

The Phoney War Summer '40 by Peter Chevalier ¹

The Sussex Yeomanry - 98th Field Brigade RA TA (Sussex and Surrey Yeomanry – Queen Mary's Regiment) – was doubled up in the summer of 1939 as a Second Practice camp at Lark Hill ² in July / August from which camp key personnel were mobilised. The Regiment (no longer Brigade) was called up on 1 Sept 1939 and on reporting to the Drill Hall in Gloucester Road Brighton was detailed off as the men arrived in two batches – on the right the 98th Field Regiment, on the left 144th Field Regiment. The former went to Worthing and within a month received their full G1098 [stores] and 25 pounders MK 1s and went to France via Dunkirk and then back to England. The Second Line – the 144th Field Regiment moved to the Sussex County Cricket Ground except for the except for the “hallowed square” and took with them the Gloucester Road 18 pounder MK IVs and received a further four 4.5 Howitzers. The Cmd [Commander] North [or Norton] (soon sadly to go up in a land mine on his own estate) commanded 144 Field Regiment at the outset but was succeeded by Major Munroe the regular Gunner who went on to have a distinguished career with the Royal Regiment (the Royal Artillery Regiment). About the time of the year (Dec 1939?) a Third Line was formed – 74 Mid Regiment under the command of Lt Col M E S Lawes – the distinguished Gunner historian. This third line was really not a Yeomanry unit as such only two senior NCOs [non-commissioned officers] being originally Yeomen – Troop Sgt Majors Chevalier and Gould –both aged 22! A large army class intake with Regular Army Reserve NCOs soon meant that the handful of Yeomen [army reservists] in 74 were required to change their Yeomanry cap badge to the Gunners badge. Whereupon the Troop Sgt Majors requested an OCT posting. ³

74 was eventually armed with 6 inch Howitzers and 60 pounders of museum vintage – the breech firing mechanism arrived some 6 weeks after the cannonry which was as reliable as well it took almost all of that time for the gun detachment to remove the “heavy core and preservation” axle grease from these sturdy relics of 1914/18. The gun tow-ers and regimental transport were of even stranger variety and origin. Bakers and laundry vans with their original names scarcely disguised by a coat of khaki paint served as OP [forward observer position] and Gun position officers' transport. The Brigade Commander found an Austin 7 saloