immediate outskirts of the town. On the opposite side of the road facing the main gates was a large house which belonged to the owner of the mill and his daughter acted as a liaison between us. She was only in her mid 20s but she was rather sour faced and was never very pleasant. We were quite comfortable there. In effect I only spent part of my time there really because I went off on several trips for

various reasons. We started to train again with landing craft at Inveraray on Loch Fyne in Argyllshire and there we slept in Nissen huts in the grounds of Inveraray Castle and one of the bugbears there was the Duke of Argyll who was an old codger, not very tall, who kept advancing on us dressed in Knickerbocker suits and a deerstalker hat. He had a white moustache and he was always complaining about what our troops had been doing breaking fences, damaging hedges etc. He really was an absolute pest. You would have thought he was on the side of the Germans. The location was known as a CTC (combined training centre) and I worked very happily with the Navy and enjoyed those two trips. Of course, after Dunkirk I had quite an affection for the navy as they had fished me out of the sea. As long as you respected their traditions they made you very welcome. For example, I would never go aboard a landing craft without addressing the skipper or the Number one (the second in command) on the bridge and say "*permission to come aboard skipper*". We used to practice loading the landing craft with vehicles then sailing down the loch and then landing them, usually on the opposite bank, then driving right around the head of the loch back to Inveraray. The drill was that whilst you were on board the skipper was in command but when it came to the actual landing you took over because you had to ensure that he put you down onto a beach which wasn't soft sand or pebbles and where your vehicles would become bogged down and wouldn't be able to get off the beach. I also spent, I think it was a fortnight, at Rothesay, on the Isle of Bute, again practising with landing craft but in this case they weren't our vehicles they were vehicles which had been taken across and were being used by a number of units to practice with.

At the end of the fortnight they had decided that the vehicles would be brought back to the mainland so it fell to us to load the vehicles onto the landing craft and one late afternoon we set sail for Wemyss Bay. When we got there I saw the beach was all pebbles and I told the skipper that I didn't think it was suitable for us to disembark. However, he said he was sorry but he had been ordered to land there. So he went into the shore dropped his ramp and the first vehicle off went right down to its axles and it was hopeless you couldn't move it. So the skipper

contacted his headquarters and in view of the tides he was told to return to Rothesay. When we got back to Rothesay, still with the rest of the vehicles on board, I got in touch with the army people and they phoned up Glasgow and arranged for a couple of breakdown vehicles to be at Wemyss Bay the next morning. So next morning we set sail again back to Wemyss Bay fortunately the vehicle hadn't been swamped in the tide. The two breakdown vehicles were there and we had to winch every damn vehicle off the beach onto the road. We then proceeded to Glasgow going through Greenoch to the sites of an exhibition that had been held sometime just before the war where we got rid of the vehicles and some of our own vehicles were waiting for us and took us back to Hawick.

I also had three weeks in Edinburgh on an infantry officers training course and we were, of course as RASC, capable of acting as infantry although we had limited experience and training and this was really to have an officer who knew enough about infantry weapons to be able to instruct our own chaps. It was quite an interesting course and being in Edinburgh it was very nice and I had many an evening out. Although I kept clear of the theatre we had been thrown out of in 1941. We did street fighting training in Leith which had been heavily bombed and was suitable for that sort of training. On the way to Edinburgh on the train I had bought a newspaper at Hawick railway station and when I looked to the front page there was a big photograph there of a chap with a bush hat and an enormous beard and was grinning. His grin seemed to be very familiar despite the beard and then when I read underneath the captions I realised it was a chap I knew from the Refuge who worked in my old office. A bloke called Albert Tooth and he apparently was a flight lieutenant in the RAF who acted as communications officer with the Chindits and this photograph been taken in the Burma jungle where he was liaising between the army and the air force for the dropping of supplies.

When you went on courses you couldn't take your batman with you. On some courses they had batmen there would look after two or three officers but on other courses you had to look at yourself. So when I went on a course I usually took the

minimum of stuff that would require attention. For example, I would leave my Sam Brown behind and just take a matching cloth belt with a buckle which was made at the time you bought your service dress. Well at Edinburgh, they had batwomen not batmen. They were ATS girls and one officer who had handed over his Sam Brown to be polished got it back and found it had been dubbed! He nearly had a fit and he was worried to death about what his own batman would say when he got back. Sometime after I got back from this course I was ordered to set up a training school just outside Dumfries where the idea was for me and a couple of NCOs who been on an infantry NCOs course to run a school and train the RASC personnel from the division in lifting mines, dealing with booby-traps and infantry weapons such as a new weapon called a Piat mortar. That was short for Projectile Infantry Anti Tank. One day whilst I was running this school an air Commodore arrived in his staff car and said that he was in command of an airfield about a mile or so up the road and he had heard various bangs and explosions coming from my direction and he would be very interested to know what we were doing. I escorted him round the place and explained exactly what we were up to and when he left he said *"where do you come from?"* I said Manchester and he said *"Look if ever you are on leave and you want a lift by air get in touch and if we have a the plane going that way we can take you to Ringway"*. That of course never came to fruition but what did happen is that I got an invitation from him to go to their mess at the airfield and spend an evening eating and boozing with them.

Shortly after getting back to Hawick from running this little school one of the sergeants who had been with me instructing was in a room in the mill at Hawick instructing some of the lads who hadn't been on the course on the use and the stripping down of the Piat mortar. I entered the room to see how he was going on and it must a startled him and he let the spring go, which a very big spring, with tremendous tension and it trapped his little finger. I dashed over and after a great deal of wrestling managed to get a grip on this greasy spring and force it open enough for one of the lads to get the sergeant's little finger out of the trap. I sent him over with my batman in the car to the MO where he had it fixed with a splint. I

got a feeling it had been broken and that was that. The reason I mention this is that about 12 months after I had moved to Stratford after the war I was walking along Bridge street at lunchtime in the midst of all the holiday crowds when I heard a shout "*Captain Hopley, Captain Hopley*". I looked around, thinking I hadn't been called that for a long time and out of the crowd emerged this sergeant. He was from Liverpool and had apparently been to visit his wife's relatives in London with his wife, who had married in London during the war, and they had stopped off in Stratford for their lunch break and he spotted me in the crowd. He was delighted to see me and shook my hand. The first thing I asked him is "*How is your little finger?*" He wiggled it to show me that it was in working order.

Each brigade in the division had a brigade RASC officer known as BASCO for short and his job was to liaise with the brigade headquarters and the RASC units, over supplies of petrol and oil, ammunition and food. Well I found myself on a week's detachment down at brigade headquarters which was at Stubbs Castle standing in for their BASCO whilst he went on a course. The brigadier who I had met occasionally was a charming chap who didn't stand on ceremony and in the mess it was already free and easy and pleasant. The first morning there when I went out to the latrines which were the typical army ones, just a canvas screen around wooden seats and open compartments. As I walked in there was the brigadier sat in one of these compartments with his trousers round his ankles reading the Daily Mirror. I didn't know what to do. I sprung to attention and saluted him and he just looked up and grinned and said "*I think we can cut out the formalities under the circumstances Fred, don't you?*" So I joined him in the next compartment.

I became involved in a somewhat unpleasant incident on one occasion. I was acting as orderly officer on a Sunday and at lunchtime about midday the orderly sergeant came dashing up to me and said "*would you come with me sir?*". I asked "*what is the trouble sergeant*" and he just said "*come and look sir*" and wouldn't say what the devil he wanted me for. He went with me to the sergeant's quarters and

up some stairs, showed me into a room and there was one of the sergeants sprawled over his bunk with half his head blown off and a rifle on the floor by the bed. All the walls were splattered with blood and brains and it was a most horrible sight. It was obvious he had committed suicide as far as I could see. I didn't know what to do but I felt the civilian police ought to be notified so I saw the OC who agreed and I phoned the local police station and they contacted an inspector who came round to see us. He took notes, arranged for the removal of the body to the local morgue and then said he would get in touch with the procurator fiscal. He is the chap in Scottish law who decides whether any legal action should be taken if an offence or something of that nature takes place. There we were with a dead body on our hands not knowing what to do. It goes without saying that I didn't really enjoy my lunch that day. The OC decided that as I been involved from the start I might as well carry on and complete the job so I got in touch with our divisional headquarters and asked for advice. They phoned me back and were very helpful and they told me that I should contact his wife and let her know what had happened, arrange for an undertaker to supply a coffin and then arrange with the railway to transport the corpse back to London for burial by his family. The police inspector came to see me and said that the procurator fiscal had gone into this matter and decided to take no action, he felt it was really a purely military matter. I went ahead and tried to get a coffin locally without success and looked up in the telephone directory and phoned one or two funeral directors in Edinburgh. One of them agreed to do the job and to bring the Coffin to Hawick within the price I was allowed to pay. He duly arrived with a coffin which was a cheap looking thing and he had an assistant with him and the three of us together with a sergeant went down to the mortuary. The undertaker and his assistant put the body into the coffin and they couldn't get an arm in so the bloke just snapped the arm over his knee and popped the broken arm into the coffin. Also, he made no effort to disguise the enormous hole in the soldier's head and I asked him what he was going to do about this and he said it was nothing to do with him so I sent the sergeant over to a chemist with some money and we got cotton wool and bandages and bandaged his head. Imagine what his wife would have thought if she had opened the coffin

and seen that horrible mess! Then I checked up with the sergeants to find if any other sergeants lived in London and fortunately two of them did so I arranged for them to go as escorts with the coffin with a 72 hour pass so they would not only be able to deliver the coffin in a proper manner but have some time with their own families. I then went to the railway station and saw the stationmaster, explained what was required and he agreed to provide a closed goods wagon purely for that purpose and not to have any other goods put in it which he would ensure went all the way to London. So on a particular day we placed the coffin in one of our lorries and drove down to railway station, I had got a Union Jack out of stores and this had been placed over the coffin and we carried the coffin into this goods wagon. We stood and saluted it and I left the two sergeants to carry on and take the coffin to London. The OC had at least taking the burden off me by writing to the widow but what amazed me was that nothing else seemed to happen. There was no enquiry. I don't know whether the widow got a pension. It just finished there.

I told you earlier that the whole division was re-equipped with new vehicles and motorcycles when we were down in Kent. The reason became obvious when we moved up to Scotland because we were told that we were going to take part in an assault. For security reasons we weren't informed of where the assault would take place but everybody got all keyed up, we had been training for a long time and strange as it may seem the idea of an assault met with general approval. Everybody was keen to get cracking. Then all of a sudden it was all off. Apparently, the Canadian government on hearing of this had objected very strongly to the fact that no Canadians were to be involved. The only active service they had seen had been the Dieppe raid which was an absolute shambles. The high command in England gave in and substituted a Canadian division for our division in the plans for the assault. To add insult to injury they asked our division, who were very highly trained for assault purposes, to help to train the Canadians and the net result was that the Canadians moved in with us and immediately started to boast "*we gonna do your job for you*". This didn't go down very well as you can imagine and one evening in Hawick in a pub some of these Canadians

were going on in this vein and the British troops were so fed they started to give them a good hiding. The fighting spread throughout the town and the local police found it was too much for them so they locked themselves in the police station and phoned brigade headquarters at Stobbs Castle and they arranged for troops from the KOSBs (Kings own Scottish Borderers), who were local lads, to go in with officers with pick handles and side arms and sort it out. The strange thing of course was that the only people that got a good hiding from the KOSBs were the Canadians. Somehow the British troops managed to avoid them. The Canadian general on hearing the circumstances was absolutely furious at his own troops and they were all confined to camp and they didn't bother our lads any more in the pubs in the various towns. The assault, which we should have done, and in which the Canadians eventually took part in, was the amphibious landing in Sicily.

Our Colonel was a great one for volunteering our services to do jobs which basically had nothing to do with us. While on exercise which was to take place in Kirkcudbrightshire we found ourselves, due to his efforts, acting as the enemy to the infantry battalions and I took a party of some 20 men with a couple of lorries into Kirkcudbrightshire. For three days and nights we took part in this exercise. I must admit that most of the time I hadn't a clue as to what I was supposed to do. It literally poured down the whole time, it never seem to stop and we slowly but surely got wetter and wetter and more and more browned off and found ourselves climbing up the hills and wading through flooded rivers. It really was appalling and at the end of the three days as nobody seemed to know what we were doing there I packed up and told the lads to get in the lorries and I just buzzed off. It was fairly late in the day and as it got darker and darker I thought well the chaps must be absolutely fed up and miserable and as was we were coming opposite a rather large house and in the gloom, with a lot of outbuildings, I decided we would stop. I would try and get permission for the chaps to go into the outbuildings and dry out a bit and to stay there during the night and leave the next morning. So I walked up to the front door and knocked on it and a middle aged man appeared. I explained the situation and asked if he would give us permission and he was very polite, called

me sir and said yes by all means and I'm sure that Sir John would approve. We set up shop in these outbuildings got a meal going and the chaps began to dry out and this fellow from the house came over and said that he had a room prepared for me if I wished. I said no as it would look better if I stayed with the chaps and so the next morning before I left I went up the house to thank him and having done so I said by the way you said Sir John last night Sir John who? He said Sir John Laurie, so I jokingly said no relation to Annie I suppose? He very solemnly said "*yes sir, this is Maxwellton House*". We had been staying in the house where Annie Laurie had lived.

Towards the end of 1943 we were on the move again and this time we went all the way up to Inverness shire and our location was at Beaulieu a village two or three miles outside Inverness to the west. It was only a small place and there was nothing much there and most of the time we spent training with landing craft and this time it was for an actual assault. We knew that but where it would be we didn't know. We polished up our training with the landing craft on the Black Isle in the area of Munlochy and they had built hards there on the beaches. They were sort of concrete slipways, which made loading vehicles onto landing craft much easier. The landing craft were not like the modern ferries where you drive in at one end and drive off the other. With landing craft you had to reverse every vehicle onto the landing craft so it would be facing the right way when the landing came. This of course had to be done with great care and skill and with lots of hand signals from NCOs who been specially trained. Another part of the preparation was to waterproof the vehicles. When making a landing on a beach there is no guarantee you would drive off the landing craft straight onto a nice dry beach. More often than not you went into several feet of water and naturally if you did that in the ordinary course of events the engine would flood and you would just be stranded. So, the exhaust pipes had to be extended high up at the back, the engine itself had to be waterproofed and sealed and that was the first time I met the word Bostic. It was a sort of black compound we used to seal off various parts of the engine, carburettor and places like that, to ensure that water couldn't get in. It was quite a

skilled job and had to be done very carefully and properly otherwise you got a vehicle perhaps stuck in the water and no other vehicle could get off the landing craft because it was in the way. We did various exercises from the Black Isle. We would embark there, go out to sea and then come into land in the area of Birkhead. This area had been chosen because it was very similar to the area we would use in France although of course we didn't know where that area was.

If you got a wet landing and got wet yourself you would spend the rest of the day wet through in the depths of winter before you got back to your own location. Also, at that time of the year the sea wasn't very kind and there was a lot of seasickness and troops would land ashore in a very groggy condition. Landing craft have flat bottoms and they toss and turn in a heavy sea where an ordinary ship would just plough through it. There was very little social life in the area. I do remember one occasion going to a village dance which turned out to be mostly Scottish dancing and all the locals would prance around the place banging their feet until the whole place was full of dust. I eventually retreated down to the local pub for a breath of fresh air. Inverness Castle was a living Castle, not a ruin, and it was the headquarters of our division and various other units of the forces including the Royal Navy. On occasion we were invited to a social event there and when we went into the room there was a bunch of WREN officers. One of them detached herself from the group and dashed over to us hugged and kissed us as though we were long-lost brothers and it was the girl from Hawick who had been in the house that we occupied - the miserable one. She had obviously joined the Navy and had been commissioned. Her attitude was completely different she seemed to be a different person from who we'd known. Why she should have changed - when we were at Hawick she may have resented our being in the house or resented the fact that she wasn't in the forces or perhaps because she wasn't all that good looking that nobody had made a pass at her.

I had to attend a conference at Furness some miles away and I set off in the morning with Fraser in the car and we had to travel along the coast road to Nairn

and turn right and then go down to Furness. As we set out it began to snow and we travelled along this coast road which was very exposed and it snowed and snowed and snowed and although we reached Nairn all right when we moved towards Furness we got bogged down the snow was so deep. I trudged over a field towards a farmhouse and the farmer got a horse out and towed us out. We managed to turn the car around and after a very difficult journey we got back to Beaulieu. I had given up the idea of getting to Furness completely.

During this winter at Beaulieu I had been told by the Colonel that I could volunteer to take an assault platoon in on D day when the landings took place. This was the sort of volunteering as in "*I want two volunteers you and you*". I could hardly refuse such an appointment. I was given a reasonable choice of NCOs and drivers and, as second in command, was a bloke called Hudson who was a Scotsman from Aberdeen. When he had first come to the unit I had christened him Soapy. The reason for this was the first master I had at the grammar school in Stretford was a chap called Hudson and he was known by everybody as Soapy so I naturally started to call this fellow Soapy and it stuck and eventually everybody calling him that name including the colonel. I always got on very well with him and although he was several years older than me, in his early 30s, but he was very fit and active so I thought it was a very good partnership.

The division consisted of officers and men who although highly trained, most had no actual battle or active service experience. To inject some experienced personnel into the division they brought back, from North Africa, some officers and senior NCOs and they were replaced with officers and senior NCOs from the division and one of the sergeants I chose for the assault platoon was one of these chaps who was a first rate fellow, a Geordie and he obviously knew his stuff. By the way, one of the officers that went from the field ambulance was Capt Branwell, the local medical officer for health here. I told you I met afterwards and he told me of his experiences in Italy. The platoon was to consist of a jeep for my own use (my car and batman would not go in on the assault but would come over later on with

the main body) thirty 3 ton lorries, a 15cwt truck, a water truck, a converted 15cwt truck for use as a small workshop. So I had a completely self-contained little unit with a total personnel of about a hundred.

Towards the end of our stay in Inverness shire we all went along to Muir of Ord and parked by the side of the road. We took as many troops as we could with us and there were many other units, there must have been two or three thousand troops, and all of a sudden Monty appeared in all his finery. He mounted the bonnet of a jeep, told everybody to break ranks and gather round and then gave us a pep talk. He was, of course, the divisional commander of the 3rd division in the retreat at Dunkirk so he was really addressing what had been his old command. All the lads were cheering him and he revelled in all this and then off he went and we had all the job of trying to find where our troops were to get them together and get them back to Beauly. About this time I was a bit worried about one of the NCOs I'd chosen for the assault platoon. He was a corporal who normally speaking was extremely smart and keen, probably one of the best of the bunch. I noticed that he was beginning to look rather scruffy, and short-tempered with his section and even inclined to be a bit bolshi to officers. So I called him in and told him to sit down and then pointed out that I wasn't very happy about him but I assumed he had some problem on his mind and if there was anything I could do to help then by all means let me know. It would be entirely confidential. After a moment's hesitation he produced a letter which he passed to me. It was an anonymous letter which stated that his wife was having an affair with a soldier in the town in which they lived. He hadn't any leave due for some time, he couldn't write to his wife about it or to his family in case it caused a lot of trouble, and this problem had been brewing up in his mind for quite a while. I thought for a moment and then suggested that I write to the SSAFA (Soldiers Sailors and Airmen's Forces Association). This was a civilian organisation that still exists which was formed to help serving men's families in the absence of the father/husband. He agreed so I duly wrote to this organisation and asked them to carry out very careful and discreet enquiries to find out just what was happening. Sometime afterwards I got a reply which confirmed that this was

totally untrue and it would seem that a very close friend of his wife, a neighbour, had fallen out with the wife over something rather badly and this was her way of getting her own back. When I passed this letter over to the corporal it completely transformed him and tears of relief came into his eyes so I hastened to tell him that I had got him a 72 hours compassionate leave pass and a travel warrant and to get off as soon as he could back to his home. He returned completely back to normal and once again I had a first-class NCO and he proved to be so in the subsequent invasion. I had found that a lot of the Territorial officers at the beginning of the war weren't properly trained in handling troops and the new breed of officer that was coming up from the ranks knew how the men felt and knew how to handle their problems.

CHAPTER 7

PREPARATION FOR D DAY

At the end of March 1944 I went on ten days leave and towards the end of the leave I received a telegram telling me to report not to Scotland but to Havant railway station. I subsequently found out that the division had moved all the way down to Hampshire from the north of Scotland while I had been on leave. This made me absolutely furious because I had missed the trip which was right up my street and I felt that they might have told me. I duly went down to Havant where Fraser picked me up in the car and took me to an invasion camp on the outskirts of Waterlooville. It was quite a large camp, all under canvas, and the first thing I found out when I got there was that lieutenant Soapy Hudson had been taken ill on the trip down south and was in Cosham hospital. Cosham is a little suburb of Portsmouth. He had pneumonia so I dashed off there to see how he was going and fortunately he appeared to be making quite a good recovery and rejoined me in about a week. At the camp I had my complete assault platoon on its own because the main body was in permanent barracks at Aldershot. There were of

course a lot of other units in the camp and there wasn't really an awful lot to do. We did some training and I went off one day to a conference or meeting in the cinema in Portsmouth and Monty addressed quite a large gathering of very senior officers, generals, brigadiers, admirals, the works. There must have been 300 or 400 in the cinema and with his usual style he stalked on the stage and stood there for everybody to admire him and then said "*now everybody have a good cough and that will be the end of it, I don't want any more*". So you had the sight of all these very senior officers coughing away merrily whether they wanted to or not and whilst Monty was rambling on about the various aspects of the invasion you could see some of the senior officers going purple in the face trying to stop themselves from coughing in case Monty told them to leave the room.

During our stay in the camp we all had to have various inoculations, TAB and TT were been the main ones and I had been pretty busy doing odd jobs and despite the MO repeatedly mentioning it I managed to avoid it. Then one day as I was walking towards the medical tent an arm came through the flap with a syringe in the fingers and the syringe beckoned me towards the tent. It was the MO making sure that he did get me in the end. After the inoculation the MO said "*are you coming out for a pint this evening?*" So I said I thought you weren't supposed to drink after inoculations. Yes, he said *that is what the doctors say but as a pal, are you coming out for a pint tonight?* Under the circumstances I could hardly refuse. As I said, the main body was at Aldershot in barracks there and I made several trips up to see them and to discuss certain matters. After some time in the camp we were issued with maps which we had to study and memorise to some extent and they were to be the maps used in the invasion but with one essential difference. The actual names of places on these maps had been being changed so that we still wouldn't know where the invasion was taking place for security purposes. I can remember three of them: Brazil, Portugal and Poland. We had a dummy run and we were told to take the vehicles, load them up and we were given a map location to go to. It turned out to be an American invasion camp which had spare tents and we spent the night in these tents and went in their PX canteen where there was

nothing but fighting and foul language. Next day we carried on down to Southampton docks. We thought we would be going on to landing craft but there were no landing craft there at all and the officer in charge merely told to turn around and go back to our original location.

Another job we had to do was to prepare our personal equipment for the invasion. That involved sanding our steel helmets so they wouldn't shine. In other words you painted the helmet and while it was still wet you chucked sand all over it and let it dry. Incidentally I still had my steel helmet from Dunkirk which I hung on to as a sort of souvenir whereas everybody else had been issued with a new style steel helmet. We had to paint the brasses on our equipment with green paint the whole idea being to camouflage us to some extent. One evening we were told there be a VIP inspecting us the following day and we had to turn out smart and neat and that meant we had to clean our helmets off and repaint them green, clean all the green paint off our brasses and polish them and turn out as smart as though we were going on parade. This of course caused a lot of annoyance amongst the troops who were going to be on the parade. The next morning we duly paraded in a road just outside the camp in units and after a very long wait on a very hot day the VIP turned out to be the King. He went along the lined up troops shaking hands with each officer, including me, and I was surprised he gave me quite a good handshake because he didn't look particularly well and in fact his face had been made up with a sort of pancake make-up used for photographic purposes I suppose. The perspiration was running down through the make-up and I felt a bit sorry for him despite the fact I had been standing in the sun for about three hours. After the parade we went back and had to re-sand the helmets and repaint our metalwork. You notice I say "we" as Soapy Hudson and I had to do this ourselves. Our batmen, our cars and all surplus kit such as service dress, extra bedding, anything except the bare essentials had, by now, gone to Aldershot to join the main body. We were down to the stuff that we were going to take in with us. The officers had exactly the same as the men and our bed consisted of one blanket and one groundsheet and the idea was that everything except what was absolutely

essential had to be left behind in order to make maximum use of the space available on the vehicles. We were still able to get outside the camp and on the odd occasion in the evening we would go in to Portsmouth and Southsea for a drink or two. There was a very nice pub at the back of the camp just by the rear entrance on the edge of Waterlooville and our OC came over and very kindly offered to stand in for us while Soapy and I buzzed off to London. We stayed a night at Brown's hotel on Dover Street. It was a rather up-market hotel, very high-class and it cost us a fair amount but with the future being a bit uncertain we thought we would do ourselves proud. We did a show and had a few drinks and returned to camp the next day and the OC went back to Aldershot.

It was announced over the tannoy system in the camp that as from a certain hour the camp was sealed and that meant that you couldn't leave and nobody except certain personnel was allowed to come into camp. In other words we were completely cut off from the outside world. We were then issued with certain items for the first day or two ashore. We had a Mae West (life jacket) although it was nothing the Mae West which the air force chaps had when they flew over water. It was a really like a white sausage-shaped thing which you blew up and wrapped around your chest and tied on with tape. That was protection of course if you went into the drink when you landed. We had the usual emergency ration pack, I still had mine from Dunkirk. It was, in fact, a court martial offence if you ate it without official permission. There were two 24-hour packs in the two halves of your mess tin and I can't remember all the contents but there were little cubes, a bit like Oxo cubes, and they were a mixture of sugar milk and oatmeal and you just crumbled them up into boiling water in your mess tin and that made a very nice porridge. There were similar cubes of tea sugar and milk again which you crumbled up and made yourself quite a decent drink of tea. There were sweets, barley sugar to sustain you, and 10 cigarettes in a tin box with a lid on. Army form blank, that is toilet paper, and I can't remember what else. Each pack was enough to keep a man going for 24 hours. We each had a little Tommy cooker which was two pieces of shaped metal which you slotted together with a little tray underneath and on the

tray you placed some solidified maths, a big white tablet which when you lit it glowed with a purple glow and gave out quite a lot of heat. You put this solidified maths tablet on the little tray under the Tommy cooker, put your mess tin on top with water in, lit the tablet and very soon you had some boiling water. We had a little tin box inside which had two small bottles with tablets in each. The idea being that if you filled your water bottle from a tap or stream where the water hadn't been disinfected you put one tablet from each bottle into your water bottle before filling it with water and it would then be fit to drink. The fact is that it tasted horrible, mind you it was just the same if you had it from the water truck because the water had been treated in a similar manner and tasted just the same. We all carried a field dressing in a special pocket provided for it in our battledress trousers. I should have mentioned that before being sealed in our vehicles had all been loaded with the stores which were required for the landing. Our vehicles of course were three ton lorries but we were ordered to load five tons to get the maximum ashore as quickly as possible. We had to carry all sorts of bits and pieces on top of that, for example, every vehicle had to carry a stretcher, not for our use but just to get it ashore. Most of the stuff I loaded was petrol and oil and ammunition, mostly small arms, and lots and lots of compo packs. The compo packs, if I remember rightly, were based on meals, mostly in tins, for 48 men for one day or 24 men two days, or 12 men for four days and so on. They had M&V (meat and vegetable), rice pudding, soups, and they were self-heating soup, that is they had a sort of candle in the middle and you lit the candle and as it burned down it warmed the contents of the tin. You opened the top and poured it out and had a lovely drink of hot soup. It had army form blank inevitably, again sweets and cigarettes and we had supplies of ascorbic acid tablets to make up for the lack of vitamin C in the tinned stuff with not having fresh fruit and vegetables. And, of course, the inevitable army biscuit which to me was an invention of the devil as it was so hard you had difficulty in breaking it with a pickaxe.

So the great day eventually dawned and we were ordered to move out. We had an Order of March and I was due to leave in the early evening which I duly did. I was

in a Jeep and the vehicles followed with the water truck and the 15cwt truck and the little workshops in the rear and our destination was Gosport. This was a very strange journey because security was absolute we were told that we must not under any circumstances speak to civilians, accept tea or cakes or anything from them. We had to remain completely aloof and the civilians had been ordered to do the same and to make sure there was no funny business the whole of the route was lined by military police and civilian police and you had the strange business of driving through the roads of southern England on a lovely summers evening in absolute silence. You couldn't even wave or shout to them. We eventually got to Gosport we were held up quite a while for our turn to embark and by the time we got down to the loading places it had gone dark and to my utter astonishment and, to some extent horror, floodlights were put on so that the place was brilliantly lit up and this was during the blackout right on the south coast of England at a major port with old Jerry just the other side of the channel. But the powers that be felt so confident that they had control over the air presumably that they were prepared to speed things up by using floodlights. They had what were called Blue Caps - they were part of the military police but all they did was handle traffic and I had never met them before but had seen them about the place. They were supposed to load the vehicles but all their signals and signs were different from the way we had trained so I chased them off and used our own NCOs. To my complete surprise, instead of loading onto a landing craft tank (LCT) I was destined to load onto a landing ship tank (LST) and also my platoon was split in half and half went with me onto one LST and the other half with Soapy Hudson went on another LST. The idea being of course if one was sunk then there was still half the unit left. Being an LST it was a much bigger craft that has a lift in the middle and two decks so that as the vehicles were loaded they went up on the lift onto the top deck until that was full and then the lower deck was filled. It was obviously too large for just my vehicles only and so in addition there were a number of tanks, Bren gun carriers and a mixture of other forms of transport.

Fortunately we had all trained with Landing Ship Tank up at Inveraray so we were quite familiar with these craft although most of our training had been done on Landing Craft Tank. Eventually after a lot of effort the craft was fully loaded, pulled away and sailed out into the Solent and anchored. The skipper of the craft had contacted me once we anchored and told me that I was OC troops on board. This sounds a very posh title but what it amounts to is that I was a stooge who had to act as contact liaison person between the troops and the Navy. It proved to be not a very satisfactory business because the skipper was a bit of a cantankerous bloke, he had been a policeman in civvy Street and was always moaning about the troops fouling the heads (toilets) and seemed to overlook the fact that the craft was absolutely loaded to the brim with a maximum possible carrying capacity because we were going on a short sea voyage. Landing craft were loaded according to the distance of the voyage involved. For example, if they were going to North Africa they would only have had half the number of vehicles and men on board that we had. The only advantage of being OC troops was that I was allocated a cabin for my own use. A tiny little thing but at least it gave a bit of privacy. When daylight dawned I could see that we were anchored off Ryde on the Isle of Wight about half a mile out to sea and it seemed strange to watch people walking up and down the promenade, some of them probably on holiday, and there we were completely isolated wondering what on earth we were in for. That was the morning of the fourth of June and we lay off for a couple of days, the fourth and the fifth of June, with nothing to do except to sit about sunbathing. I seemed to spend most of my time scrambling over different vehicles to get to the officers or senior NCOs who were in charge of the different contingents conveying the complaints of the skipper about the activities of the troops.

Looking up and down the Solent from one end to the other was a most magnificent sight. It was absolutely jammed tight with ships and craft of all sorts and shapes and sizes from battleships to destroyers, cruisers, merchantmen, landing craft and small torpedo boats. It was the biggest armada that had ever been assembled in history and there were of course other armadas assembling all the way along the

south coast. For example, in the area of Torbay, as it is now, the Americans were forming up with all their troops and shipping and landing craft. Whilst we were waiting we water-proofed the vehicles and I checked them all over to make sure they were ready for a wet landing. D day should have been on the 5th June I learned later but because of the poor weather it was felt that the landings would be too difficult and so the operation was postponed for 24 hours.

CHAPTER 8

D DAY

On the morning of the 6th June 1944 the broadcasting system on the landing ship announced that we were about to sail and so for us Operation Overlord was about to begin. We eventually sailed out into the channel and after a while the skipper announced over the broadcasting system that he would like all officers and all NCOs who were in command of individual contingents to report to his cabin. After a struggle climbing over vehicles we all duly appeared in his cabin. He drew our attention to the safe which was sealed and said "*would you please note that I'm about to break this seal*". He broke the seal and opened the safe and inside were some cardboard tubes which were also sealed with wax. Each had a unit name on and he handed them out to the various people there according to their unit and I duly received my batch. I took them to my cabin and sent for the NCOs, opened up the sealed tube and inside were maps for the landing. They were of course exactly the same maps we had been studying for a long time with the exception that now the names on them were the real names and we could now see that we would be landing in Normandy. There were two maps, a large scale one which covered the area of the beaches and some miles beyond, almost to Caen, and a small scale map which covered quite a large part of Normandy and I had five of each. I handed these out and we studied them. Gradually, one NCO after the other excused himself and disappeared. Having got out into the open channel there was a very

heavy swell, it wasn't rough but the ship was rolling most dreadfully and I am afraid they all had to disappear because they weren't feeling too well. In those days I was a fairly good sailor so happily I wasn't affected. We continued out to sea, not travelling very quickly, and as we got closer and closer to other side we noticed quite a lot of different craft returning presumably from the initial landings. Some of them were all right but others were badly knocked about. One in particular I remember had obviously been on fire and all the vehicles and tanks and whatever was in the well deck had been burnt out but somehow it seemed to be able to make its own way under its own power and presumably it eventually got home safely. As we got nearer to the coast the skipper very kindly invited me to join him on the bridge and I sat on a deck chair and from then on I had a sort of grandstand view it was almost like being at the pictures except it was for real. The thought that passed through my mind was 'what the devil am I doing here it's dangerous'. There was a tremendous amount of activity on our landing beach and as you may well imagine it was very noisy. There were battleships, both American and British, and smaller cruisers firing shells inland; there were landing craft disgorging men and vehicles, tanks and Bren gun carriers. One thing I saw that I had never seen before was when one of the landing craft beached and dropped its ramp there were rows of rocket firing instruments facing the shore and they would fire a salvo into a hotel and the hotel would just disappear in a cloud of smoke and dust. When the dust cleared it was just rubble. There were lots of aircraft flying about. The fighter aircraft had markings on which again I had never seen before. Instead of the RAF roundels they were dark with white stripes and there were planes coming in and dropping parachutes of different colours presumably carrying supplies to the airborne troops. The colour of the parachutes indicated the contents of the package it was carrying that presumably made it easier for the airborne lads to find what they wanted. One of the planes was hit and went down into the sea in flames. Fortunately it didn't hit anything and altogether it was a very noisy business. It reminded me of the mythical tank commander in the desert who was in the middle of a battle and his CO got in touch by radio to ask him how the battle was proceeding and this chap was reputed to have said " *Oh my dear the noise and the*

people". At about 16.00 hours we lay some distance offshore (Fig. 8a & b) waiting for our turn to come in for quite a while and while waiting I noticed that shells were coming over from our left rear and landing on the beach or in the water, troops were scattering and the shells that landed in the water sent regular little splashes along as though a lot of people were skimming pebbles over the sea. I thought the shells must be coming from one of the naval vessels and that some silly ass on board was dropping his shell shorts instead of sending them inland. I found out later that they were coming from a German big gun which was in a tunnel in the cliffs not far from Deauville. It trundled out on a trolley on a rail line, fired a few shots and went in again. It was there for very long time and they tried long after to get rid of it without success and eventually the beach on which we were landing became untenable because of it and ceased to be used. The beach wasn't wasted however because the Royal Engineers produced rubber blown-up models of life-size vehicles and tanks and soldiers and put them on the beach in strategic positions so that from where the gun was being fired there appeared to be real objects and this gun continued to fire on these rubber objects for a long time afterwards wasting shells and at night the REs would pop down the beach and move them all around so as to give the impression that they were in fact real.

At last our turn came and the landing ship went in and beached at about 18.00 hours. The lower deck had to be cleared first and all the vehicles and a number of tanks went onto the beach and moved away and I began to bring my vehicles off. It was a wet landing and the vehicles had to go through 3 feet of water so that as a vehicle went down the ramp the water went right over the engine and into the driving cab. Fortunately every single one of the vehicles came off the ramp and up the beach beautifully without any trouble. As I moved up the beach I recollect being very scared but I had a deep feeling of satisfaction that after being kicked out into the sea further up at Dunkirk, and feeling very humiliated that the British Army could have collapsed so badly, that I was coming back, not as a poor miserable private but as, I hope, a well-trained officer and I would have a chance to get my own back.

Coming off the beach we moved into a de-waterproofing area that had been set aside as the vehicles had to have all the waterproofing materials removed otherwise even on a short journey it would have caused problems of overheating and perhaps condensation in the electrical parts. Whilst we were doing this a Jerry plane came in very low and I automatically, following my experiences in France and Belgium earlier, dived underneath the nearest vehicle. We had, of course, in 1940 been carrying supplies which would have proved very good protection from anything coming from above, but in this instance when I crawled out I realised I was under a vehicle loaded with petrol! A figure appeared along the road riding a motorbike and it was Soapy Hudson. He had landed from his LST some distance along our beach and had got his vehicles off. He nipped back and along came the other vehicles and I then had a complete platoon all in one piece and ready for action. The only trouble was that I had no idea where to go but fortunately very soon afterwards a captain from divisional headquarters turned up and gave me a location, a map reference, to which to take the platoon. The original plan was for me to replenish the tanks of the 13th/18th Hussars after they had gone forward but unfortunately at that time nobody knew where they were. My original job just didn't happen. After a spot of map reading and a lot of good luck we got to our location which proved to be a couple of orchards about a mile outside the small town of Hermanville-sur-mer. A tiny little place about a mile inland of the beach. There were five invasion beaches the one on the extreme left where I landed near to a little seaside town called Luc-sur-mer was on Sword beach with the 3rd British division and just by us the 6th airborne division had landed to hold the bridges over the L'Orne river and the Caen canal. Then to our right was Juno Beach where the 3rd Canadian division landed and to their right was Gold beach where the 50th Northumbrian division had landed. They were a Territorial division and strangely enough, the division which at the beginning of the war, the 42nd division (which I had been with) had replaced up in Northumberland (Fig. 9a & b). There were two other beaches further round to the right Omaha Beach and Utah Beach where the Americans landed.

The two orchards we moved into proved to be our home for something like six weeks. We moved the vehicles into the orchards and it was now getting pretty late in the day, it was still daylight but it must have been about 9.0 o'clock so we set about camouflaging the vehicles and I told the chaps to dig some trenches for sleeping in for the night and to get their first 24 hour packs out and to get a meal as best they could. When all this had been done it was pretty dark and then Soapy and I realised that having been supervising all this, firstly we hadn't got a slit trench and secondly we hadn't had anything to eat. We scooped out a bit of a hole and lay in it just as we were and tried to get some sleep.

CHAPTER 9

D+1 ONWARDS IN NORMANDY

I can't remember actually sleeping that first night, I may have dozed off occasionally but it was so noisy with shells whistling in both directions overhead that I think most of us were jolly glad when the dawn came. I then had an opportunity to have a look around and see just exactly where we were. The area opposite was open sloping land and it had masses and masses of pit props perhaps about 6 feet long and all stuck in the earth. I assume that the Germans had put them there to stop airborne landings but in fact there were quite a lot of gliders, a bit knocked about, that had come in there. The troops presumably got out all right. The gliders had a little explosive charge in the middle of the body of the glider and after it landed they set the charge off and blew the aircraft in half very gently so that the troops could pour out of the middle of the fuselage. Lying all over the place were bits and pieces of equipment some German and some British; we found a couple of folding bicycles that belonged to the airborne. They were very simple affairs that folded in half and had a couple of wing nuts which when you opened the folded bike and tightened the nuts you could then ride them. They had

one brake at the front and none for the rear wheel. They were very useful for dashing about the place. We also found a little motorbike, a tiny little thing, which when you sat on it your knees came up to your ears and that belonged to the airborne also. We hung onto these because they could prove quite useful to us until we were eventually ordered to hand them in because the airborne would need them for future airborne landings.

That day (D+1) proved something of an anti-climax. We had no orders to do anything and we spent the whole day making deep, proper slit trenches, getting everything organised and we offloaded the vehicles of anything except their proper load which was ammunition petrol and compo. All the additional supplies we made a heap of and covered them with tarpaulins. Sometime afterwards we had orders to deliver them to headquarters. Well that day passed fairly uneventfully but noisily and we managed to get a little bit of sleep the next night. The following day I was in one orchard when I heard the sound of a shot close at hand in the other orchard now and wondered what the devil it was so I dashed round and there, lying on the ground, was a lance corporal surrounded by his mates. This Lance corporal had jumped out of the back of a lorry with his Sten gun in his hand and it had caught on the step of a lorry and he had shot himself. I hated those Sten guns, they were very poor things that were liable to go off at the least excuse. However he shot himself in the lower regions and the bullet had obviously travelled upwards and as he lay there it was obvious he was dying. His lips had turned blue and he was frothing a bit, his eyes were glazing and his pals were all looking at me as though I could do something to help. All I could do was to get one of the stretchers and get a driver to take the Jeep with this chap on it to a CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) a short distance down the road. When the chap who had driven the jeep came back I asked him what had happened and he said he just handed him over. They were very busy with a lot of casualties coming in and that was all he could do so he drove back again. So I got the jeep and chased off down to this CCS and asked an NCO there if he could give me any information about this lance corporal which he couldn't but he suggested I went into the field just by them to see if he

was amongst the dead. I went into this field and there were rows upon rows upon rows. There must have been several hundred bodies covered with blankets and I just stared at this in absolute horror and then I spotted a figure leaning over one of these bodies with a sergeant. This person was emptying the pockets of the dead and taking their identity discs (dog tags) off and then I suddenly realised it was the padre who had left our unit two years before because he was too old. He was the one who been rector for the Gordano valley villages. I went over to him and said "*hello padre*" and he looked up at me and I realised that tears were rolling down his cheeks and he said to me, as though we had only met yesterday, "*Fred how could God allow this sort of thing to happen?*". He was obviously very distressed and his faith had received a bit of a shaking so I thought it hardly the time to reminisce so I just patted him sympathetically on the shoulder and set about my own unhappy task. I must have uncovered well over a hundred corpses, a mixture of our division and the airborne division, before I eventually found my own chap. lots of these airborne chaps were boys really and I remember one in particular, he was a 2nd lieutenant, with blonde curly hair and he didn't look more than about 16 or 17 years old and I imagined then what on earth would his mother and father think when they learned about this. I returned to my location in a very subdued state of mind to confirm to his pals that he was dead. I never saw that Padre again. I hope that he survived and got back to his rural retreats in the area just behind Portishead and that somehow he managed to regain his rather shattered faith.

For a time we had trouble with snipers. Quite a few Germans had been cut off from their units and gone to earth somewhere and some of them tried to harm us by popping up and having a pot shot every now and again. And that happened to us, every now and again a bullet would come whistling past our ears. Fortunately none of them hit us or any of the vehicles and I got a bit fed up with this so I borrowed a rifle from one of the lads and with a sergeant and a couple of the men I made off in the direction from which the firing was coming. We crept along taking plenty of cover until we got to a farm nearby. The farmer was standing in the doorway and I signalled to him and he sort of shrugged his shoulders so I went up,

and in the best school boy French, I asked him if there was a sniper about and he pointed to a low wall and by this wall there were a number of empty cartridge cases. That must have been where he had been firing from and it did in fact point towards our location. I assume he had seen us making our way over and cleared off. Either that or it was the French farmer himself. A lot of these Normans didn't really make us particularly welcome. I think they had had a reasonably easy time under the Germans. They were allowed to get on with their farming and as long as they produced food stuffs I don't think they were bothered very much. Then we suddenly appeared and started knocking hell out of their villages and charging tanks and vehicles across their crops and generally destroying the countryside.

Because the beach which we had originally been allocated had to be abandoned because of the Deauville gun, I had to get supplies of various commodities from other beaches and for ammunition I occasionally had to go to the 3rd Canadian division which was on our right and get ammunition from their dumps. On one lovely summer evening my vehicles were being loaded in this dump and a dogfight started up in the sky between German and Allied planes and whilst this was going on you could hear the machine guns firing quite clearly. One of the planes was hit and nosedived into the sea but before it actually disappeared the pilot had parachuted out and was slowly coming down towards our location in the dump. To my absolute horror these ruddy Canadian soldiers grabbed their rifles and started to fire on this chap who was just dangling there completely helpless. They automatically assumed he was German and started to fire on him. I dashed around shouting to them to cease firing and one or two took notice and one chap I knocked the rifle out of his hand and when this poor fellow eventually landed we went over to him and he had been wounded several times, whether from these damn Canadians or in the dogfight, but he was in fact an RAF officer. The things I said to the Canadian officer in charge of this dump after wouldn't bear mentioning

The airborne forces were being supplied from the air with coloured parachutes but apparently what happened very often was that these parachutes, in the wind,

drifted over into German hands so that a lot of the supplies were lost. In any case they weren't sufficient for their requirements so I got involved with helping them out by running supplies of ammunition and food across the bridges over the Orne and the canal which later became known as the Pegasus Bridge and it is still called that after the Div sign of the airborne which is a flying horse. The bridges were under observation by the Jerries because they occupied higher ground close to the airborne area and as a result they could be subjected to mortar shells. Trips across could be a bit hairy and I used to send vehicles across three at a time, nose to tail, and they went across flat out and then I would allow a short interval and do it again until all the vehicles were across and then I would set off on a motorbike, with the throttle fully open and steel helmet firmly on my head, expecting a mortar shell to bounce off at any minute. The place where we dumped these supplies was a quarry and as we were unloading the airborne lads were firing their mortars steadily and I saw a figure approaching me who looked familiar. It was the captain who had been in charge of our course at Clifton College when I was at OCTU. And there we met, I was also captain by now, and he looked extremely miserable. He was wearing a red beret and apparently he had dropped with the airborne forces and was a liaison officer, still RASC of course. I asked him how did he get mixed up in this. He said "*I was bloody well posted*". I suppose he must have found it a dreadful contrast to the nice cushy job he had at Clifton.

Another rather strange incident, or comical incident really, occurred. I overheard one of these airborne lads talking to one of my drivers and he said to him "*have you driven this lorry across those bridges loaded with ammunition?*" and my bloke said yes. So the airborne lad said "*blimey mate I wouldn't have your job for a pension*". Imagine someone who had just dropped out of the sky and not wanting to drive a vehicle loaded with ammunition. I suppose it is everybody to his job. Some of the airborne lads had a bad time with mosquitoes being down by the river and low lying, wet land and they were blighters these mosquitoes. They used to bite very badly and some of the airborne lads who occupied this area were so badly bitten that their eyes closed and they couldn't see to do their job. They were sent home

immediately. In fact, anybody who wasn't up to 1st class physical state, if they had a touch of flu or something, they just sent them back home because they were a burden. Only fit people were allowed to stay.

By the time the airborne lads had cleared the higher land facing their positions it was decided by the powers that be to withdraw the airborne troops. After all they were very highly specialised, they had had heavy losses and they would be required for possible future airborne landings. To use them as ordinary infantry was wasteful. They were replaced by the 51st Highland division, a Scottish Territorial division, and I was coming back across the bridges when their first contingent of infantry were coming across from the other side. They had a Piper to pipe them along and lots of flamboyance and they weren't particularly well thought of by other divisions because wherever they went they plastered up their divisional signs HD (Highland Division) and there were so many of these signs that they became known as the highway decorators. When they took over they took down the Pegasus sign belonging to the airborne lads from the bridges which they had fought and captured from D Day onwards and threw the sign into the river and replaced it by one of their own. This caused a terrific furore and I believe even Monty was involved and eventually they were ordered to remove their own sign and to recover the Pegasus sign and replace it. Ever since then there has been a Pegasus sign on the bridge and as I said earlier it is now called the Pegasus Bridge.

I have jumped ahead a bit. During these early days it became a fairly common sight to see soldiers and officers wearing brightly coloured cravats. They had been made out of parachute silk from the coloured parachutes that had been dropped and one or two officers I saw even were wearing grey flannel trousers with their battle dress tops. I suppose they rather fancied themselves as the d'Artagnan type of soldier. This practice didn't last long as from the point of view camouflage it was a daft idea and I should imagine they were told to wear more conventional attire. There were all sorts of happenings or events taking place in the first few days and

I can perhaps mention one or two of them. They had built up a very large supply dump of petrol and oil on one side and ammunition on the other side of a road down by the beach and, I think it was D+1, a Jerry plane got through flying very low and dropped a bomb on this dump. The petrol immediately went up which set the ammunition off and there was a series of most enormous explosions. The ground just shook although it was some distance from where I was and then a huge pall of black smoke went spiralling up into the atmosphere and people who had come across after this event said that the column of smoke could be seen even on the other side of the channel at Portsmouth. There were very heavy casualties of men and vehicles but fortunately none of my men or vehicles were in the dump at the time so I didn't suffer any losses (Fig. 10). On June 13th 1944 the colonel from the field ambulance I had been with drove the divisional general (Major General T.G. Rennie) in his jeep and they took a shortcut and went into a minefield. It blew the vehicle up and General Rennie was wounded and the RAMC colonel had his ankle shattered and his eardrums burst. Both he and General Rennie eventually had to go back to England. The general was eventually, after recovering, appointed as general in command of 51st Highland division and was killed on the Rhine crossing when a shell hit his headquarters and killed him and several of the senior staff that were at a conference with him.

Also about this time I'd been on the beach when I heard a series of explosions and I looked out to sea and about half a mile out there was a row of about 4 or 5 old merchant vessels side onto the shore and they started to sink all of them and I thought there must be a submarine or something that had torpedoed them. It turned out later that these were some old vessels brought across and they were sinking them to form a temporary breakwater so that between this temporary breakwater and the shore they would have smoother sea and the ducks (the amphibious lorries) could ferry stuff from ship to shore with much more ease. one day a soldier wandered into our location and he looked most odd. He had a strange attitude and had no badges on at all and his hand was all wrapped up in a handkerchief soaked in blood. He asked if he could have something to eat and

drink so we gave him something to eat and drink and he wouldn't answer any questions. We had a look at his hand and he had a finger that appeared to have been shot off and was bleeding badly so I put a dressing on it. I came to conclusion this was a self-inflicted wound and that the chap had deserted from his unit. I handed him over to the military police.

On of the jobs my little workshops had to do was to look after the vehicles and ambulances belonging to my old field ambulance and these used to come in occasionally some had been knocked about by shrapnel and our chaps would try and fix them up. It always used to horrify me when they opened the back doors of the ambulances as they often were soaked in blood and sometimes the blood just trickled out. One of the nicknames used by the soldiers for an ambulance was 'blood wagon' and they certainly lived up to their nickname. I was always glad to see the drivers of these ambulances and other vehicles because of course they had been my men when I was with the field ambulance and they kept me in touch with what was happening but sadly a lot of the news they brought wasn't very happy. As I said earlier the colonel had been badly wounded and evacuated and the RASC officer who had taken over from me was hit very badly in the shoulder with a chunk of shrapnel and he was evacuated. The CSM who was second-in-command of the RASC section had been hit in the head with shrapnel and been evacuated and I heard later on that he had been taken to Bristol, been operated on but unfortunately died. Another casualty was the dental officer Jimmy Hutton. He had found the strain of trying to work under such adverse conditions too much and he got the jitters in other words he couldn't stop shaking. This made him quite useless as a dentist and he was evacuated and presumably when he recovered he could carry on doing his work with troops in England. Another odd job we had was dealing with the kits of officers who had been killed. They were brought into us by unit vehicles and we would take them down to the beaches and put them onto ducks who would take them to one or other of the ships returning to England. This was a rather distressing task because every time a kit came I

looked at it to see if I knew the officer. I knew quite a lot of the infantry officers so that it was a sad business when I spotted one I recognised.

We occasionally encountered the Maquis (the French resistance) who had sought out French girlfriends of German soldiers. Their fate was to be sat in a chair surrounded by local people, all jeering, and to have their heads shaved. They were known in French as 'collaborateurs horizontal'. After a few days we began to get the morning newspapers round about teatime. They had been flown across from England and distributed to us and it seemed rather funny to be sitting there reading the morning papers under these circumstances. A lot of the stuff they were putting in about the invasion was really a load of rubbish. I suppose they were restricted as to what they could publish and what they couldn't publish.

We dug a big hole to serve as an office, as even on active service there is plenty of paperwork, and another one for the cookhouse, and to give added protection I went across with vehicles to the opposite side of the road and we towed out those pit props that had been put in to prevent gliders landing, rather tentatively to begin with in case there were booby-traps, and brought them across to our location. We placed empty ammunition boxes at two opposite ends of the two big holes we had dug and placed the pit props on top, side-by-side, so that the other two sides provided sort of windows. Then we piled all the soil we had dug out of the excavations on top of the pit props and therefore now had very good cover against anything that might drop on us from the heavens. One of the lads was quite a handyman and he got hold of some wooden ammunition boxes which he carefully dissected and from the remains he made two chairs and a table for the underground office. We had in the kit which we brought across hair clippers and a pair of hairdressing scissors. We experimented amongst ourselves to see who was best at cutting hair. Some were quite good and others were pretty lousy and I was one of those. I experimented on Soapy Hudson's hair unfortunately he had a rather bumpy neck at the back and after I had sliced off one of these bumps he began to object rather strongly so I decided to abandon the idea. Eventually we

found that one the Sergeants was by far the best at cutting hair so he was unofficially appointed as the platoon haircutter.

We always seemed to be moving around in clouds of dust so we were permanently dirty and by having our hair short, in fact some of the chaps radically shaved their heads into a sort of prison crop, meant that when we had a wash we could wash our hair at the same time and make some effort at keeping clean. One night we had a somewhat unpleasant experience. I was out with about 15 vehicles carrying mines up to the outskirts of Caen for the Royal Engineers to lay mine fields. As we were proceeding in the dark we heard the drone of a plane and as it flew overhead it dropped flares and these lit up the landscape almost like daylight. The plane circled round and then came in and dropped a stick of bombs. Fortunately they were fairly inaccurate but the blast blew me into a ditch where I stayed and then he circled round again and came in firing a machine gun or cannon shells at us and then buzzed off. I got out of the ditch amidst some considerable confusion expecting the very worst had happened but in fact there was very little damage to vehicles. I checked up on the men and they were all intact with one exception - one of them was missing. We searched around in the dark but couldn't find him so we had to proceed to the rendezvous with the Royal Engineers, drop off the mines and returned to our location. At first light I went off in the jeep into the area where we had been attacked and searched around for a body or the remains of a body but couldn't find anything. I tried various medical units in the area and they had no reports of a casualty from the raid so I just had to abandon the search and posted him as missing. About two weeks afterwards we had a delivery of the morning papers. It was a Sunday and I opened the News of the World, which was the only paper delivered to us, and on the inside was a photograph of this chap who had gone missing and he was lying in a hospital bed with the Queen (the present Queen Mother) leaning over and shaking his hand. He was described underneath as having been wounded in Normandy so I was able to post him as wounded as per the News of the World which is about the only useful thing I ever found with that paper. He rejoined us later when we had got into Holland and told us what had

happened. He been hit in the area of the stomach by a chunk of shrapnel and a passing military police jeep had spotted him, picked him up and taken him straight down to the beach where an MO had patched him up. They put him on a landing craft and took him back home to England. He said that when his wife visited him the first thing she said to him was "*what have you done to your hair*"? He was one of the lads who had shaved his head thinking of course that he would be abroad for months.

Shortly afterwards I lost another man who been out on a detail of two or three vehicles with an NCO and a Jerry plane had come over and dropped a stick of, what were called by the troops, bouncing bastards. They were small anti-personnel bombs which when they hit the ground literally bounced up and burst at about chest height and scattered fragments of jagged metal in all directions and this poor lad had copped one of these. They brought his body back and fortunately the padre, the young padre who had replaced the old chap, came along too and between us we searched his pockets for personal possessions and his dog tags but it really was a most unpleasant task. His body had been more or less shredded, his face was unrecognisable, his arms had been broken and were dangling, his fingers were broken and dangling and his whole body was soaked in blood so that his khaki battledress had turned a sort of horrible solid purple colour. The young padre showed no emotion whatsoever unlike his older colleague earlier on at the CCS. As I said earlier this padre was a bit of a twit, he kept pestering me to hold church parades despite the fact that I told him I didn't want all my men together in a small area with the risk of shelling. I eventually agreed that he should hold two separate church parades with half the men who wished to attend on each occasion and that he must make the service as short as possible.

We used to get regular intelligence reports which proved very enlightening. They gave lots of detail about the German units opposite us most of which were Panzers, armoured divisions, and lots of other little bits of information and I used to make a point of passing these reports round to the men for them to read as well because I

remembered at Dunkirk one of the most dreadful things about the setup there was nobody, particular the men, knew what was going on. These reports were sometimes quite amusing. I remember one which referred to a German bunker which had held out for quite a long time and they had difficulty in getting the people inside to come out. It was suggested that the commander of this bunker was understood to have a mistress in the nearby town of La Delivrande and he used to nip out at night to visit her. The idea was that she should be suitably booby-trapped and thus dispose of the commander.

There was always plenty of aerial activity particularly during the day. Flights of fighter planes patrolled up and down the beaches keeping an eye open for any enemy planes and these would be replaced at intervals as they ran short on fuel. In addition, there were plenty of bomber raids, presumably on enemy positions in the area of Caen, usually by light twin-engined bombers and one afternoon after one of these raids one of these bombers, which was almost certainly American, started to circle round our location. I couldn't make out why he was doing this and it went on for quite a long time until I began to get a little bit anxious as to what the purpose was. Then, without warning it suddenly dived towards our location straightened up, zoomed up away from us, stalled and then came back. I shouted for everyone to take cover and we all dived into our slit trenches and I dived into our underground office with some of the lads and then there was a hell of a crash. The ground shook and after a short time I popped my head out and this bomber had landed just a few yards beyond my location. It had burst into flames, ammunition was going off in all directions and burning debris was scattered all over my location. We all climbed out and had a look around to see if anybody was hurt fortunately, nobody was or so it seemed. There was a huge burning pile of debris on top of the cookhouse which, if you remember, I had put underground. We pulled this off with some difficulty and out popped the cooks totally unharmed fortunately. A lot of the burning debris had fallen onto two of my vehicles which had set on fire and I was concerned because they were loaded with mines. However, they didn't explode and I can only assume that the explosive in them

wasn't affected by heat but only by the use of detonators. Then from the direction of these lorries there came a shout, ammunition was still going off in all directions, and there were flames and smoke and one of the corporals dashed into the middle of this inferno and after a moment or two came out carrying one of our drivers. We checked this driver over and apart from some slight burns he appeared to be intact but was obviously suffering very badly from shock so we sent him over to a medical unit who gave him some dressings for the burns and after a while he came back more or less recovered. I was very impressed by the action of this corporal and I did ask the Colonel if he would take some action to get him an award of some sort but nothing ever came of it. This corporal was Maltese and he had gone to Gibraltar, become a Gibraltar policeman and then when the war broke out he came to England and joined up. He was a first-class NCO but was inclined to use a lot of bad language in a most peculiar way. I won't endeavour to imitate it but it was really quite hilarious some of the expressions he used. Before long an army fire engine turned up. I must confess I didn't even know there were any ashore. They put the fires out on the vehicles and the remains of this aeroplane and weighing everything up it turned out all right. The next morning a jeep arrived containing three American army air force officers who had been on the plane and they were looking for their buddy who was the other officer who had been with them and wanted to know if we had found a body in the wreckage. We hadn't, there was nothing except the remains of ammunition belts and bits and pieces of equipment. I told them this and they said he must have drifted into enemy lines. They had been hit over Caen and abandoned the aircraft and parachuted down and these three had dropped into our lines and presumably the fourth had fallen into the German lines. What annoyed me about these chaps was that they never once asked if any of our people had been hurt or killed. They never commented on the fact that I had got two burnt out vehicles. Their only concern was for their buddy and I asked why didn't you fix your automatic pilot when you were hit so that the plane would go out to sea. One of them said it was damaged with the shellfire and off they drove. To me Americans were more or less expendable as there were so many of them and they always seemed to have so much equipment which they

treated with disdain whereas we looked after ours very carefully. I think the best way of describing them was in the phrase which was very often used by the troops that they were 'willing to fight to the last yank'.

I had to replace these two burnt out lorries as soon as possible so later that day I obtained a requisition from divisional headquarters and together with a sergeant and two drivers I tootled off in a jeep further down the coast some miles away to a Royal Army Ordnance Corps depot where they had new vehicles which had been brought across to replace any that were destroyed or too badly damaged to use. The office for this depot was in a German pillbox and I went through the entrance to this pillbox in sunshine and of course inside it was quite dark and all I could see was a rather dim figure sat at a desk. This figure said to me "*Hello Fred how are you going on?*" and when my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I realised it was a chap who had been with me in the same form at grammar school. He was a lieutenant in the RAOC and was in charge of this depot. With his assistance I soon collected a couple of new vehicles. Next to the depot was a dump for badly damaged vehicles which were no longer serviceable and these vehicles of all sorts were used to provide spare parts and that system is known as cannibalising. Anybody could go along and find a similar vehicle to the one they wanted to repair and take parts from it and so keep their own vehicle mobile. There was one tale about an officer who went along to this dump with his jeep to look for spare parts for his vehicles and when he got back to his jeep all that was left was the chassis.

We brought with us a pack which we had bought from the NAAFI with unit funds which contained all sorts of goodies for the troops and decided after about three weeks to open it and let the chaps buy what they wanted from it. I had to collect money from them because the unit funds had to be reimbursed and they paid for these goodies with invasion francs. I forgot to mention when we were in the invasion camps that we had changed our money into these invasion francs which were more like Monopoly money even than the present new 5 pound note.

Whether the French would ever accept them I don't think I ever found out because I didn't spend any. Amongst the things in the packs were items such as bootlaces, shaving soap, writing paper, envelopes, sweets, cigarettes that sort of stuff. I did quite a good trade with the lads because they were running short of most of the things which were contained in the pack so it proved to be quite a useful buy in the long run. Talking about writing paper and envelopes, one of the less pleasing jobs which Soapy Hudson and I had to do was to censor the lads letters. It meant that their letters were somewhat inhibited and I always felt embarrassed at having to read about other people's private affairs.

I mentioned earlier about army biscuits needing a pickaxe to break them. We had to put up with them for several weeks until a field bakery came in and then we got a half a slice of white bread each on one or two occasions and then there went back to biscuits again. I broke a tooth on one of these biscuits and coming back from a detail I happened to pass a medical unit which I didn't know, it wasn't one I was familiar with, but I thought I'd try and get this tooth fixed so I popped in and saw an NCO and explained what I needed and he said he would fetch a dental officer and he showed me into a marquee, again rather dark after coming in out of the sun, and it had a sort of collapsible seat with a treadle drill. I suppose it was part of the dental equipment for active service and shortly afterwards the dental officer duly appeared. I explained my problem and he sat me down in the chair and looked at this tooth and said "*do you mind if I only put in a temporary filling as about quarter an hour ago we were subjected to heavy shelling and we have had a number of casualties and I feel a wee bit shaky?*" By then I had grown accustomed to the darkness and I could see the sun shining through a lot of holes in this marquee where the shrapnel had come through so I hastily said by all means and got the hell out of there as fast as I could. He must have had a lot of courage even to attempt a temporary filling under those circumstances. A mobile bath unit moved into the area and we were notified and sent along parties to have their first proper shower for a very long time. It had been rigged up in a farmyard where there was running water on tap and it was a very primitive set up. They had a large tank which was heated and a pump to force the water through a long tube about 7

foot off the ground with holes in it and the warm water came out through the holes and provided a sort of shower. I went along with a party and duly stripped. There was no screen around these things just the open farmyard and we were all dancing about naked under these showers when we spotted the ladies from the farm, about five of them all stood by taking a great interest. The officer in charge of the bath units shooed them away amidst a lot of giggles.

One sunny afternoon we heard the sound of aeroplane engines and looking out towards the sea we could see a host of heavy bombers coming towards us. They were British of course. They were night bombers, the famous Lancasters and there are hundreds of them. They flew over flight after flight fairly low and the sky was black with them as they carried out a raid on Caen. We could see this taking place in the distance and there was gunfire from the anti-aircraft guns flashing in the sky. You couldn't actually see the bombs falling as they were too far away but one or two of the planes were hit and came down in flames and the rest returned over us and made off for home. Then about a quarter of an hour or perhaps half an hour later we could see towards us from the direction of Caen a huge wall of dust. The wind was coming from inland and this huge wall of dust came closer and closer until we were completely enveloped in it; everything was covered in thick dust which had been caused by this enormous bombardment from the air on Caen. It took a good half hour before we could see the sunlight again and then we had to set about cleaning everything including ourselves. Poor old Caen was always taking a bashing either from land or from the air and sometimes even from the sea with the huge battleships sending their enormous shells over. I forget the purpose behind it but the artillery had a programme which laid a barrage on the surrounding area near Caen which was bigger than the barrage preceeding the attack at El Alamein. I was involved with my vehicles and we had to build up huge stocks of ammunition at the sites of the various artillery units and once the barrage started we continued to ferry stuff to the gun sites from the beach dumps, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, and we even reached the stage where ducks were coming ashore with ammunition from merchantmen and offloading them

straight into our lorries and we took them up to the guns. At the gun sites on a number of occasions as we offloaded the ammunition they broke open the boxes and proceeded to put the shells straight into the guns and fired them. The noise was appalling. It was at that occasion I was very thankful that I wasn't an artillery officer as I might have been. As a matter of interest, being an assault division our field artillery had been equipped with self-propelled guns; that is guns on sort of tank tracks. They were 105 mm and they were used instead of the 25 pounders which field artillery in divisions normally had. Eventually, as the division had in effect reverted to an ordinary infantry division these self-propelled guns were withdrawn and the field artillery reverted to their 25 pounders. I think on the whole they much preferred the self-propelled guns but there was a shortage of ammunition, which was American.

I received a message from brigade headquarters to report there and on doing so the brigade major told me that our troops had captured Caen and that he wanted me to supply the vehicles to take in the infantry to replace the troops who had carried out the capture. The changeover was to take place that night and I was given a time and three places close together where the troops would be waiting. I hadn't got troop carrying vehicles which normally have seats or benches so for the comfort of the infantry I put a row of compo packs (they were in wooden boxes) on each side of the inside of the lorry so they could sit on them. We appeared at these three sites, we picked the infantry up and it was dark and we proceeded very slowly and carefully in absolute silence down into Caen. I dropped these chaps off and moved further down the road and there the infantry were waiting who had been withdrawn from the city. They got into the vehicles; they were rather subdued I suppose they had had a lot of casualties, and I drove them down to the beach where there was a rest camp and they were to have a few days rest there with a few comforts and relieved of duties so they could rest. When I dropped these chaps off I noticed that quite a few of the compo packs had been broken into and the only things missing were the cigarettes. I suppose these chaps had run out of cigarettes, seen the compo packs, got their bayonets out and helped themselves

which made me absolutely furious. I got hold of one of their officers pointed to these packs and told him what had happened and told him to report the fact to his quartermaster so that he would know when he got the next delivery of compo packs for his battalion why he was getting broken packs. I didn't see any reason why other battalions should suffer. The thing that annoyed me was that I had shown a bit of sympathy for these blokes, I realised that they'd be in a pretty tired and weary state and if I hadn't put the compo packs in for them to sit on they would have had to stand up in the lorries and be knocked about from side to side. All they had done was to abuse that.

One night, it must have been about the fifth week, I hadn't got any duties that night and I had gone for a dos in my little dugout, we never took our clothes off only our boots to be ready for an emergency and being pretty weary I was sleeping very heavily. I was woken up by somebody shouting "*hello Fred we are here*". I looked out and although it was very dark I could see it was the OC. What had happened was the headquarters had duly arrived from England and they were lined up on the road outside. So I had to drag myself out, very weary, put my boots on and the only thing I could do with them at that time was to organise them into the field next to our two orchards where the toilets were. Having seen they were all right, I left them to it and went back to my dugout to try and get a bit more sleep. The next this morning, whilst I was shaving, a couple of shells came sailing over slap bang into this field where headquarters was and there was lots of shouting and screaming and I dashed over and there were several bodies lying on the ground one or two were dead or dying. One of the lads had been in our latrines and had been hit in the foot and that was hanging off and it was all rather unfortunate considering the fact that they had only been ashore a few hours. One of the strangest things was that, apart from that bomb landing near us, we never had a shell on our location for all the five weeks we had been there. It certainly gave them a very early baptism of fire. Their arrival meant that Fraser was there with my car and all my camp kit and extra stuff which I had to leave behind so I was going to be looked after again but it also meant that my little command would now be broken up and we would revert to an ordinary brigade company RASC. I would cease to be my own boss and I was

rather sad about it although it was inevitable because during those weeks we had all lived together under very difficult circumstances. We had all got on well together and I liked to think that we had done a pretty good job.

As I told you earlier, the Colonel had a nasty habit of volunteering some of his troops for jobs which really had nothing to do with us and as some of the beach had still not been fully cleared of mines he conceived the idea that chaps who had been on the course which I had run at Dumfries, on mines and infantry weapons, should get some practice in by clearing some of the beach. Well I thought this was an absolutely barmy idea. These chaps had only been on a short course and they weren't skilled men like the Royal Engineers who had specialised in that sort of thing and despite my protests, which rather annoyed him, he insisted that I organise a party to do this job. The RSM was to be in charge and I detailed a sergeant and four men who had been on the course. The sergeant and I had also been to two exhibitions of mines, one at the little estaminet by Pegasus Bridge where the REs had laid out a series of mines particularly stressing the new mines which they hadn't come across before and a second, bigger exhibition over in Bayeux which was the only time I ever went there. It had in fact survived very well because the 50th Northumbrian Div had captured it either on D day or D+1 without much opposition and it was therefore largely intact. One of the new mines was an anti-personnel mine shaped like a small plant pot covered over and on the top there was a small cylinder of very soft metal. The cylinder contained some acid and suspended underneath was a thin piece of soft wire attached to a detonator and the explosive was inside the main part. The way it functioned was that if you trod on the soft metal cylinder, the acid was released and it burnt through the soft wire and the detonator descended and up went the mine. This all took place in a few fractions of a second. These were planted in soil or in the sand with the top of the little metal cylinder painted a suitable colour so that when you looked at it only the top showed and it looked like a pebble. The party got to work on the beach and in the first two days they cleared quite a lot of mines including these pot mines. The system they worked was to unroll white tapes on either side of the area they

were working in and as they moved forward the tapes were moved forward too so that between them and their starting point was clear. They used a mine detector and bayonets for prodding and it seemed to be going very well. I occasionally popped over between other jobs to see how it was going and the sergeant had done very well. On one particular site he had checked the concrete steps going up from the sand onto the promenade and he had found one of the steps was in fact wood painted to look like concrete and underneath at both ends and the middle were Tellamines (anti tank mines). He had lifted these very carefully and fortunately he had found underneath each mine a booby trap fixed to another Tellamine. His carefulness had paid off and he had survived. On the third day, I went over to find that the RSM who had been supervising the work had put one foot just over the white tape line into an area which hadn't been cleared stepped on a pot mine and blown his foot off. He was from the Manchester area and I had always got on very well with him. I was most annoyed about this because it more or less proved my point and the Colonel very quickly called a halt to the rest of the mine clearing and forgot all about it. The RSM was evacuated and I did meet him again after the war at a re-union in a London hotel and when he spotted me he waved and shouted "*Manchester*" and I just grinned and asked him how he was managing and in fact with his artificial foot he walked extremely well just with a slight limp.

The rest camp which I referred to earlier as the place to which I took the troops from Caen was at Luc-sur-mer, a little holiday town, and there were other facilities for the troops to relax and enjoy themselves for a 48 hour leave including a Divisional concert party to entertain them. The Colonel had another of his brilliant ideas - Bastille Day was approaching (14th July) and he contacted the Mayor and volunteered a sort of Guard of Honour to march in their procession and he even talked the colonel of the KOSBs into providing his pipe band. So Muggins here got landed with the job of getting a party together for the Guard of Honour and we all had to polish up our brasses and steel helmets like we had had to do for the King's inspection over in England but fortunately this time I had Fraser who did the job for

me. Come the 14th of July we paraded on the sea front with their own procession of local dignitaries and off we set with the pipe band leading playing a rousing tune and all the troops marched very well and smartly until we got to the town square in front of the Mayor and town hall and there the Mayor gave an impassioned speech, only little bits of which I could understand. They played the Marseillaise and I had the forethought to call the men to attention and present arms and then after this the Mayor came over to me looking rather upset, he was a tiny little man with a shiny top hat and a red, white and blue sash around his waist, and he nattered away to me and after a while I began to realise that he was annoyed because he thought the British had taken over their celebration and he insisted that when we marched through the town back to the promenade that his local town band would play. I told the pipe major and we duly set off with the local band playing. It was quite impossible to march to this band as they didn't play any particular time and the net result was that my lads and the pipe band just shuffled along and kept changing step trying to get some sort of pattern to their marching without any success and things became more and more chaotic. There were troops in the town who were at the rest camp and they were highly amused at our antics and to add salt to our wounds some of my own pals amongst the unit officers had turned up to watch us, including the Colonel, and that they also appeared highly delighted at my discomfiture. I gave them an extremely dirty look, concentrating it particularly on the Colonel, and when we got back onto the promenade I very hastily dismissed the troops and pushed off in high dudgeon. So, whenever Bastille Day arrives each year it inevitably reminds me of that shambles. Shortly afterwards, and at long last, we got orders to move and we left the beachhead. I can't say I was sorry to get away from it. It had always been a bit claustrophobic and overcrowded and we moved south to a town called Flers. It was a pleasant little town that had been knocked about a bit but it was a country town and all the area roundabouts was known as the Bocage. It is very similar to Devon with lovely country lanes with high hedges on either side. Very difficult country for fighting but very pleasant to spend time in.

I continued to run convoys down to the beach to bring up supplies of various kinds into the new area and this went on for some time. Then one evening we were sat in an out house of a farm which we had made into a sort of mess and the OC said to me that he thought it was time I had a bit of a break. I had been on the go ever since I got back from leave in April and the only break I had had was that one night at Brown's hotel in London when we were in the invasion camp. We were always far too busy in the assault platoon for any of us to take advantage of the rest camp. The infantry, when they weren't fighting, could be withdrawn and rested but with the RASC we still had to continue working all the time because the troops had to be fed, their vehicles and tanks needed fuel and we had to build up large stocks of various kinds ready for the next action. This meant we were on tap seven days a week, 24 hours a day. On some occasions I would go 48 hours without any proper sleep at all. So the OC said take your car in the morning with Fraser and push off for the day and I don't want to see you back until tomorrow night. I thought what the devil can I do with a day off? I didn't want to go down to the beach, I had seen enough of that place, and it suddenly dawned on me that we weren't so very far from Souvigne sur Sarthe, the little village I had been in right at the beginning of the war in 1940. I checked on the map and decided it was quite a feasible idea so next morning, bright and early, I popped some tins of food from a compo pack into the car and some cigarettes and sweets and with Fraser off I set. We got caught up in various convoys but eventually I realised we were in the American sector because all the vehicles and units were American. One spot we got held up at was where they were laying pipes for Pluto (the fuel pipeline under the ocean) and these were being laid by black American troops. In those days blacks and whites didn't mix in the American army. The Blacks were kept separate in units of their own under white officers. But one of the funny things that I spotted with these blacks was that if there was some shellfire about when it started their eyes would roll and their faces would go grey. I suppose it really was the equivalent of white people going white when they were frightened. We had quite a pleasant run after a while when we got more or less free from any army traffic and I found myself in Sable sur Sarthe, turned right along the road to Souvigne sur Sarthe and arrived outside the

estaminee which we had frequented in 1940. I went inside the estaminee and they all looked at me and I recognised one or two of them but they didn't recognise me at all and in best schoolboy French I did my best to explain who I was and it didn't really click very well and then I sang one or two of those nursery rhymes in French which I had been inclined to do on my previous visit and then it suddenly clicked. They realised who I was. I think one of the things that confused them was the fact that when I had been there before I had been a private soldier and here I was back as a captain. In the French army it took years before you could rise to the rank of captain even if you were commissioned.

I did tell this story in a letter to your mother which she still has and produced to me some time ago. They were all delighted to see me and they went out into the back garden and dug up some extra special wine which they had put there to hide from the Germans. It was the first intoxicating drink since before we were sealed into the invasion camp way back before D-Day. Fraser although essentially a teetotaller was prevailed upon to take a glass or two and they made a huge omelette which we tucked into and I gave them the tins of food and the cigarettes. In the mean time the village had been alerted and there was quite a crowd outside the estaminee so I went outside and distributed sweets amongst the children and one little girl presented me with a bouquet and it was really quite an event. One chap who appeared to be a leading light apologised to me because Madame la Contesse of the château wasn't in residence so she wouldn't be able to see me. After a while, probably two or three hours, I decided it was time we were making tracks so Fraser and I bid our farewells and amidst lots of kisses and hugs and vows of eternal friendship we came out of the estaminee to find the car had been decorated overall with flowers. Fraser, not being a drinker, wasn't really in a fit state to drive so I drove. We left with everybody waving farewell and I felt like the Queen of the May. We got back to Flers late on, probably about 11 o'clock at night, and I had really enjoyed the day out. It did me a lot of good and Fraser too when he had recovered the next morning said he had had a smashing time. Another little break I had was a visit to a George Formby show. Some quite bright fellow had

picked an outdoor spot for his performance by the side of a river on a bend so that there was flat land by the Riverside and then the banks rose up to the road in a sort of half moon which formed a natural amphitheatre. The show was quite a modest sort of thing, it only consisted of two lorries put back to back with planks across between them to form a stage and the men were in one lorry changing and the women were in the other. There was George Formby and his wife Beryl, a girl tap dancer, a male singer pianist and they put on a pretty good show. As you can imagine with a troop concert George Formby's jokes and songs were a little bit blue. He daren't put them on an ordinary stage but they were very acceptable to troops on active service.

The next stage of events was what became known as the Falaise gap. What happened was that the Canadians in the north attacked south towards Falaise. The British troops attacked from the west, and that included our own division, and the Yanks swept out of the Cherbourg peninsular south of the German army and headed towards Falaise and eventually as the Germans retreated they were cut off and trapped. They were pounded by every possible means of destroying them you could imagine they had field guns, medium long-range guns, they were bombed, they were mortared and they were slaughtered. When they surrendered it meant that the allies had had their first big victory and the Germans were on the retreat. On a couple of occasions after the battle while bringing up supplies from the beachhead I made a diversion, a bit of a long way round through Falaise, first of all as a matter of interest and secondly to show the troops in the vehicles just what could be done to the German army and that was quite appalling. When you got in that area every road, every lane, every field in fact every area as far as you could see was full of burnt out vehicles and tanks, bits and pieces of vehicles, dead animals horses and mules. Strange as it sounds although the German army was so highly mechanised they did in fact use horses and mules for their transport to a large extent. Above all, in all this mess, were corpses and bits and pieces of corpses, a head here and an arm there, a trunk there. The bodies had been lying there several days in the hot sun and had become so bloated that they looked like

caricatures, most grotesque. They had blown all the buttons off their tunics with the gas inside their bodies and the swelling. Perhaps the worst of all was the smell. It was a stench of rotting bodies and I am sure you have never smelt a body that has been lying in the sun for several days but it is a most sickly sweet, horrible smell and one of the funny things is that a dead cow smells the same as a dead human being. On a lighter note, I understand that Falaise was the birthplace of William the Conqueror so we had some sort connection with the place.

CHAPTER 10

FROM NORMANDY TO HOLLAND

Then came time to leave Flers. The road was open all the way to the Seine and we finished up at Les Andelys. Strangely enough this small town is only a few miles downstream from Vernon where I crossed the Seine in 1940 where I met that funny little French cockney. We were situated in a farm just on the outskirts of the town and from then on we just set about moving stores of all kinds from the beachhead to the area round the Seine. This was a real hard slog and we kept at it day after day going all the way back to the beachhead and then bringing the supplies forward and back again and this went on for quite a long time. There was no rest for us although the infantry were resting. During this time any of the men who were off duty had trips into Paris which wasn't very far away in recreation vehicles. On one of the trips back from the beachhead I managed to leave the convoy in charge of a lieutenant and peeled off to cross the Seine at Rouen, it wasn't very far away, and I meandered through the town to look at it. It was a lovely old French town with a marvellous Cathedral and I got back to Les Andelys at much the same time as the convoy. Incidentally if you went off like that, which you weren't supposed to do and the powers that be frowned upon it, it was known as swanning or going for a swan. Eventually it came my turn to have a trip to Paris with one of the recreational

vehicles and I duly went to sleep looking forward to this trip and I was wakened about 4 o'clock in the morning with a message and instead of spending the day in Paris I finished up in Brussels on the day it was liberated. The journey from Les Andelys to Brussels was very different from in Normandy after all we had more or less smashed Normandy to bits but we were going through an area that the Germans had retreated through very quickly so there was little damage and all the people were out with their French, and later on Belgian, flags flying, bottles of wine and grapes, hugs and kisses and cheering in fact it was difficult sometimes to make headway because they were more or less blocking the road. Brussels, of course, was full of people cheering but unfortunately I couldn't stop and I carried on through to the other side of Louvain where I had a rendezvous with the advance party of the div HQ. I had been given a map reference which proved to be a crossroads and I expected there would be someone there to meet me. It was getting fairly dark by this time and there wasn't a soul about and I stayed there for about an hour and nobody turned up. So there I was somewhere in Belgium wondering what the devil to do. I told Fraser just to drive on and we carried on up the main route and after about 40 minutes I saw a dim light and found the advance party of the div HQ purely by accident. When I went inside the barn where they were sitting I approached the second-in-command who was a major and was rather angry that there had been nobody to meet me at this rendezvous and I made my annoyance rather apparent which didn't please this major. He said "*I am sorry Fred. We forgot all about you*". Which didn't make me feel any better and there was nothing I could do then as it was dark and I just went and sat in the car with Fraser and we dozed there until the morning. I was told there was a convoy on its way which had left an hour or two after I'd left from Les Andelys and I had to pick it up and take it to a location for which I had a map reference. So I set off back the way I had come keeping an eye open for this convoy and got as far as Louvain getting rather worried as to what might have happened to it and then eventually I did find it parked up in an outer suburb in a boulevard and there was a sergeant and two drivers there and nobody else. I asked the sergeant who was in charge of the convoy and he said "*Mr Hudson*" so I asked where he was. "*Oh he is in one of*

the houses opposite celebrating"; so I asked where all the NCOs and drivers were. *"They're doing the same sir in other houses."* So I said *"you go and get Mr Hudson and tell him I want him here immediately and rouse out the drivers and NCOs and I want this convoy on the move in half an hour"*. Out came Soapy from one of these houses obviously a bit tiddly and I gave him a damn good dressing down for deserting the convoy. For the first time I had rather strong words with him which sobered him up a bit. It didn't last of course as I was on too good terms with him to fall out for long but I suppose I was absolutely fed up because I had had a long day, the day before, setting off early in the morning bashing across northern France and into Belgium, overtaking convoys of military vehicles, getting through crowds of cheering people, then ignored when I did eventually find the Div HQ and having to sleep in the car, not very well and then the worry of finding the convoy afterwards so I was in a foul mood. However, once I got the convoy moving I soon recovered from a bad temper and I think I also appreciated the convoy being parked in the middle of a city with all the local people anxious to entertain British troops. The temptation must have been pretty great particularly as they didn't know what was happening and I suppose also underneath I was rather narked because I had missed all the fun.

We eventually got to the location which was a small village the other side of Bourg-Leopold in Flemish or Leopoldsville in French and that town is equivalent really to Aldershot, a military town with lots of barracks. We were in this village for some time and there was an unfortunate incident. A sergeant came to me one evening and said there been an accident and would I come and deal with it. I went to a nearby farm, over a very rough soft, sandy track and there in the living room of this farm was a young woman lying on a sort of settee. Apparently a corporal who had been staying in this farm in the loft upstairs had come down the stairs which were open, there was no side to them, and as he came down a Sten gun hanging from his shoulder had hit the side of the stairs and fired about half a dozen shots. These shots had gone through the thighs of this poor girl and she was bleeding profusely but the corporal, despite the fact that he was extremely upset, had had

the good sense to put some tourniquets on both the legs. Again we had this Sten gun business as happened early in the invasion with the lance corporal. I hated those things they were so unreliable and I think more dangerous to the British than they were to the Germans. I sent the sergeant off to the nearest medical unit and he came back with an ambulance but unfortunately with this sandy track being so soft it got bogged down and we had to go and dig it out. We decided not to bring it any further and took a stretcher and carried this young woman to the ambulance which took her to a civilian hospital some miles away and fortunately none of the bullets had hit any bone just the fleshy parts of the leg. When I enquired the next day at the hospital I was told that she was all right and would make a good recovery. The thing that impressed me about this young woman was, despite the shock and the obvious pain she was undergoing whilst we were waiting for the ambulance, she kept on saying that she didn't want the corporal to be punished as it wasn't his fault and when I went to the hospital there was a message there from her again saying that she didn't want the corporal to be punished. She was quite a girl. He wasn't punished because we checked the Sten gun and even with the safety catch on if you banged it hard enough it would still fire so the corporal was exonerated from any fault.

After some time we moved again and this time we carried on until we crossed the frontier into Holland where the Germans had come to a stop and started to fight back again. It was a very difficult country for fighting because it's very flat, very wet with lots of dykes and canals, bridges which the Germans of course blew and which the Royal Engineers had to replace with Bailey bridges. It was particularly difficult for tanks because their normal practice of fanning out over fields just wasn't on. The fields were very wet and basically sandy underneath and the tanks even with their tracks could easily get bogged down. The place we stopped at was a farm and the people there as usual were very delighted to see and made a fuss of us and they asked us to join them in a local celebration. We all went into the farmyard and two chaps with spades went into a field and dug up a big bundle wrapped in a tarpaulin and brought this into the farmyard, opened it up and inside

were long rods with a big metal ball at one end and at the other presumably one of their local traditional flags. They did all sorts of strange moves with these instruments, all to a sort of pattern, It was quite clever and quite intricate and presumably this was one of their local customs. I suppose they had hidden these things in the field in case the Germans confiscated them because they didn't like occupied countries to practice their local traditions. One day, about this time, when I was out with a convoy we heard the sound of aeroplane engines in the sky and there were masses and masses of gliders being towed that passed overhead. There were hundreds of them and the sky was full and this later turned out to be the British airborne landing at Arnhem. There were two others: one at Nijmegen and the other at St Ouden by the Americans. We weren't involved in any way with supporting the airborne landings at Arnhem. I believe some RASC vehicles were in the convoy that set out to try and relieve the airborne lads that was badly shot up by German tanks and suffered very heavy casualties.

Our next move was to an area around Eindhoven and it was there that we stayed right through the winter. When we first arrived there were lots of American paratroopers wandering around the place but they fairly quickly disappeared. We were now pretty well into autumn and after living more or less in the open since April one of the objectives was to get the troops under cover. They couldn't very well live in the open when the severe weather came. So a lot of our time was spent in different villages in the area of Helmond and the troops usually went into the local school and the officers were billeted out just for sleeping purposes and we set up a mess in a house which the Dutch were only too willing to offer to us. Fighting carried on right into the winter through November and December but we were held up by the river Maas (which in France is known as the Meuse) and the infantry had a pretty rough time with the severe weather. Most of the action later on in the winter was confined to making raids across the river Maas by the Germans onto our side and by us onto the German side. Going back to our first entry into the area at that time we were still drawing supplies from Belgium and on one occasion I went to a supply depot which had been opened up in the area of a factory. As I

went into the office with my indent there was a major standing there who said "*how are you doing Fred?*" and I realised that he was a captain I had known with the 42nd Div, a Territorial, that's why he called me Fred even though he had known me as a corporal. He was now a major on Corps headquarters on the supply side and he'd seen an indent signed by me and recognised the name and decided there was only one F Hopley in this man's army so he'd made a special trip over on the excuse of seeing how the depot was being handled just to see if I was going all right which was very decent of him. Strangely enough after that I seemed to run into him on a number of occasions on the road when we exchanged salutes and friendly waves. (Fig. 11)

The people we met in the villages which we went into over winter were always very friendly but they were country folk and they didn't speak English. It seemed to be a mainly Catholic area because on Sunday everybody went to church three times. We were always made to feel very much at home in our billets and although they had very, very little themselves they were always generous with what little they had. Lighting was a problem as they had restricted electric lighting and it was always rather gloomy but the beds were always comfy. In one, it was a house with two very, very old ladies and they seemed to be more Victorian than anything else and we had a mess in the schoolmasters house and at that time things were quiet and we could afford to have a few drinks after our evening meal. By that I mean without risk of being drunk when we had to go out on duty. Whenever I came back from the mess to this house the two old ladies would be sat there beaming all over their faces with a glass of hot milk and a biscuit for me. I didn't really want it after the booze I had had and so to try and avoid this I would stay rather later in the mess and creep back and try get in the house without them hearing but as soon as I opened the front door there these two old ladies were beaming all over their faces and ushering me into the kitchen for the glass of milk and the biscuit. It was a pretty hopeless situation because I couldn't speak Dutch and they couldn't speak English but eventually I just gave it up as a bad job and had to have my cup of hot milk and a biscuit every evening.

In another village the house I was in was the village postman's and he had two rather charming teenage daughters and when I came in from a job of some sort perhaps rather tired and dirty they would each give me a kiss, sit me down one would take one boot off and the other take the other boot off and then they would put a pair of their father slippers on my feet and made me feel completely at home. In another village I was billeted in the local dairy and the lady was middle-aged and appeared to be minus a husband who I think been taken off by the Germans for forced labour and one evening she produced a cousin who had cycled over from Helmond. This male cousin spoke English and apparently this woman had asked him to come over to ask me if I was happy and if I was being looked after properly and was there anything else she could do to make sure that my stay in her house was a pleasant one. It just showed you the way these Dutch seemed to have such an affection for the British. Practically all the Dutch in the country areas wore plain wooden clogs, not fancy ones that you buy when you go over there as a tourist, and I should imagine they wore those because there was a shortage of leather and in any case even if they could get hold of shoes or boots they would have been much too expensive. During my late night jobs I stopped off at a couple of places just for the night at different towns. The first one was a nun's cell in a convent and if that's the way the nun's lived thank goodness I wasn't a nun. But the other one was at a town called Venray which is just a mile or so back from the Maas river. That had been captured by our troops and been badly knocked about and this night which was quite late on in the winter when there was a lot of snow and ice about was brilliantly moonlit, you could see quite a long way, and it was pretty quiet with very little activity going on from the point of view of gun firing and I really felt as though I was on another planet it was so weird. The whole area being evacuated, several miles back from the Maas, of civilians so there was a town completely empty and badly knocked about and it really felt most peculiar. There was always a thought in the back of one's mind that a German raiding party might suddenly appear and then you would be in serious trouble. It wasn't all miserable although it was perhaps the most miserable winter I had spent in the army since the first

winter of 1939-1940. We occasionally went into Helmond, the nearest town of any size, which was quite a pleasant town and there was nothing in the shops. I think the Germans had treated the Dutch much more harshly than the Belgians or the French. There was a saying in Holland, a German quotation, which loosely translated meant '*everything's gone - nothing in the window*'. This was very different from Belgium or France who seemed to have masses of stuff in their shops which we hadn't even seen in England for years.

The NAAFI had taken over a sports and social club in Helmond where they used to hold dances occasionally and you could go in for a drink and it was open to civilians so we could mix with them. Whilst there we met four Dutch girls who were sisters. The eldest about 30 and the youngest about 15 and they were daughters of a professor of languages at Amsterdam University and they had been evacuated into the countryside when the war was getting rather hot. The three eldest spoke very good English although with a heavy Dutch accent and the youngster didn't speak any at all. Their father used to hold language days that is, say on a Monday everyone in the household would speak English and the next day they would speak German, the next day French and then revert to Dutch and then around again. If any of them spoke Dutch on the non- Dutch days they got chores to do like making the beds or washing the pots. They were very pleasant and they had been in Venray when our lads had liberated it. It was a sort of black army joke to say that a place had been well and truly liberated when in fact it had been completely flattened. These girls had been hiding in a cellar when the fighting was going on and it must have been a terrifying experience and then they heard English voices and one of them said to the others "*we're all right now the Tommys have arrived*". On the continent English soldiers were always referred to as Tommy's by French, Belgian Dutch, German always Tommy's.

I had a number of trips into Eindhoven, a much bigger town than Helmond, and that is the headquarters of Philips the electrical company. They had a very fine small theatre as part of their recreational set up. On a couple of occasions I managed to

see plays put on by ENSA with quite well-known English actors and actresses. The main pleasure if you like to put it that way was to have 48 hours leave in Brussels. Brussels was very lively and gay in the old-fashioned sense of the word and although there was a blackout at night and there was a curfew, I think midnight, nevertheless there was plenty going on and as I said the shops and restaurants wherever you went had plenty of everything. The leave hotel was on the boulevard Adolf Max. The hotel was in the four or five-star category, taken over again by the NAAFI, and you paid half a crown a day and you had a lovely room with a nice comfy bed with sheets which was in itself a luxury. You had excellent meals with an orchestra playing for the evening dinner and there was a remarkable lady who acted as a sort of hostess. She was of indeterminate age, and could have been anything between 60 and 90, very vivacious, spoke with a pronounced Russian accent but excellent English and she was a white Russian. Her name inevitably was Olga and she'd escaped from Russia when the revolution took place in 1917. She was a fount of all knowledge. She knew everything that was going on in Brussels by way of entertainment such as nightclubs and suitable shops to shop at to send home souvenirs or presents. She was in contact with lots of people who wanted to invite English officers to their homes or perhaps to the parties at their homes. On one occasion she gave me directions to go to a party and told me which tram to catch and incidentally the trams in Brussels were free to all British troops, similar to the way they were in Darlington when we got back from Dunkirk, and in Glasgow which I haven't mentioned before. Of all places Glasgow allowed troops on their trams for nothing. I also remember in Edinburgh that kilted soldiers weren't allowed to go on the top deck of the trams; they had to sit down below! I eventually found this house which appeared to be in quite a nice district of Brussels and rang the bell at the door and a very neat, smart young lady complete in a maids outfit answered the door, gave me a little curtsy, took my coat and cap and showed me into the main room which was full of very well-dressed people, mostly young, with one or two other English officers. I realised that this was a society do and the people there were quite high up in the social strata of Brussels. The hostess greeted me in excellent English introduced me to various people including

a girl of about 21 who spoke almost perfect English and was a real chatterbox. She also proved to be a bit amorous later on. She sat me down and started chatting about England and she said "*I suppose you go hunting in pink*" and I managed to keep my face straight and she said "*we always hunt in green*". I found out later from one of her pals that she was in fact a Countess. The food was very, very good indeed and endless booze of all kinds and it did pass through my mind that considering how we were fixed in England, and particularly how the poor Dutch were, the well-to-do Belgians seemed to be doing rather nicely. It proved a very entertaining evening and when I did eventually make my farewells I realised it was after curfew time and also all the trams had stopped running so I had a rather long walk back to the hotel which I had to do very carefully in case the military police picked me up. I dodged through one or two side streets and in one street I heard a sound of running water and as I came towards it I realised it was the little boy that pees into the fountain. The well known statue 'the Manneken Pis'. I had seen it before when I was on holiday in 1937 on a day out from Ostend.

Another place I visited on that day out there was WH Smith's who had a branch in Brussels and I had called in and bought some postcards to send home. I had looked around for somewhere to write these postcards and I approached a young chap who was an assistant and in my best schoolboy French said "*avez vous une esctritoire, s'il vous plaît*" which to my way of thinking meant have you a writing desk please. He looked at me as though I was not quite all there and then said "*what can I do to help you sir?*" He proved to be an Englishman who was training in the Brussels branch of WH Smith's. I mention this as during these leaves I used to pop into WH Smith's, as they had a very nice cafe, and perhaps had morning coffee or afternoon tea - all very English. One of the people who I saw on more than one occasion was Mary Churchill, the daughter of Winston Churchill, who is now Lady Soames. She was there as an ATS officer with SHAEF that stood for Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.

We also occasionally managed to wangle duty leaves to Brussels. How we worked it was that certain items of equipment which needed repair could only be dealt with by people in Brussels so it meant that the particular article of equipment had to be taken to Brussels, repaired and brought back again. In my case our typewriter in the company office had conked out so of course it was necessary for me to take it to Brussels to get it repaired. I set off with Fraser in the car and we eventually got to Brussels, found the place where it was to be repaired, handed it in and they told us to collect it at lunchtime the next day. So we then drove over a barracks which accommodated other ranks that were on duty and I left the car there with Fraser and gave him some extra money so he could enjoy himself and walked over to the town major's office where you got a pass which entitled you to put up at a duty hotel. This hotel was fairly decent it was nothing like as good as the one on Rue Adolf Max but you got a decent room and bed and the meals were quite adequate and reasonable. On this occasion when I came down for breakfast there was a table with just one chap sat at it so I went over and asked him if he minded me joining him and he just looked up and grunted so I sat down. He was in ATA uniform that is Air Transport Auxiliary who were civilians who flew military aircraft from manufacturers direct to airfields and they wore a sort of dark blue uniform with their silver wings up and then I realised who this chap was. It was Jim Morrison who was the husband of Amy Johnson. Both of them of course were very famous Flyers before the war and had achieved a number of famous flights either individually or together. He looked pretty miserable and apart from the grunt that was the sum total of any conversation I had with him. I presume that he felt that he had very much come down in the world; he was, by then, divorced from Amy Johnson who later died when she went missing over the Thames estuary in one of the planes that she was delivering. Jim Morrison died a few years after the war from drink.

One duty trip I did to Brussels involved a small convoy of six lorries and when I had loaded them up with the stores we had gone for we set off on our return journey. It was dark and it was quite a long trip back to Holland and when I got into Holland it

started to snow quite heavily and I had to make a right turn on the road I was travelling along and I saw the opening very faintly in the snow and, with the very subdued lighting we had, turned into the opening and found myself in the middle of a wood with the six vehicles. After some difficulty we managed to turn them round and get them out and back onto the road and about a quarter of a mile further along I found the correct road. That was only the second time I had gone astray with a convoy. The first, if you remember, was in East Grinstead when I drove into the local cinema's car park. It wasn't too bad considering the many thousands of miles I must have taken convoys on in England and Scotland and north-western Europe. It sounds as though I was constantly going to Brussels but in fact the visits were few and far between really as all our time was spent in Holland in rather miserable weather conditions. One day at our location there was a bit of a dog fight going on overhead and a plane came down rather shakily and landed in a field a few hundred yards from us and it was a Typhoon. Known colloquially as a Tiffy. We dashed over to see if the pilot was all right and he climbed out and he was only young fellow, about 20, wearing an ordinary battledress jacket and pyjama trousers. I don't know why he was in those but perhaps he had had to come out of his bunk back in England and take to the air immediately afterwards. But he was very, very white and shaking all over and he had been hit but to give the boy his due he had brought the plane down instead of parachuting out of it. The plane seemed to be in reasonable condition but would need patching up where it had been hit and we put a guard on it and notified brigade headquarters and presumably they contacted the air force people because after a couple hours a car arrived with a transporter which was used for carrying small planes about. They partly dismantled the plane and got it onto the transporter and the pilot officer, who by now had recovered after we had given him something to eat and a good stiff whiskey, was whisked away in the car.

Another problem we encountered was from the V1s (the buzz bombs). They were being launched from somewhere on the other side of the Rhine and they used to go over us but sometimes if they were duds they would conk out in the air

somewhere around about us and come down with a hell of a bang so that you never quite sure whether one would drop on you. We could see, on occasions when we were up near the Maas, V2s being launched. The launching was similar to watching a rocket being launched in America nowadays. You couldn't actually see the rockets but you could see the vapour trails as they rose higher and higher until eventually they disappeared from view. There was always the thought in our minds that in a few minutes the damn things would be landing somewhere in London. I think it was a V2 that landed on a cinema in Antwerp and killed an enormous number of people most of whom were service personnel. *(Dec 16 1944 - your father-in-law John Harrison was in Antwerp at that time)*

Just before Christmas the Dutch and Germans celebrate the feast of St Nicholas who was of course the original Santa Claus. It's the children's Christmas really held round about the 12th December and it is on that day that the children get their presents. Christmas itself is really for grown-ups. St Nicholas appears dressed in rather different robes from our Father Christmas accompanied by his sidekick who is a black man and all the children have to go to him and confess all the things they've done wrong in the previous year and then St Nicholas forgives them and they get their presents. On Christmas Day in the army it is the custom, and it still applies, for Christmas dinner to be served to the troops by the senior NCOs and officers who act as waiters. As you can imagine the troops take full advantage of this and take the Mickey out of the officers and senior NCOs but nobody minds very much and it gives the lads a chance to get their own back just once in awhile. For Christmas 1944 the troops did pretty well. There were extra supplies in addition to the normal daily ration and the NAAFI had got in a number of goodies and we purchased some of these with the PRI fund (Regimental Imprest fund) and we got plenty of beer in so I think on the whole they had a jolly good meal. One of the strange things about the army in those days, and maybe now, is that in the troops canteens only beer or cider or wine could be served whereas in officers and sergeants messes they were allowed spirits. Why this was so I have no idea but

perhaps they didn't think that troops could handle spirits probably it goes back to Victorian days when troops used to get roaring drunk on cheap gin. (Fig. 12)

On New Year's day 1945 I was walking along a lane close to the village where we were stationed and heard a plane coming in very low, almost hedge hopping, and as I looked at it I saw it had swastikas on it. It was a ruddy Jerry and it was so close I could see the pilot's face but in a field nearby there was a light Ack Ack unit and they brought him down almost immediately into a field. I went over, the plane of course was smashed up and the Jerry pilot was lying near the plane dead as a door nail. What had happened on that day was that the Germans made their last really big aerial attack. They sent hundreds of planes over Holland and Belgium mainly aimed at air fields and they suffered heavy losses. I believe Brussels airport was very heavily hit and a lot of allied planes on the ground were destroyed. But it was the last time the German air force ever really put in a real major attack - it was their swansong.

In January, leave to the UK started and it was supposed to be based on 'first in first home'. In other words those who landed first got the first opportunity to go home on leave. While I don't think it applied all that well I was one of the lucky ones and I did in fact get home for a seven day leave. I can't remember a lot about it but one thing I do remember is that we had a very rough crossing from Calais to Dover and the first person ashore was carried off on a stretcher. He had died from choking on his own vomit. Poor chap, it seemed a lousy way to die after having landed early on in the Normandy landings. In the early days of the war I always used to go home on leave and spend the whole of my leave in Manchester and go out for evenings with old pals and spend time with your Granddad and your mum and various aunts and uncles but as time proceeded most of these pals of mine were called up into the various services and I found quite a lot of my leave, particularly during the daytime when everybody was at work, I was just hanging about so later on, particularly after your grandfather married for the second time, I used to spend the first few days at home doing all the visiting and meeting people and then I used

to push off to London for the last few days of the leave and go to shows and have some nice meals at posh restaurants. On occasions I would go to the Grosvenor House hotel on Park Lane where in the afternoon they used to hold tea dances for about half a crown, which was very reasonable, and danced to Jack Jackson and his orchestra, a very famous bandleader of the time. I had found a place to stay as an alternative to hotels which were a bit expensive. It was a large flat on the corner of Tilney Street which is a few yards off Park Lane and immediately facing the Dorchester hotel. This flat had been used for officers to stay when on leave. It only accommodated about six officers and two rather posh ladies ran the place voluntarily and it provided you with a decent bed and just a continental breakfast for only about five shillings a night and was ideally situated in Mayfair. I met a chap there who I palled up with who was a captain in the Royal Artillery and he had been flown home from the Middle East and had to attend the War office occasionally usually in the morning for an hour or two on some secret project of some kind which obviously he couldn't tell me about and then at lunchtime he would be free. We would have lunch together and then go seeing the sights and in the evenings doing the shows. One of the places we visited during the daytime were the Assizes in Fleet Street where we are asked the doorman if there was anything interesting taking place and he said "*I suggest you try court three Sir there are some juicy divorce cases going on there*". The other place we went to was the Old Bailey and listened to some of the cases being tried there which was very interesting. Indeed in a way it was more interesting than going to a theatre show.

Back in Holland after the leave the weather deteriorated even further. It was very snowy and icy with a bitter wind blowing and it really was probably one of the coldest winters I've ever spent. When the weather was damp or wet we used to have what was called a rum point. We would get a signal from headquarters saying 'splice the mainbrace' as they do in the Navy. That meant we had to open up a rum point at a given map reference and I would draw supplies of rum in gallon jars and go to this point, usually a crossroads, and all the units in the division would have been notified and they would come along bringing their own containers and I

had a measuring jug and we had worked out how much per unit according to their strength and as each unit turned up, generally with a quartermaster, he would give me the container and I would measure out from these stone jars the amount due to that particular unit. What I never did do was to hand over the jar complete, in other words I would keep all the jars because they had to be returned but the jars allowed for spillage so there's always a little bit more than a gallon in so when I got back to the unit I would pour out the remains of each jar and we would have a nice big supply of free rum for the mess. It was all fair, square and above board because the troops had got their full ration and we had got what was left so everybody was happy. If units didn't turn up at the rum point I always made a particular point of waiting say for about three quarters of an hour after the point was supposed to close and if there were still people who had not reported I set out to find their locations and that probably would take me three or four hours sometimes to find them. The quartermaster's were always extremely grateful when I did turn up and they would give me a hot drink and put some of the rum in it so I would go away with a nice glow on. If the weather was very cold and dry then they didn't have rum points. It was only when it was cold and wet and troops were exposed to this in trenches or in open positions. The rum was dished out usually with hot tea to troops who were off duty because if they drank it to go on duty the effect would wear off and it would have the exact opposite effect as intended and they would feel the cold and be more exposed than they would have been otherwise.

It must have been about this time that I had to arrange a petrol point. A petrol point was similar to a rum point but obviously it required lots of vehicles with petrol, diesel and lubricating oils and this point was to replenish the Yanks who were going to go through our lines to make an attack on a German position which was on slightly higher ground, anything above about 50 feet was high in Holland. It was no good putting up signs marked P (petrol) point because they wouldn't know what that was so I had to put up temporary signs towards the point marked GAS. They duly came through with the vehicles loaded with infantry and I replenished their tanks and they carried on. They looked like boys most of these Yankee soldiers

and were rather apprehensive and the next day they came back again looking extremely the worse for wear and we immediately moved forward as our infantry had taken over and took the objective which the Yanks had failed to do. As we passed through the area you could see American bodies dozens of them all over the place. To me, it didn't really register properly. Of course I was sorry to see it but there seemed so many Yanks and after seeing them at the cinema, most of films that we saw before the war were American, it hardly seemed real. If they had been British bodies I would have been quite upset but the Yankee bodies left me quite unmoved.

In one area where fighting was taking place there was a lunatic asylum which was right in the middle and although fortunately I wasn't involved vehicles had to be sent to evacuate the inmates and apparently it was a very unhappy task because the inmates were terrified by all the gunfire and it was impossible for them to understand what was going on so our chaps brought out these poor devils after a great deal of difficulty and found it a very unhappy and unpleasant task.

By now, we were getting into February and the thaw started which caused problems from the point of view of moving about on the roads. The soil is very sandy in most of Holland so that this with the thaw and the very heavy traffic, for which the roads hadn't been built, caused them to begin to collapse and crumble. It made moving up and down the two routes, the up route and the down route, very difficult as they slowly became seas of mud. On occasions we would see Monty in his big staff car either going up to the front or coming back from the front. He was always preceded by two military policeman all bulled-up to the nines with white webbing equipment and all looking very smart and if you happened to be unlucky and had a convoy on that route you would be waived over to make way for Monty and there was always the chance that some of the vehicles would finish up in a ditch and you would have a job to get them out. The blokes always gave him a cheer but I must admit my inclination was to make a rude gesture but I had the good sense to refrain from doing so.

CHAPTER 11

INTO GERMANY

Early in February 1945 the division was relieved and moved out of Holland back into Belgium to the area around Louvain and the surrounding villages and they had a fortnight's break to get reinforcements, to do some special training for river crossings and to get some rest. After all they had been on the go since June. We (the RASC) didn't get much rest of course as we still had to carry out normal duties. After a fortnight, we moved back into Holland and crossed the river Maas at Gennep. The crossing was by an enormous Bailey bridge, the largest I had ever seen and once across, within a few miles, we were in Germany. It was a strange feeling to be in enemy territory after so many years of war with them. I don't know quite what I expected to see. Whether the people would have horns and a tail or something but of course they looked quite ordinary. You could tell you were in Germany because on some of the few buildings that were left standing on the walls were slogans. There was the usually one of: "*Ein volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer*" - "*One people, one country, one leader*". And another one, presumably aimed at women: '*Kinder, Kuche, Kirche*' - *Children, kitchen, church*'. Hitler was a great one for exhorting the women to have plenty of children and I suppose that was to provide for the future when the Germans ran the whole world. I found in one German house a little miniature cross which was given to women who had 12 or more children. (Fig. 13) On the front it said '*German mother*' and engraved on the back was the signature of Adolf Hitler. Although you needed a magnifying glass to read it. I still have that by the way. We carried on until we passed through the Reichwald, a big forest lying between the Maas and the Rhine, and going through one road in the forest slung on a rope between trees on opposite sides of the road was a sign which said "*This is the Siegfried line*". About half a mile further another rope strung between two trees on opposite sides of the road with lots of dirty

underwear hanging from it and a sign which said "*This is a washing line*". Unfortunately it wasn't the British who had put it up, it was a Canadians. I thought this was a bit of a cheek really because after all it was our song; still they were on the same side and at least it wasn't the Yanks that did it.

The Germans fought even harder than they had done before because they were defending their own country and every town and every village was defended and was literally flattened. There were two quite big towns Goch and Kleve which is the town that Ann of Cleves came from (one the wives of Henry VIII). In one of these towns which was just rubble we were held up with the weight of traffic and there was a woman stood on the pavement and she was trembling all over. It was obvious that she just wanted to cross the road but she was terrified that she would get into trouble or be shot or something. She just stood there dithering until I got fed up and got out of the car and escorted her across. She just said a quick '*Danke*' and scuttered away. I suppose that was the English attitude to treat women with kindness even if they were enemy women. One of the four sisters we met in Helmond, the one called Dolly, had said to me that she thought that we wouldn't be severe enough and punish the Germans enough because the English were too kind.

There was a great deal of very heavy fighting for the next two or three weeks until eventually the Germans were pushed across the Rhine and we occupied the whole of the area between the Rhine and the Maas. (Fig. 14) Then of course there would have to be a crossing of the Rhine and this took quite a while to organise. Our division was not involved in the initial crossing and the taking of the far bank but we prepared everything for the troops who would come through our lines and I spent a lot of time moving stuff up, supplies of all kinds, ready for the assault. When eventually it did take place I was fortunate enough to be in a position near the banks of the Rhine to watch a lot of it and I also watched the 6th airborne division coming in a mass drop which was really very exciting to see. The 6th airborne were old pals of ours because we had been with them at the beachhead so I was

very interested to watch them at work again. To some extent it was a little like the beach landings because they had a very wide stretch of water, the Rhine is a very wide river, and the infantry had to cross it. There was an enormous barrage from every type of gun you could imagine being thrown across the Rhine from our side and what with the noise and the aircraft and gliders it was almost like a repeat of D day. One of the strange sights was that of a number of small naval patrol vessels moving up and down the Rhine manned by naval personnel and as Rotterdam hadn't at that stage fallen, as far as I know, they must have been transported to the Rhine overland.

Then it came our turn to cross over. By this time a number of pontoon bridges had been built and we crossed on one towards the town of Rees (north of Duisburg), or what was left of it. It was a hair raising trip across because it was a very long bridge and the pontoons wobbled up and down as you drove along and it was really a bit like a rollercoaster ride. I was very grateful to get off the other side and to get all the vehicles across in one piece. I suppose really they been reasonably safe. From now on, my job was to keep up with the infantry and the fighting troops with a convoy and to supply them with ammunition, POL (petrol, oil and lubricants) and compo and as my vehicles emptied I would send them back with a senior NCO to replenish at our headquarters who in turn sent their vehicles back to the supply dumps to replenish. As the fighting troops moved forward I moved forward with them and kept them, hopefully, fully supplied with their requirements. Having crossed the Rhine we moved forward a few miles and then parked up for the night. On this occasion the cook produced a special treat for us. Normally we were on compo rations but he had acquired a German chicken which he had cooked and we all settled down to enjoy this treat only to find it was an old rooster because it was as tough as old boots and I must confess I preferred the compo.

The next day moving forward we strangely enough went back into Holland. There is a sort of tongue or stretch of land that juts out and we had to cross this to get back into Germany. I also warned the troops that we were re-entering Holland and

to treat the people accordingly we didn't want them treating the Dutch like the Germans. We then came to a big town called Enschede. It now has a very famous football team but in those days, until I got there, I had never heard of it. The Dutch people where we spent the winter had quite a while to get used to us but these Dutch people had only just been liberated and they were so delighted it was quite incredible. One of their greatest desires was for British troops to go and sleep in their homes. To do that seemed to be an honour to them and they looked at us as though we were descended from heaven being liberating forces and I don't doubt that after a long winter and the Germans the presence of British troops in their town was what they had been praying for a very long time. However, we weren't able to stay and enjoy this adulation because the next morning, early, we were on the road again moving northwards and in a few short miles we were back into Germany. A minor problem I had was the fact that I hadn't got any maps, presumably we had got so far that they had run out of the available maps or there was a shortage. All I had to carry on my journey was a foolscap piece of paper with a route drawn on it and place names - the names of towns and villages and I had to make my way forward with that. I stopped one night at a deserted railway station which had been evacuated by the occupants but in any case all the railway lines were rusty so that probably for quite a long time the railway had been out of action with bombing and I heard a noise. I walked onto the platform and coming towards me from the north was a sort of self-propelled trolley with a Royal Engineers officer and an NCO sat on it and it came to a halt. I said "*How do*" and they said "*How do*" and I asked them what they were doing. They said they had found this thing several miles away and got it going and thought they would have a look around. In other words they were swanning, the phrase I mentioned earlier. So after a pleasant chat they turned this thing around got back on it and went back from whence they had come.

Another unusual experience I had was when we were going along the road and I noticed an entrance to something that I couldn't make out what it was but the gates were open and I went up a drive and then realised this was some sort of underground factory because all the buildings were sunk into the ground and the

tops were grassed over and the whole setup covered quite a large area of land. Quite a long way inside this sort of complex there were a number huts which were above ground and they appeared to be the accommodation for the workers. I wandered in and out of these huts and it was obvious that they had only recently been evacuated, probably only a few hours before, because there were lots of bits and pieces scattered over the place, bits of clothing and so on, so they had obviously panicked and cleared off very quickly. It also dawned on me that I was a bit daft because if there had been people there what might they have done to me being on my own. I reported the location of this place to brigade headquarters who thanked me very much because they didn't know it existed so I felt a bit chuffed that I'd sought out and captured a place on my own.

At another location where we stopped I was approached by, of all things, a Russian soldier. He made a terrific fuss and shook hands with everybody and he spoke some German and with what little German I knew and lots of gestures I found out that he had been wounded very badly, which was obvious because his face was an awful mess, in the Crimea and captured by the Germans and sent to work on a farm nearby. He very obviously hated the guts of these people running the farm and of course to Germans the Russians were more or less sub-humans who weren't in the same category as Nordic races. He had probably had a rough time with them but what he wanted us to do was to capture a German soldier who was hiding in this farm. I went over with a few of the lads with their Sten guns and rifles at the ready and as we approached the farm the door opened and a German soldier came out with his hands on his head and I looked at him and he was obviously frightened and was a man in his 50s. As far as I could see he must have been a member of the Volkssturm, equivalent of the Home Guard. They were a very poor lot who were put together towards the end of the war and consisted mostly of older men, sometimes in their 60s, and young boys of 13 or 14 and all they were useful for was to provide bodies to resist the allied advance. Well this chap, I found out from the woman of the house, was in fact the farmer and he must have been called up under the Volkssturm and at the first opportunity he had

deserted. However, being in uniform I couldn't let him go so I passed him on to the military police. We searched the farm for weapons but there weren't any and we carried on our way, with the Russian soldier absolutely delighted that he's got his own back on these people.

We came to a decent sized town called Nordhorn which had been knocked about a bit and then carried on to another town called Lingen where there was a lot of heavy fighting. There was a lot of resistance and I was on the outskirts of this town waiting for something to happen with lots of street fighting going on and a lot of bangs and crashes and smoke and flames and suddenly out of the dust in the distance coming down the street were two German soldiers, only young fellows, with hands on their heads, white as sheets. They were running and being chased by a Lance Corporal in the military police. Now this Lance Corporal I had known for a long time because I used to meet him on convoys back in England and in Scotland and across Europe and I always got a pleasant wave and a salute and I passed the time a day with him If he happened to be on duty when we were on convoy. He was also a regular soldier and had what was known as a Palestine ribbon for serving in Palestine (now Israel) before the war. He was kicking these two lads up the backside shouting "*Imshi* you bastards, "*imshi*" and they were absolutely terrified of this little Lance Corporal. As he passed me he said "*morning sir, nice day*" and just carried on chasing these two German soldiers. *Imshi* is the Arabic for get moving or something like that and it was often used by regular troops who had served in the Middle East before the war.

We continued moving steadily in a north-easterly direction through various towns and villages and eventually got to the outskirts of Bremen. It was in these outskirts I witnessed an unpleasant sight. We had surrounded a German concrete bunker and apparently it was occupied by Hitler Youth and although our troops brought up a loudhailer with a German-speaking intelligence officer who told them to come out and that they would be treated properly but, as happened quite frequently when German troops were surrounded, they refused to come out and kept firing.

Eventually we brought up what I think were called Crocodiles, flame throwing tanks, and they trained these on the slits of the bunker and out came these Hitler Youth with their uniforms and hair on fire but still firing. The only way to stop them was to shoot them and the result was that they were all killed. The Hitler Jugend (Youth) were absolutely fanatical. They worshipped Hitler and were fully prepared to die in his name and as a result they were extremely dangerous.

Having got more or less as far as we could go the main body of the RASC began to catch up. Most of the time they had been at least a hundred miles behind. I fixed a location for them in a large and rather well appointed, modern farm out in the country some miles south-east of Bremen. They duly moved in and we settled down to await further action. One of the problems when moving in to a location and taking over houses or farms or whatever, was that most of the small towns and villages and farms had evacuees in. The big cities like Hamburg and Bremen and Osnabrück had evacuated women and children and old people to escape the bombing and they then moved into the countryside and when the British troops arrived the accommodation was always too full to start with. We hadn't much compassion and we cleared them out and they had to find somewhere else to go and that applied in the case of this farm near Bremen. We weren't completely callous, for example in this farm there was a very old lady who was bedridden and one of the sergeants carried her gently down and put her in the car and then took her to the nearest town and installed her in the Krankenhaus (hospital). The second day we were there an NCO reported that he had been in one of the barns and there was a horrible smell. We investigated and we found, covered in straw, the body of a young German soldier that was beginning to rot. He was so young that he must have been a Volkssturm and all his papers were there in a cowhide satchel which a lot of the German soldiers seemed to carry with them. They were just natural hide on the outside and inside they kept their personal possessions. This boy was only 15 and there are snapshots of him on holiday with his friends and relatives and we got hold of the farmers wife and asked her as best we could what this boy was doing there. She was very frightened but we at last found out

that he had come to the farm as a deserter and the SS had found him and shot him. The farm people had hidden him in case they got into trouble when the British troops arrived. We got the Padre to come over and we gave him a proper burial in the grounds of this farm with a little service and I think the Germans fully appreciated what we had done. The farmer's wife seemed rather superior to the average farmer's wife and I think her husband must have been a gentleman farmer. He was in fact, as we later found out, an officer in the German army and she didn't know where he was or what had happened to him.

We were in this farm for some time and we did our usual jobs supplying the fighting troops and then I had a message to report to a building way some distance away in Osnabruck and I duly reported. Osnabruck was an awful mess, there wasn't much left standing and there were rows of trams that were burnt out but the fairly large building which I went to was more or less intact and at this conference, with a lot of officers from different units, we were informed that within a day or two we could celebrate the fact that the war in Germany would be over. The 3rd Division would be pulling out of Bremen and moved down into the area around Osnabrück and we were each given areas in which we were to find locations for our various units. so I a recce of the area allocated to my unit and found a small town or large village called Recke which was a few miles to the west of Osnabrück and eventually the unit pulled out of the farm near Bremen and moved in to this place. We weren't trained in this aspect of 'warfare', if you like to call it that, and if you took somewhere over you just played it by ear. For example, in this town of Recke I arrived with NCOs from each of the platoons and headquarters and workshops, drove around the town weighing it up, deciding which buildings I wished to take over in the form of barns in the outskirts, a gasthaus (a small hotel) for the officers mess, a suitable place for workshops, places for the platoons and where they could park their vehicles. It was really quite a skilled job in a way but I was so used to this that it was no great problem. Then I would ask one of the locals "*where was the mayor*" and he would point to where he lived or take me to him and in this case in Recke he bowed and offered to shake hands but I ignored that and then I

explained in my very limited German what I wanted. He came round the town with me and I pointed to the buildings and the various barns and said "*zwei stunden*" (that's two hours) "*alle raus*" (everybody out). The unit duly arrived and each NCO picked up his part of the unit and put them into place. Whilst waiting for the unit to arrive most of the townsfolk came out everybody was weeping and wailing and some of them approached me and tried to make clear they weren't Nazis but that the people next door were Nazis - typical of the Germans everybody blamed everybody else. All I did was to say "*alles Nazi*" that's everybodys Nazi and ignored them.

CHAPTER 12

ARMISTICE DAY

During our travels we had acquired and accumulated a fair amount of booze both for the officers and for the men in anticipation of the great day of victory so the next day after arrival in Recke (May 8th 1945) we got a message through that the war in Europe was now over and a complete ceasefire was in effect. That night everybody celebrated in true style. The gasthaus that I had acquired for the officers mess was a pleasant one, I am afraid we knocked it about a bit during our celebrations but the next morning we had the decency to clear it up ourselves and not leave it for the mess servants to do. As you can imagine the feeling amongst the troops was one of great delight and great relief too that we were all still in one piece. Of course the war wasn't over just the war in Europe and there was always the thought in the back of our minds that after a while we might find ourselves in the Far East fighting the Japs. In the meantime we still had our job to do, we still had to supply food and POL to the troops but no longer of course much ammunition. This gasthaus we where in was a very nice one and I had a nice room outside of which was a large tree and at night a Nightingale used to come into this tree and sing its head off. After all the noises and bangs and crashes of warfare this nightingale

singing was a delightful sound but it did it every night keeping me awake and I got to the stage where I was sat on the windowsill with a pistol hoping I would spot it so I could shoot it. One problem we were faced with was the fact that a lot of the slave labour which the Germans had brought into Germany from various countries and put to work in factories and in the fields were now on the loose and a good many of them were out to wreak retribution on the Germans. They had got hold of weapons and they were often in bands marauding the countryside and we found ourselves in the most peculiar position of having to supply guards for various farms to protect the Germans from them.

Whilst at Recke I managed a 48-hour leave to Enschede in Holland which wasn't all that far away. Not to Enschede the town but to a country club, as it must have been before the war, out in the woods a few miles away. It was a very posh sort of place and it had a large lake, I think it was an artificial lake, the sides of the banks of the lake sloped and were covered in sand so it was almost like the seaside. You could go swimming and do water sports. The clubhouse had very nice bedrooms and a small ballroom, dining room and it was run by the NAAFI with the assistance of a couple of local girls who spoke fluent English and acted as hostesses. On the second night I was there, it was a Saturday night, they invited a number of local businessmen and the town dignitaries over with their wives for an evenings socialising with us and throughout the whole evening I never heard a single word of Dutch spoken. Every single person there spoke excellent English and it was like being at an English social event and they were so good that later in the evening, when they had had a few drinks, I spotted three of the men sat around a table, no English people about, and they were, I am afraid to say, swapping dirty jokes but they were so good that they were swapping them in English. That's what I call being fluent in a language. One chap I got into conversation with knew Manchester very well. He had been over there many times on business before the war and it seemed so funny in a place like that talking to somebody about Piccadilly and Market Street and various places in Manchester which we both knew.

CHAPTER 13

THE OCCUPATION OF GERMANY

Having beaten Germany, the main problem for the Allies was that the whole country just wasn't functioning. All the leaders and the industrialists were in jail, every city and every town had been pretty well devastated, the railways had been knocked about and very few were functioning, all the major ports were knocked out and blocked by sunken shipping, bridges over the main rivers had been destroyed and the whole place was in a complete mess. Added to that of course was the fact that the countries that had been occupied were also struggling to sort themselves out but at least they had leadership and with the assistance of the Allies began to function again. However, with Germany there were millions of Germans who needed to be fed and to do that the Allies created an Operation called Barleycorn. The idea being that of the millions of prisoners many were agricultural workers and quite harmless basically and the objective was to get these blokes back onto the land and in the spring to get the crops planted ready to provide food for the winter for all these millions of Germans. Otherwise they would be a burden to the allies who would be forced to feed them from their own resources. Eventually a Control Commission, as it was called, was formed where allied countries sent over specialists in all forms of industry and engineering and they even sent top men from trades unions to get the trades unions re-formed in Germany which of course had been abolished by Hitler. These people were given honorary ranks such as colonel, or major or captain depending on their importance and wore battledress but with a badge on their arm showing them as Control Commission. But this was sometime after Operation Barleycorn which was put into effect a few weeks after the surrender and as a result after three or four weeks at Recke we moved up and over to a little place called Munsterlager. It was shown on our maps as Munster

but we knew it as Munsterlager. It was only a tiny little place, it wasn't even a decent village but the main part of the place was a huge prisoner of war camp which had been used, we understood, for British prisoners of war and now, quite properly, was housing thousands of German prisoners of war. In this camp British intelligence officers screened all the prisoners. This meant examining their documents to decide whether they were who they said they were because a lot of Nazis had changed from their SS uniforms, and other objectionable organisations, into ordinary soldiers uniforms and had false identity papers.

The idea was to sort all these prisoners out into different categories and for the agricultural workers to be released as soon as possible. Our job was to take these prisoners from the camp and to distribute them all over Germany to within a reasonable walking distance of their homes and my particular job was to organise this distribution. We had extra platoons given to us and vehicles and each morning I would go to the camp, see the intelligence officers, find out how many prisoners they had to distribute on that particular day and the places to which they had to go and then arrange the transport accordingly; perhaps six vehicles for here and ten vehicles for there. We would bring our vehicles into the camp and load up the prisoners according to their destination. They had all been given haversack rations for one day and then our vehicles would leave under a senior NCO if it was a small number of vehicles or a lieutenant for a larger number. They would then spread out all over Germany with the exception of the Russian zone who refused to join in with this scheme so prisoners who belonged in the Russian zone were returned by us and presumably vice versa. If any of the prisoners belonged in the French or American zones then we would take them to certain points and hand them over to the French or to the Americans.

I had taken over a shop in the village which I used as an office and on one wall put joining-up maps to cover the whole of the area and there I could follow the progress of the various little convoys wherever they happened to be and workout when to expect them back ready for another journey the following day. When I

went in the morning I could also tell the intelligence officers how many vehicles were available for whatever prisoners they wanted to distribute. This is rather a long rigmarole but it explains what we were doing there. Going into the camp you'd find German officers lounging about and they would spring to attention and click their heels and give a smart salute and we made a particular point of walking past them hands in pocket, give them a sloppy sort of salute and more or less ignoring them. The idea was that a) we treated them with contempt and b) that they would look upon us as an absolute shower and wonder how on earth we had beaten them. In the centre of this POW camp was a sort of camp within a camp where they kept the SS prisoners. We weren't allowed to approach this area but I understood that these SS prisoners had a very, very rough time indeed from the camp guards and suffered as they deserved. Every day there was a spectacle of German prisoners, sometimes hundreds at a time, trudging along from the different prisoner of war cages that had been set up all over the countryside for incarceration in this POW camp. They would have a couple of soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonets and a Bren gun carrier in the rear with a gun trained on them and that was the total guard. The sight of these German prisoners all looking very beaten, very weary, made you think how different they were from the goose-stepping, cocky devils we used to see on the newsreels before the war. A lot of them were Volkssturm some of them looked over 70 or more and young boys of 13 or 14 and it showed just how desperate Hitler had got towards the end of the war to have to call up such poor specimens.

Somewhere in the area there were a party of Italian prisoners of war who must have fought on our side after Italy surrendered and had been captured by the Germans and presumably been in this POW camp. I kept being pestered by one of these chaps, an officer, and if you think of that chap as the Italian captain in 'Allo Allo' this fellow wasn't far off being like him. He really was a bit effeminate, he spoke good English but he was always calling to my office asking if he could have some transport. I suppose he had difficulty getting supplies being without his own transport. I had none available at any time and I wouldn't have given it to him in

any case so he became a damned nuisance and I reached a stage where I threatened him with a damn good hiding if he kept pestering me. These Italians used to appear at a big sand quarry nearby which was quite deep and full of water and it shelved towards the water so you could use it like a beach and go swimming. We used to go occasionally when we had a bit of time to spare and have a swim and sunbathe and these Italians were there and also a number of young German women. The Italians used to strut about preening themselves in front of these girls showing off their magnificent physiques and these girls completely ignored them and treated them in the way we did with absolute contempt.

It was at this time when there was a 'no fraternisation order' from Montgomery. That meant we weren't allowed to be friendly to the Germans in any way and could only deal with them if it was a matter of duty. In our mess, the back window of which overlooked a copse, a small wood, in the distance in the evening we would see a lot of German girls going out for an evening stroll just sort of joking and laughing and at the other end of the copse you could see English soldiers also out for an evening stroll and both parties would enter this copse from opposite ends and there would be no sign of any of them for about an hour and then they would re-emerge again each from the opposite ends and disappear. It didn't take much thinking to imagine what was going on and strictly speaking they should have been punished for it but we thought the idea of non-fraternisation was absolutely barmy and we took no notice. This non-frat business was a bit ridiculous because, take for example, if you're walking on the pavement and a German man approached he had to give way and step in the gutter which they usually did and raised their hats but if it was a German woman then you gave way to her because you were an English gentleman - absolutely ridiculous. I went for a haircut at the local barbers and you were ordered not to tip anybody for anything so that all you paid was a basic charge so I thought I'd try this barber and I went in the barbershop and there was a chap being shaved and the barber saw me and turfed this bloke out of the chair immediately still half shaved and bowed me to a seat and I indicated that I wanted a haircut which he carried out and then just like an English barber they

used to shave the back of your neck with a cutthroat razor. When I saw this chap approaching me with an open cutthroat razor I had my doubts whether I should be there! We used, for payment purposes, Occupation Marks which were horrible things similar to the Invasion Francs which we had for the liberation of France. These were not very popular with the Germans and eventually the main currency, if you can call it that, was cigarettes. If you wanted to get hold of a wristwatch or something of that nature you would barter with cigarettes and ask how many cigarettes they wanted for this wristwatch and if they asked a reasonable amount then you would swap your cigarettes for the watch. This situation came about because with the collapse of the German economy. They didn't trust their own marks and didn't trust our marks so they used cigarettes as an in-between. They also used the cigarettes from us to buy things from other Germans.

The village of Munsterlager was on the southern most fringes of Luneburg Heath where Monty had taken the surrender of the German forces but only about 25 miles away was a place which became famous all over the world and which is now shown on maps as Bergen but its full name is Bergen-Belsen and that was the location of the Belsen concentration camp. The poor devils who had survived in the camp were being looked after by British Field Hospitals and they would bring in a Field Hospital for 2 to 3 weeks by the end of which the nurses and doctors had had just about as much as they could take with trying to handle these people and they would be replaced by another Field Hospital and they would do another two or three weeks and so on. We were one of the nearest units to the Belsen camp and we received a request for officers from our mess to go over occasionally to Belsen and provide a bit of company and entertainment for the nurses to take their minds off their rather miserable job. So occasionally in the evenings we would drive over there and spend the evening with the nurses. They had an Offizierskasino outside the perimeter of the camp where the German guards presumably entertained themselves and they got one or two of the inhabitants of Belsen who were in reasonably good condition to act as waiters and waitresses. They had a gramophone and we could dance and have a few drinks and generally have a

pleasant time. Offitzierskasino is German for officers mess. We never went into the camp itself. To start with we didn't particularly want to, but it wasn't allowed anyhow except for authorised personnel and of course there was always the risk of disease so I never saw the horrible sights which the nurses were seeing. But it did emerge from conversations with one or two of them that these poor creatures, many of whom were probably very well educated and were from good Jewish families in Germany, had been reduced to the level of animals and when they brought food they had to be careful that the weaker ones were protected from the stronger ones otherwise the stronger ones would steal from the weaker ones. Another difficulty the medical staff had was in persuading many of the inhabitants that the troops there were British and were liberating them. To them a uniform meant Nazis, persecution and death and it was apparently very difficult to get through to them that this no longer applied. I had noticed also outside the perimeter of the camp a number of Jewish looking girls who looked reasonably healthy but had enormous fat tummies and I asked one of the nurses why there were so many pregnant Jewish girls about and she said they weren't pregnant but the result of experiments by Nazi doctors and sadly it couldn't be reversed and they would be like that the rest of their lives.

The inhabitants of the small town Bergen-Belsen denied vehemently that they knew what was going on inside this camp. As far as they were concerned they said it was just a labour camp and I saw on newsreels later on that they were forced by the British troops to go inside this camp to see just what it was like. Some of them even then said this was just British propaganda and the Germans hadn't done this but some were very distressed when they realised just what had been going on. I am afraid with typical British army black humour we would say to each other "*are you going over to the holiday camp tonight?*". We did invite some of the nurses over to our mess to give them a change of scenery and a decent evenings entertainment but on one occasion one of the hospitals which was set up outside the camp under canvas invited us over for a dance and they got a big marquee which they normally used for dining in and they had got some floorboards

and one or two people from the camp who could play instruments and we were all having a good time when the lights went out. The lighting was being provided by a generator and this had conked out. Well some of the people there took the opportunity to do a spot of snogging and all of a sudden when the lights came up everybody could see that a young officer, and he couldn't have been more than 20 or 21, had grabbed the matron without realising who she was. When he realised what he had done his face was red on he was extremely apologetic but she made him even worse by saying that she had a son about the same age as him who was also in the army.

Further down the road going away from Belsen is a town called Celle which isn't very far from the north part of Hanover and on one side of the main street in Celle the side roads slope down from the hillside and Fraser was driving me along this main street when suddenly from a side street a girl on a bicycle appeared, obviously out of control, hit the side of our car and cartwheeled over the top of the bonnet and came down on the pavement on the other side with a bang. We stopped and got out and the poor girl was unconscious. She had her hair piled high on her head in typical German fashion which was held by a tortoiseshell comb and this comb had gone deep into her scalp. I had noticed as we were going along the main street that we had passed the local Krankenhaus (hospital) about two or three hundred yards further back. By this time a crowd had gathered, all gawping and quite useless, so I got two of the fellers and made them carry this girl to the hospital and when I had made sure that she was being properly cared for and I was about to leave a very agitated young female turned up who turned out to be the injured girl's sister. I assumed that she had come to find out how her sister was but in fact her sole concern was what had happened to the bicycle. She never mentioned her sister! I reported the incident when I got back to the unit in case the German police contacted the army about it but I heard nothing further and I hope the girl recovered alright. The Germans in those days, it was still a 'non-frat' period, were under orders from the British authorities and these were plastered up on walls in both English and German and I remember one in particular where the

British Army informed the German population that if any German woman had children by a British soldier the British Army would not accept any responsibility.

It must about this time that they began to award campaign medals. I had been wearing the 1939-43 star ribbon since inception in 1943. This had been awarded to all troops who took part in the Norwegian and Dunkirk evacuations but the powers that be decided to update this medal and call it the 1939-45 star. It was awarded to anybody who had crossed the channel irrespective of whether they had been in a fighting unit or hundreds of miles back. As far as I was concerned it became of no value at all. When Operation Barleycorn eventually came to an end we left Munsterlager and for once I am stuck for the name of the place we moved to. Nothing very much happened there as I suppose it hasn't made much of an impression. I do remember that headquarters RASC was in a Schloss (German castle) which was rather fine with a moat round it and I remember when I went out on a detail there one morning and came back a little bit late for lunch. When I went into the dining room I discovered that the divisional general had paid a visit was sat having lunch with the officers of the unit. I apologised for my late arrival and was introduced to the general and sat down next to his Aide de Camp a rather elegant guards officer. The general was in battledress but his Aide was in service dress, very smart Guards service dress. I chatted to this fellow and we got on to the question of uniforms and general smartness and looking back on it I suppose I was a little bit pompous and I was saying that it was time now that the war in Europe was over the troops started to smarten themselves up and in particular one thing I didn't like was officers wearing desert boots. They were boots of suede leather and they were known by the expression 'brothel creepers' or BCs. After lunch the general got up and walked to the door and then he looked at me and looked down at his feet and yes he had desert boots. Fortunately he didn't take me out to have me shot he just burst out into roars of laughter and obviously thought it was a huge joke. I took quite a while to live that one down.

At the beginning of September I went on UK leave. The last one I had had was in the previous January. In accordance with my usual practice I went to Manchester for a few days and then finished off the leave down in London. It was a very different place from my previous visit because the lights were on and everything was much gayer and whilst I was there they announced VJ day (Victory in Japan Day) which was the end of the war completely. I was fortunate to be able to join the celebrations in London. They announced on the wireless that leave parties from Europe, they all had numbers, were to remain on leave until it was announced which numbers should make their way to a railway station and get back to Germany. I got an extra three days before they announced my number. I had to catch a late train from Waterloo so I stayed in the West End still enjoying the celebrations until the last minute and then I wanted to get to Charing Cross Tube station. To get to it you walked down a side street at the side of Charing Cross station, called Villiers Street I think, and at the bottom by the river is the tube station. There was a queue to get into the tube station stretched the whole length of the street up to the Strand. I thought that if I wait for this queue I will miss my train. So I got hold of a Bobby (policeman) and explained to him my problem and he said "*That's alright sir, you follow me*". He took me right down Villiers Street into the tube station and made sure I got onto the platform for which I was very grateful. When I got back to Germany things had changed considerably. Up until then, we had never been quite sure what was going to happen to us. We could have been sent to Berlin as occupation troops or out to the Far East to fight the Japs either was possible but now the war was over I suppose the authorities had to start to reassess the position. It was announced eventually that 3rd division would be sent to the Middle East to Egypt and to Palestine but wouldn't be taking officers, NCOs or men who were below a certain demob group number. Obviously the requirements for troops in peacetime was very different from wartime and there was a huge army which had to be demobbed leaving just a basic peacetime army. To be fair to everyone the authorities had worked out a system combining wartime service with the age of the soldier concerned and that put them into a certain group which was numbered. Somebody like me with a long period of wartime service but

fairly young went into a group in which there were also older men with shorter wartime service. My Group number was 25 which meant that I wouldn't be going with them to the Middle East. The Colonel held a get-together for all the officers in the divisional RASC so that we could say our farewells to each other and we had photographs taken and in early October the division moved into Belgium to bring itself up to strength and to get the necessary equipment to go to the Middle East which it eventually did.

Those of us who had to leave were posted to units all over the BAOR (British Army of the Rhine) and I found myself posted to the 49th West Riding Territorial Division. Very similar in all respects to the infantry divisions I had been with before; that is the 3rd Division and the 42nd East Lancs Territorial Division. Fortunately for me, Fraser had got maximum service in having been called up at the beginning the war as a reservist and was older than me so I put in a request which he endorsed for him to stay with me so I was able to take my batman with me when I joined the new unit. The 49th Division had spent some time in Iceland before the Americans took over from them and they had chosen for their insignia a Polar Bear. What a Polar Bear had to do with Iceland I don't know but that is what they decided and that was what I had to have sewn onto my battledress in place of the old 3 Div sign. The unit I joined was identical with the unit I was leaving and was stationed in Germany at a place called Wickede some miles to the east of Dortmund. It was a small, not very impressive little town on a river and the blokes seemed to be a decent crowd and being an identical unit I very soon settled in knowing exactly what the drill was. The OC had a chat with me and told me that he had a platoon out at a village a few miles away called Waltringen which hadn't had an officer for some time and was a bit out of hand and he wanted me to go over there and stay with them and get them sorted out. So before I had been at Wickede more than a week I was on my own at Waltringen and with this platoon. They had had a sergeant in charge and they had got a bit slaphappy and the Colonel had apparently played hell about this so I found myself with the job of getting them back to a decent standard. The trouble was that with the war being over troops were beginning to get what was

known as demob-happy. In other words they knew that they were due for demob sometime in the fairly near future and that they were merely filling in time before that event occurred. I got them all altogether and gave a pep talk and asked them to cooperate with me so we could all live in peace and before long everything was a decent standard and it was quite a nice little posting really. A few miles up the road was the Mohne reservoir at the end of which was the famous Mohne dam (Fig. 15). The dam had been repaired so that the artificial lake had filled again. It was a huge lake surrounded by pine forests, rather beautiful, and all round the sides of the lake were yachting clubs and huge mansions owned by the Ruhr millionaires, the Ruhr not being very far away. The Mohne Dam was the subject of a famous attack by British bombers using the bouncing bomb led by Guy Gibson which had resulted in the flooding of the Ruhr valley and an enormous amount of destruction to homes, towns and factories and the loss of thousands of lives. There were also two other dams raided at the same time and damaged. Guy Gibson got the VC for this raid of course and subsequently a film was made.

One of the mansions set on the hillside, amongst the pine trees by the side of the lake had been taken over by the NAAFI and occasionally I used to go with other officers and have a night out at this place with a very excellent meal. Everything in the house belonging to some millionaire had been acquired and we drunk wine out of beautiful cut glass and ate off lovely plates and were waited on by German waiters. One wall of the dining room had an enormous glass window and on the press of a button this window slid into the wall and you could look, as though on a balcony, right across the lake and in the moonlight it was a very beautiful sight. After all the rigours of war I considered this sort of life was just my cup of tea.

Whilst at Waltringen I had seen an old lady about the place quite frequently, she must have been well into her 70s, and one day she approached me and addressed me in very good English and introduced herself as the countess of something or other. She was the third Countess I had met in my military career. The first was the countess in Souvigne sur Sarthe in France and the second was the little fliberty

gibbet in Brussels and now this elderly German lady. She explained that she had lived in England for quite a while before the war and that she had been very saddened that war should break out between the two countries and she should like very much to do something to get on better terms with the British. Well I took this with a bit of a pinch of salt but I asked her what she wanted to do. She said she wondered if it was possible for some sort of social occasion to be arranged where the British troops could meet the village maidens. Well the non-fraternisation rule had been abandoned so there was no real reason why this shouldn't be arranged. I said to her that I was willing to talk to the men about it but it was for them to decide whether they wished to do this and that I would have a chat to them and I get in touch with her. Well we were in the school at this village, I was in the headmaster's study as my bedroom, the troops were in various outbuildings and there was a school hall which would be ideal for some sort of social affair. I got the chaps together, explained about this dear old lady and her suggestion and asked what they thought of it. There was quite a lot of discussion and two of the older married chaps said they thought it was all wrong that we should fraternise with the Germans after fighting for so many years but after about a vote there was an overwhelming decision in favour of the get-together. I appointed a committee to run it and said "*it is your do not mine*". They fixed on a date and time in the evening and the cook promised to try and make some cakes. We got hold of some beer and the committee approached me about decorating the school hall. They didn't know what to do as they had no paper decorations. Well as it was autumn the countryside looked very beautiful with autumn colours so I suggested that they went out into the woods and cut off small branches with autumn leaves on and branches with berries on from the hedgerows which they duly did and made a very good job of it. The place looked smashing and the time arrived for this magnificent affair and at about 7 o'clock in the evening through the gates of the school appeared the old countess with a number of the village maidens all in their best Sunday frocks and with their hair specially prepared. She advanced towards us like a mother hen with a brood of chicks. We all went into the school hall and one of the chaps was a pianist and played dance tunes on an old battered piano. The

girls were introduced to the Palais Glide and the Lambeth Walk and other popular tunes. They played a number of simple little games and I spent my time with the old countess chatting away to her. She turned out to be a very charming old lady and I think she was truly genuine in her wish to get on good terms with the British again. All in all it turned out to be a very good do and no doubt some romances came from it. From then on the atmosphere in the village with the villagers was very much more pleasant and after all we had to live with them and life became much more bearable.

Eventually a subaltern was posted to the unit and he was placed in charge of this detachment at Waltringen and I returned to Wickede and settled in at the company headquarters. We were in a rather nice, big house (I have a photograph of it) which belonged to the boss of a nearby, small factory which wasn't functioning and he was a prominent Nazi and at this time was in prison. In the grounds of this factory we had a very large dump of POL with thousands of gallons of petrol in jerry cans, diesel oil and lubricants and we received an order that all such dumps must be undercover for the winter. Well, this was quite a task and they didn't tell us how to do it but it had to be done. I had a scout around and I noticed by the river, on the outskirts of the village, alongside a bridge there were quite a lot of metal pipes which presumably had been put there by the Germans for drainage of something so one dark night I took some vehicles down and acquired these pipes without telling anybody and used those to put into the ground for drainage purposes. I had also noticed in my travels a camp of huts which presumably had been used by the German army and I did the same there and dismantled the huts and moved them down to our dump. I got in touch with the local Pioneer Corps officer who managed to get me some Hungarian army POWs to act as Labour and slowly and carefully I managed to build a sort of large hut into which our dump was placed. It started off being known as Hopley's Folly by the other officers in the mess but I had the last laugh when it was completed and everybody thought it was quite a good job.

In dealing with the local Germans I often had the assistance of an interpreter. This chap lived in quite a big house and was obviously a gentlemanly type. He had been a major in the German army on the Russian front and had been badly wounded and walked with a stick and he had volunteered, much like the Countess, in an effort to get on good terms with the British and to act as an interpreter. He spoke very fluent English but with a pronounced Glasgow accent. When I got to know him I asked him why he spoke with such an accent and he said his nanny had been from Glasgow and he had learnt his English mostly from her. He turned out to be a useful chap and a very charming one with an English sense of humour and I got on very well with him. In addition to this huge dump which of course was for general distribution we had a petrol pump we had taken over in the village which we used for our own vehicles and one day there was a chap on duty there smoking so I gave him a damn good ticking off and told him it mustn't occur again. Blow me the day afterwards he was on guard at the dump and he was smoking again. I told the sergeant to put him on a charge and he duly appeared before the OC and was given 28 days stoppage of pay. In the old days you would have given him CB (Confinement to Barracks) but we were so short of drivers that the best punishment was to stop pay which meant they could still take vehicles out and do their normal duties but they wouldn't have any money to spend on entertainment or beer in the evenings. Not long afterwards this chap went on UK leave and whilst he was away the German civilian police contacted us to say that one of our vehicles had been involved in an accident where some people had been hurt although our vehicle hadn't been damaged. So we checked up the time and the date and examined our work tickets for that particular day and inevitably this vehicle had been driven by the chap who had been on a fizzer for smoking at the petrol dumps. Not long afterwards we got a letter from the military police at Calais enclosing the man's paybook and pointing out that where the amount of money he was allowed to take home had been entered as 20 marks he had inserted a nought after the 20 making it 200 marks. Presumably he had done this as he had been fiddling in the black market. But instead of arresting the blighter they had let him go

on to England and sent his pay book to us to take whatever action was necessary when he returned. Needless to say he never did return and just deserted.

We were short of drivers and the Division arranged for us to have an extra platoon added on but the odd thing about this platoon was that the vehicles and drivers were all German army. The officer in charge of this platoon was a German naval officer! I suppose these people had been released from the POW camps just to suit our convenience. They were certainly, in true German fashion, extremely efficient and did a good job of work. The naval officer was English speaking and proved a very good commander of his platoon. One of his vehicles was involved in a collision and we had to hold, under those circumstances, a court of enquiry so I explained to him what was required and he understood perfectly and when the court of enquiry was held it was no problem at all because it was obvious that our system was almost identical with their own. He knew exactly what our requirements were and what to do about it.

We were lucky enough to have a cinema in the town, only a small place, a bit of a fleapit, but the army had taken it over and we were able to go once a week to see English or American films. One I remember was Arsenic and old Lace.

At last it came time to part company with old Fraser my Batman. As I explained he been a reservist and was called up at the beginning of the war and being several years older than me his demob group was number 22 or 23 so he left the army before I did. I was very sorry to part company with him and I think he was with me. He'd been with me since I was commissioned and we had always be on very good terms; we had had lots of ups and downs and he always looked after me like a mother. His departure was quite a loss. I had another chap who volunteered to look after me and he was quite good and we got all right and he stayed with me until I was demobbed.

One of the problems being in the forces during wartime was that we didn't have any clothing coupons so that we could never buy anything in civilian shops. However, in the BAOR they eventually had what were called 'officer shops' and you could go along and buy certain things without coupons. I bought a jeep jacket from one. They were an American issue designed to ride in jeeps and cars and really were the precursors of the car coats which were very popular some years ago. I think you can still buy them. I also bought some grey leather gloves which were German army issue to officers and were lined with fur and were very comfortable and a pair of leather boots which laced up just below the knee. I don't know where they came from but they were certainly very good for the bad weather. We were also able to buy certain things from the civilians and I managed to get hold of some aluminium pots and pans and kitchen utensils which I sent home to your mother. I understood that they came from shot-down flying fortresses, the metal being melted down and made into pots and pans.

An Officers Club had opened up at a town called Soest some miles away from Wickede and we used to go there occasionally and on one occasion coming back we were driving with the OC in a Humber four-wheel-drive, his staff car, and we were hit by a civilian in a rickety old motorcar which disintegrated when it hit us and we ran into a telegraph pole. The OC was trapped and I was sat in the back with a mass of equipment piled up on me. We eventually managed to get out the car and extricate the major who fortunately wasn't as badly hurt as we had thought and he was cussing and swearing but otherwise other than a painful back he seemed to be able to walk alright. The civilian was sat in the middle of the wreckage of his car covered in blood and obviously as drunk as a lord. Fortunately a car with REME officers came along and their unit was only a couple miles down the road so they went off and sent a breakdown to remove the debris including our car. They contacted the military police who came and took the civilian away. There were a series of further accidents with officers in cars at that time mainly going to demob parties at various units and the Colonel got a little bit worried because in one crash one of the officers was very seriously injured and had to be flown back to England

for treatment. From then on when going to a demob party we always got one of the Batmen to volunteer to drive us and get us back because he didn't drink but we always made certain he had a jolly good meal wherever the party was.

I managed to get another home leave in before demob and it must have been on this occasion when I was in London that I watched a parade down Whitehall. The Home Guard which had become quite a considerable force during the war was being stood down in other words they were going to cease to exist. They had this farewell march past through London and down Whitehall and I forget which important personage it was that took the salute but they marched past and they were very smart indeed I was quite impressed by them.

Most of my demob group, number 25, were demobbed in time for Christmas 1945. (Fig. 16) The rate of demob meant that officers and senior NCOs were being lost and there was nobody to take over from them to keep the units running so they deferred a lot of group 25 officers and senior NCOs for an indefinite period so that the various units wouldn't be denuded and I was one of those who was held up. I was in the position where I was completing the demob papers for group 25 soldiers going home and I was still there. I also made the point when completing these papers that where the soldier was a driver I completed an official chitty which said he was a competent driver and that when he got home he could get a driving licence without passing a civilian test. I also made jolly sure that when I was demobbed I got another officer to sign one for me so when I got home I got a civilian driving licence without a test.

The last parade I took part in was at a German army (Wehrmacht) barracks not far from Soest. Monty had been in command of the BAOR and I think it was the occasion of his appointment as CIGS (Chief of the Imperial General Staff) and he was leaving the BAOR that he inspected the various units throughout the BAOR. On this occasion he inspected elements of all RASC units. I was landed with the job of handling our contingent from 49 Div and it involved two or three rehearsals at

the barracks. The bloke in charge of these rehearsals was the senior RSM in the RASC. He had been the RSM at the RASC OCTU so that most of the majors, captains and lieutenants on the parade had been under his tutelage as cadets. He was a much respected RSM and greatly liked and he recognised the majority of us and made a particular point of saluting us and shaking hands and asking how we were going on. I thought what a shame it was that there we all were with a row of ribbons on our chests and the only medal ribbon he had was the defence medal. I hope that eventually he got at least the BEM for the services he rendered because he really was a first-class warrant officer. At one of these rehearsals I was walking across the parade ground with two other officers when a Corporal came towards us who I recognised. It was a chap called Cyril Blackburn who had been with me in the old 42nd Div when I was in the ranks. He was there because he been awarded the Military Medal and it was to be presented to him by Monty. Strangely enough he had won this medal as an NCO with a Field Ambulance. Some years afterwards he used to come into the Seymour Hotel when we all lived at Scott Avenue (Chorlton cum Hardy) and he must, on occasions, have met your dad. The great day arrived and we all marched past Monty after he had inspected us and there were three cheers. Afterwards the officers repaired to the dining room and had lunch with Monty. Then everybody went to the Drill Hall where he made a speech and then presented medals to various soldiers of various ranks. To demonstrate his showmanship, when he first came on the stage he was wearing a British Warm, which is a short army overcoat, and he took the coat-off so that his left chest was facing towards the audience and of course as the coat came off the enormous array of medal ribbons was exposed to the admiring gaze of the assembled multitude who all cheered and whistled. Monty apparently was trying to keep his face straight but eventually laughed and I don't doubt for one minute that the whole thing was carefully staged.

Eventually, as time passed, the OC of the company I was with was demobbed and I found myself as senior captain in command of the unit and for quite a while no replacement for him arrived. The company was being transformed into an

occupation company and it was to consist of four platoons of three ton lorries and two platoons of petrol tankers. One of the transport platoons proved to be from my old company that I been with in the Terriers and at Dunkirk and afterwards (503 Co) and strangely enough when I had been interviewed by the OC of 503 Co when I went to OCTU he asked me what my ambition was and I said "*to sit where you are sitting sir*". In a way that partly came true. None of my old pals were with this platoon as they had all been demobbed by now and there was one NCO who remembered me although he hadn't been a pal of mine and of course he knew all these old pals and I had a long chat with him about old times.

I had some sinus trouble around about this time and I went to see an ENT specialist at Iserlohn about 30 or 40 miles away. He was a Lieutenant-Colonel RAMC and the treatment he gave me was to push pads of cotton wool soaked in novocaine or something of that nature up each nostril and the stuff trickled down the back, of my throat and I thought I was choking to death. It was the most horrible experience my eyes ran with enormous tears and for a while I was just gasping for breath. However, that eventually wore off and I wasn't allowed to go straight back to the unit and expose myself to the cold air so I stayed overnight in the hospital and had dinner with the medical officers and staff. Then afterwards this Lt Colonel and some of the nurses came to my room, I had a room of my own, and we spent the evening yarning and supping whiskey. He got his pound of flesh though, this colonel, because about a month afterwards he phoned me up and asked if I could supply transport because he was going on demob and he had to get to a railway station with all his kit. Although I suppose I shouldn't have done as I was under no obligation to provide transport for his unit I sent my car and batman over to Iserlohn to pick him up and he stopped off on his way at Wickede to wish me all the best.

CHAPTER 14

DEMOB

At long last I was notified of my demob date and presumably under the circumstances they decided they must send a major to take over the company who duly arrived. He proved to be a regular soldier and as far as I could see more or less a deskbound warrior. He admitted he knew nothing about RASC companies for infantry divisions and said "*Oh well, you carry on Fred you know what you're doing*" and that is literally what I did. He made no effort to take the company over and as time drew near I got extremely angry with him and after a great deal of effort I managed to get him to sign the documents taking over the G1098 (that is all the basic equipment of the company) which when a company is taken over had to be checked and found to be all in order before the documents could be completed. Workshops made me a crate into which I placed all my camp equipment, all surplus clothing and so on which I would no longer need and that was sent off to England, to Conway Road with a duty-free label on it. The great day eventually arrived after handing in my webbing equipment and pistol and the old steel helmet I had had with me from the days before the war.

I was on my way. The train was a special train with everybody on it being demobbed and it took us to Ghent in Belgium where we spent the night and next morning we got another train which took us to Calais. The ferry boat took us across the channel to Folkestone where we caught a train which travelled through the night all the way to York. At York we were met by army vehicles that took us up into the nearby moors to a permanent camp at Strensall which still exists. There we were given some breakfast and then we were documented and we got our release documents and this must have been towards the end of March 1946. Then, back again by truck to York station where we got another train to Oldham and there at Oldham we went in a big cotton mill which was full of civilian clothing. There we got our demob kit. I forget exactly what it consisted of but you had the choice of a

suit or sports coat and flannels, a cap or a trilby hat, an overcoat or a raincoat, a pair of shoes, a shirt and two collars, and I think a tie and some socks. From the mill we walked out onto the pavement outside with both our army kit and our civilian kit and we were on our own. I teamed up with two or three other chaps and we got a taxi which took us into the centre of Manchester down the Oldham road to Piccadilly. There, with some difficulty, I managed to get all this kit onto a number 49 bus which took me to Sale Moor and deposited me just outside your granddad's house in Conway Road. (*Demob date was 24 March 1946*) (Figs 17, 18a & b)

What I would like to say coming towards the end of this rather lengthy diatribe is that your mum proved a very good pal to me right through the war and particularly so in the early years when I was in the ranks. She sent me food parcels when food was rationed and I really don't know how she managed it and things like knitted articles, gloves and scarves and balaclava helmets and so on. She must, quite often, have gone without herself to make sure I got some goodies. Your granddad was also very good. On one occasion in Germany while the fighting was going on, I had broken my pen and I happened to mention this when writing to your granddad and without hesitation he sent his own fountain pen which I know he couldn't replace because such things weren't available in the shops in those days.

I am not sure what you will make of all this and I am not sure what to make of it myself. It is a rather lengthy dissertation and I hope it hasn't been too boring. I have tried hard to avoid any question of tall stories or mock heroics and to the best of my knowledge and belief everything I have said is as it occurred. Of course it's all a very long time ago and no doubt if you'd asked me to do this 40 years ago I could have been much more detailed but then of course you were a bit young in those days and you probably weren't interested. I haven't tried to tell the history of the war only my experiences during that period and I know it's a bit of an amateurish effort and could have been done a lot better by a professional but then that's their job. During my demob leave (*79 days*) I tried hard to get a job which might prove more interesting than going back to a desk job at the Refuge Insurance

Company but there wasn't much going on then, industry and business hadn't really got moving so that eventually I had to give in and go back to the Refuge. I went back in the middle of July 1946 a month short of seven years from setting off on holiday in 1939 - Some holiday! (Figs 19, 20)

CHAPTER 15

AFTERTHOUGHTS

I have had one or two thoughts, after completing the six tapes, of some spin-offs after the war which possibly might be of interest to you. These reminiscences are post-war but they relate either to the army or to friends I had in the services or to events after the war connected with the army.

When I went back to the Refuge in the middle of July 1946 I was told that I could have a fortnight's holiday which was very generous of them and I thought and I would go back to Jersey where I had been in 1938 and have a holiday at the same hotel I stayed at then. I booked this and then shortly afterwards I got a letter from an old pal of mine from the Refuge who was about to be married and wanted me to go along, not to be best man but to help out. This chap, a bloke called Harry Richardson was a Yorkshireman from Leeds who spoke broad Yorkshire and was an orphan. Throughout the war I had kept in touch with correspondence and he had been called up in the infantry, the Devon Regiment, which he hated and managed to transfer to the RAF and eventually reached the rank of flight lieutenant (non-flying) and became adjutant of an air field. He had met a WAAF officer there and they were going to get married. This girl seemed to be from a class quite different from him who, as I say, was just an ordinary chap from Leeds and she obviously came from quite a well-to-do family. The wedding was to be in Brompton

Oratory which as you may know is a very high-class church in Knightsbridge and the wedding was to take place on the Saturday that I was due to leave to go on holiday to Jersey. What I did was to get a train straight from the office on the Friday to London and I splashed out as a final gesture after being demobbed for a room at the Dorchester hotel on Park Lane. I must have been mad because it cost me £3.10 shillings whereas a reasonably decent hotel would only have cost me about 12 shillings and sixpence. I arrived in London and met this chap who I hadn't seen since before the war and instead of greeting me in an honest to God Yorkshire accent he said "*Hello fellow Fred old boy, awfully decent of you to join me*". He continued with this dreadfully posh accent for the rest of our acquaintance. It was obvious that having been commissioned it had gone to his head and he thought that was the correct way to talk. However, we went on the town a bit but we didn't have very long because I had travelled from Manchester in the evening. When I eventually went to bed after having had a few drinks and feeling a bit the worse for wear I left a message at reception in the Dorchester to call me at 8 o'clock. Next morning when I wakened I hadn't had a call and I looked at my watch and it was 10 o'clock. I was absolutely fed up about this. Instead of having a nice leisurely bath then going down for a pleasant breakfast I had to dash like anything, have a quick wash and shave, pack my battered old bag. I went down to reception and played hell with them about this call. They were very sorry but when I asked about breakfast I was told I was too late so I paid my bill very reluctantly and went over to the head porter, a very resplendent being in a marvellous uniform and a top hat, and about 6 foot three with a belly to match, and asked him to get me a taxi. So he said "*yes sir please sit over there*" and waved me to a seat clicked his fingers called over a little pageboy and said "*see that this gentleman gets a taxi*". The pageboy disappeared and I sat there for quite a while and nothing happened until eventually I went up to the head porter and said that I was still waiting for a taxi and he expressed astonishment flicked his fingers and called over another pageboy told him to get me a taxi and waved me to a seat. Again I waited and waited and waited. Nothing happened so eventually I got so fed up I stalked up to the head porter and said to him - "*what sort of a place is this? Would you get me a taxi?*" He

looked very flustered and grabbed my bag, went out onto the pavement and eventually got me a taxi which I got into without giving him a tip and drove off in high dudgeon but shortly afterwards it suddenly dawned on me what I as a mere insurance clerk had said about the Dorchester. What sort of a place is this?

I went to Victoria station to dump my bag ready for the train to Southampton in the evening for Jersey and then got another taxi and went over to where Harry was staying. He was in a hotel just on the opposite side of the Brompton Road from the Brompton Oratory. I agreed to pick up his bags after the ceremony and take them to the girls house where the reception was being held. He gave me a note of the address and the telephone number. When we crossed the road into the church the only people he had was me and a friend of his from Manchester and this friend's wife and that is all there were on the groom's side. On the bride's side of the church it was absolutely packed with all sorts of society people, senior officers with red bands round their hats and tabs on their uniforms and obviously quite a select band of people. It was a peculiar feeling to sit there, just the three of us, with Harry and to see this mass on the opposite side of the church. After the ceremony, I dashed off and got a taxi, piled his bags into the taxi and set off for this address. After a while it became apparent that we were going all round the houses so I asked the taxi driver what the devil he was doing and he was very apologetic and said he had only just been demobbed and wasn't really very familiar with the routes. In fact he didn't really know where the devil this address was. By this time we found ourselves outside the entrance to Regent's Park zoo so I got out and went to a telephone and phoned this address where I was supposed to be going and fortunately one of the people who answered it knew exactly how to get from where I was and gave me instructions and I eventually arrived with the baggage. I paid off the taxi driver, it was 15 bob (shillings) which was a hell of a lot of money in those days and then dumped the bags in the hall and found out that all the food had been eaten. I suppose being the days of rationing there was a limited amount and it had been wolfed. I didn't get anything to eat and only had a chance for a quick word with Harry before they went off on honeymoon and I said cheerio to the other

couple of his friends and got a tube back into the centre of London. From that day to this I never heard another word from him. He didn't write to thank me, never got in touch so heaven knows what happened to him. He was certainly in for trouble because he was completely out of his depth marrying into a family of that standing particularly as he already confided in me that this girl married Harry very much against her family's wishes who didn't consider it a very good match. She had had great difficulty in persuading her father to agree to it.

You may remember I mentioned another chap from the Refuge a chap called Albert Tooth and I had seen a photograph of him in the morning newspaper when travelling from Hawick to Edinburgh for the infantry officers course and he been on the front page with a big beard and a bush hat and was a flight lieutenant with the RAF liaising with the ground forces and the air forces in the Burmese jungle as a Chindit. Well this chap eventually came back to the Refuge and like me started where he had left off, sat at an office desk and I think he found it extremely difficult to adjust himself and after a few months he left having obtained a temporary commission in the RAF and hoped everything would be all right. However unfortunately a month or two afterwards we heard that he been killed on a training flight in the RAF and had left a wife and a couple of small children. It seemed rather ironic that after all he had endured in the jungle that he should come to such a futile sort of end. It was all rather sad.

I mentioned earlier that the 3rd division had gone out to the Middle East, to Egypt and Palestine, and a few years after the war I read an article in the newspaper which referred to an RASC major walking in the streets of Cairo or Alexandria with his wife out shopping when they were attacked by Egyptian terrorists. At that time Britain occupied Egypt as a protecting power and inevitably when that happens, as in Northern Ireland, you get terrorists who object to it. This chap and his wife came under fire from these terrorists and he grabbed his wife and hid her behind a box on the side of the street and shot it out with these terrorists. He inflicted some

casualties with his pistol before they killed him. The reason I mention this is that he been a pal of mine in the 3rd Div and of course it was unpleasant news.

When I left the army in 1946 I was treated more or less as a regular officer and I was placed on what they called the reserve of unemployed officers - rather a quaint term. What it really meant was that if they wanted to call me up again they could do. I didn't take much notice of this at the time but in 1951 the government decided to call various officers and other ranks up who were on reserve for a fortnights what they called Z training. I don't know what the object of this was now but at the time of course the Cold War was fairly hot and it was round about the time of the Korean War and in 1948 there had been the Berlin airlift so I suppose this was really a political gesture to the Russians. It meant that lots of blokes who had gone back to Civvy Street were hauled up for training with Territorial units. Well the first year, 1951, I was lucky as I wasn't called up but those who were moaned like Billy O that it was a sheer waste of time as the Territorial units couldn't cope with this enormous intake of men and there were no proper training facilities. There were complaints in the papers about wasting men's time who could be getting on with their jobs. However the next year, 1952, much to my horror I got called up for this Z training and this time they were somewhat better organised and the unit I was called up to was my old mob on Upper Chorlton Road. They held a sort of get-together for the officers. I was called up under my war substantive rank as lieutenant and at this cocktail party I met all the other officers who would be going on the fortnights training. Several other wartime soldiers were there, some of whom I knew who had been in the ranks with me in the early days and a chap who had been with me at school and one or two National Service officers. These were youngsters who had been called up to do their National Service for two years, had been commissioned and when they were demobbed they had to join the Territorial Army for a number of years - that was part of the conditions of the service. The camp to which I went was Chickerell camp a mile or two outside Weymouth in Dorset. (Fig. 21) It was a regular camp but we were under canvas because there were so many additional troops. I had the pleasure of travelling down first-class by

train in civvies because most of us no longer had uniforms and when we got there we were issued with battledress and berets and pips for our shoulders and medal ribbons and I learnt that I was entitled to the Territorial Army other ranks medal as a service medal. You had to do 12 years as a Territorial soldier but wartime service counted twice so that I was well over the 12 years and they wrote off for this medal for me and I eventually received it at home.

Quite a few incidents took place at this camp, some funny and some not so funny. The first I remember is that one of the chaps who was called up, an other rank, had objected very strongly to this call up because he had started a business and felt he had done his fair whack for his country and when he arrived at the camp he refused to change into uniform, refused to come out on parade and the poor old colonel who was a very pleasant and amiable sort of chap was rather stuck to know what to do with him. So the only thing he could do was to put this chap in civvies into the guardroom where he stayed for the fortnight. He was just allowed out to do a bit of exercise. At the end of the fortnight he was marched out of the guardroom to the railway station he went home. They couldn't do much with him because basically although in the camp he was under military law he was still very much a civilian. I suppose they just forgot the incident.

They had some sergeant instructors from an infantry battalion, regular soldiers, PSI's I think they were known as (permanent staff instructors) who had been loaned to the Territorial unit to help in training all the additional troops. None of these sergeants had seen active service and were quite youngish and I remember one of them was going to give a talk on weapon training with a Bren gun and he stood up there and of course all the blokes who were looking at him were old sweats with their medal ribbons up and had seen active service most of them and probably knew a Bren gun as well as he did. It was pretty obvious that he felt rather intimidated and just to show his authority he put his left arm forward, pointed to his sergeant's stripes, and said in a very loud voice "*You see these, they are not butterfly's wings*".

On the first day of the camp I was stood with a couple of other officers talking to the Territorial company sergeant major, who was a bit of a pompous fellow and rather fancied himself, and as we were talking a figure appeared in a very badly fitting battledress and a beret and shambled along with his hands in his pockets. This CSM bristled at the sight of this scruffy looking devil and shouted to him "*That man, come over here.*" As the figure approached the CSM said to him "*Don't you salute when you see an officer?*" This figure said "*And don't you sergeant major?*" It was one of the two REME officers that had been called up and he wasn't particularly regimental as you can guess and the pips that we were issued with instead of being sort of raised so that you could see them at a distance were just a piece of cloth and lay flat on the epaulettes so that at a distance they were invisible and this scruffy looking bloke just looked like a real poor soldier. The CSM's ego was very much deflated as he stuttered and stammered to apologise to this chap.

One of the officers who had been called up had been the adjutant that I'd had to see here when I went up for a commission and he was an appalling chap, a dreadful snob. Anybody who wasn't commissioned was a load of rubbish and of course a lot of the chaps in the Terriers at the beginning of the war had very good jobs, were well educated and some of them even had university degrees and all they were doing was driving 3 ton lorries or acting as loaders. He was extremely unpopular this adjutant and at Dunkirk, so I believe although I wasn't with him, he had thoroughly disgraced himself. His name was Capt Kerr and he was known by the troops as Kerr by name and cur by nature. Well this chap now that I was in officer made an awful fuss because I was one of the old gang and he was always trying to be pally and I resisted this with great effort because I couldn't stand the chap. He proved to be just as bad as he'd been in the early days. One night when I was Orderly Officer, I was in the guardroom at about 00:30 in the morning and one of the instructors from the infantry appeared in the guardroom drunk as a lord thinking that he could just report to the corporal and tell what he could do if the corporal asked him why he had turned up after midnight. This sergeant was very

surprised to see an officer was there so he managed some sort of a salute and started to mumble about why he was late and I thought well he is a regular soldier if I make a report he will be in trouble and in a few days I'll be home back in Civvy Street so what the hell. I just told him to clear off and that I hadn't seen him so he about turned and fortunately the corporal was there to catch him as he fell over. The corporal saw him to his tent. Later on, on another night this ex-adjutant was Orderly Officer and about 1 o'clock in the morning he happened to be passing this sergeant's tent when he heard a lot of girlish giggling and he popped his head in and this sergeant had got a girl in. He had a smuggled her into the camp. Needless to say, being the sort of chap he was, this ex-adjutant reported the sergeant who of course was sent back to his unit in disgrace and no doubt lost his sergeant's stripes.

The weather at the camp was beautiful and it reminded me very much of the first camp I went to in 1939 which was 13 years ago. Strangely enough it was about the same time, two weeks in July. We did manage to get out into Weymouth occasionally in the evenings. The first few days we were there the whole town was invaded by Yankee sailors from a huge battleship called the Missouri which was known as the 'Mighty Mo' which was at Portland. The town wasn't very pleasant with these chaps in who were just chucking their money about and attracting a lot of rather unpleasant attention from the locals. Fortunately they cleared off, the ship sailed to another port. It was paying courtesy calls to various ports round the British Isles. We also had the odd trip to a country club near Abbotsbury which is just up the coast. On the middle Saturday of the fortnight I went with these two REME officers, one of whom had a car, to Bournemouth and we had a very nice afternoon and evening enjoying the pleasures of Bournemouth.

The rifle range at this camp was in rather an interesting position. It backed on to the Chesil bank. This stretches quite a few miles from Weymouth up the coast and is a huge bank of pebbles that is never covered by the sea. In between this bank and the mainland is a sort of sea lagoon and with this rifle range backing onto this

lagoon and out to sea whenever there was any firing one of the soldiers had to row a boat across the lagoon and go to two flagpoles and raise red flags so that any shipping passing close to the bank on the seaward side would see there was firing and keep well away. We did quite a lot of work on this fortnight. It wasn't like the fortnight in the previous year when they weren't organised but I always felt sorry for the Territorials to have this enormous task imposed on them. I don't know what useful purpose the whole rigmarole had served but at the end of the fortnight the colonel tried to talk me into taking a Territorial commission and promised me a captaincy but I wasn't really interested. At the end of the war I had been seen by a Colonel about a regular commission and because at that time they were reducing the size of the army regular commissions were few and far between. All he offered was a short service commission for four years which to me seemed a very poor bargain because I had no idea what the future held and in four years time I might have a job to get to a position in Civvy Street. I would have lost my right to a job at the Refuge. As things turned out I daresay I would have eventually got a regular commission with all the various warlike activities that took place at the end of the Second World War. The idea of a Territorial commission didn't appeal though. I think it would have been something of an anti-climax after doing the real thing.

I got two weeks pay in cash at the end of the fortnight on lieutenants pay which somehow, absent mindedly, I forgot to declare to the Inland Revenue. So I made a profit on the deal and of course lieutenants pay was a damn sight better than the pay I was getting at the Refuge. One of the officers there had been what was known as a militia lad before the war. About twelve months or so before the beginning of the war to strengthen the army they had called up a proportion of 20-year-olds to do, I think it was, a years service in the army. In other words they were conscripted and fortunately for me I was just two or three months too old to be called-up so I got away with it. Well this ex militia lad had a car and I made good friends with him and he suggested I join him on the journey home in his car instead of going back with the rest of them by train. This suited me fine as it was much nicer to travel by road in those days than to be messed about on trains. So on the

last Saturday morning we got up at about 7 o'clock. The rest of the camp had been vacated so we had had an unpleasant night without proper accommodation. We had a wash and shave and there was no food so we set off home and got as far as Shepton Mallet, about 8 to 8.30, and stopped in the main square. There was a cafe which was closed and we knocked on the door and the proprietor came and we explained that we wanted breakfast and although he wasn't open he let us in and we had a smashing breakfast at a very reasonable price. It rather reminded me of the trip from Paignton back home on the Friday before the war broke out. Then we got as far as Gloucester and at the outskirts we were stopped by a police inspector who told us that the main road all the way through the centre of Gloucester was closed because Princess Alexandra was visiting the city and that was the route she would be travelling. We noticed of course lots of bunting. He asked if we were intending to stop in the town and we said no we were just driving through on our way home from army camp to Manchester. He looked at his watch and said if you promise me to drive straight through and not stop anywhere I will let you through. That suited us and off we set and we drove right through the centre of Gloucester not another car or vehicle of any sort in sight and on both sides of the pavement were crowds of people waving flags and cheering and as we proceeded along the empty road we gave regal waves and nods and bows to the assembled crowd. Eventually we reached the other side and carried on to Manchester where, in the middle of the afternoon, this chap dropped me at 40 Scott Avenue where there was a little girl, about three and a half I suppose, waiting to greet me. I think her name was Ann.

Whilst I was with you at 40 Scott Avenue I went out one evening in the winter, it must have been November or December, and was making my way to a dance at a place somewhere up Wilbraham road and as I was making a shortcut through some side streets, it was drizzling very heavily and pitch black and the lighting was very poor and I had my coat collar turned up and a Trilby hat on and my hands in my pockets and I heard some footsteps some distance behind me. Then a voice called "*Captain Hopley*". So I stopped and turned round and there was a chap,

presumably with his wife, and it turned out to be a corporal of mine from many years before and I was delighted to see him and we walked along having a chat until it came to the parting of the ways and before he left I said to him "*How on earth did you manage to recognise me at that distance and in these conditions?*" and he said "*Oh, I knew it was you straight away from the way you walked.*" This rather amazed me because I didn't realise I had any particular sort of walk.

A pal of mine at the Refuge before the war, whose name I regret I can't remember, lived at Hyde in Cheshire and on one occasion before the war he invited me over one Saturday straight from the office (we used to work Saturday mornings in those days) to visit him and his family at Hyde. He lived in a modern house for the times at the end of a cul-de-sac behind which was a fence and a field and whilst I was there I said to him "*I've got an uncle and family living in Gee Cross, Hyde*" and he replied that this is Gee Cross. I gave him the address and he said just come with me and went out into the back garden, climbed over the fence into this field walked along about a hundred yards to the next cul-de-sac, climbed over the fence, pointed to one of the end houses and said there's the address. We walked up the path and I rang the bell and cousin Jack came to the door. He was astonished to see me because I didn't know him very well as he had lived for many years, as I've mentioned before, with uncle George up in Scotland and I had only met him a few times but he was a charming chap. We went in and chatted to him and had a cup of tea. Uncle George and his Mrs, my aunt, were out so we didn't see them. This pal's mother became mayor of Hyde. The reason I mention this is that this chap during the war was called up and joined the RAF, became a sergeant pilot and flew Lancaster bombers. He went on many raids and won the DFM and then was promoted to pilot officer. On one raid he just didn't come back and there was no record of what happened to him and his crew and the aircraft. Well early in the 1950s if you remember I got a little motorbike and used to go swanning, to use that phrase, in all directions and I think it must have been the occasion when you and your mum and dad were on holiday in Minehead, and as you were going away I decided to have a week touring on this little motorbike. I went down to London first

of all and stayed there a couple of nights and on the following day I carried on westward right across country and joined you and the family in Minehead and spent a couple of days there. On the way to Minehead from London I made a diversion to a place called Virginia Water. It lies between Staines and Ascot and I had read in the paper sometime before that they had built a memorial at Virginia Water to all airmen who had gone missing and had no known grave. I thought I might call and see if this pal of mine had his name on this memorial and to pay my respects. I did find this memorial and it was a very beautifully designed one in nice grounds and it was on high land overlooking the River Thames at Runnymede and I spent half an hour or so there and then carried on to Minehead.

Another trip I went on this little motorbike was a tour of the south and west coasts and I joined the coast at Weston-super-Mare and carried on the full length of the coast down to Lands End, stopping at various places en route. From Lands End I had a trip to the Scilly Isles. I then carried on along the coast until I got to Brighton. The next day when I left Brighton I got to Hastings and I was going to stop there for a coffee and leg stretch and when I arrived the whole place had bunting and flags up and I stopped and asked a policeman what was going on. He said that Winston Churchill was being installed as Warden of the Cinque Ports which is a sort of honorary position, and I think the Queen Mother holds it at the moment, so I thought I might as well stop and see him as I had never seen him in the flesh so I parked the bike up and took my riding kit off and dumped it on top. You could leave things in those days without people pinching them. I walked along the prom and after about a quarter of an hour I was stood by the pavement when old Winston came along in an open car standing up with his cigar and his V for victory salute and passed me very close by - I could have leaned over and patted him on the back - and the car turned into a hotel. Shortly afterwards another car came along and this was one I recognised quite well as I had seen it many times. It was Monty's army car and Monty was stood up there saluting the population and as usual showing himself off and he too passed very close to me. The thought that occurred to me was that I could make a rude gesture to him without any

repercussions this time as he couldn't have me court marshalled. I finished off the trip by going on to Folkestone and Dover and a day trip to Boulogne and then from Folkestone I returned home.

Well that is the last reminiscence I intend to inflict on you. I thought these little yarns might round off the story and complete my connection with the army and the forces in general and after that of course I had very little to do with the army until you joined the Territorial's.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1a & b	Pte F Hopley RASC 1939
Fig 2	The town of Sable sur Sarthe, France
Fig 3	Souvigne sur Sarthe village
Fig 4	The church in Souvigne sur Sarthe
Fig 5	Le Chateau de la Roche-Talbot, Souvigne sur Sarthe
Fig 6	Promotion to Corporal 1940
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Fig 19	Capt F Hopley RASC 1946
Fig 20	War medals and the Territorial Efficiency medal
Fig 21	RASC Officers at camp 1952

CONFIRMED DATES OF UNITS

1939-1940	503 Coy RASC 42 Div
1942	When commissioned - 125 Brigade Coy RASC, 9th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Div
D Day 6th June	3rd British Div
Sept 1944	47 Coy RASC
Dec 1944	172 Coy RASC
Apr-June 1945	23 Coy RASC
Dec 1945	483 Coy RASC 49th West Riding Infantry Div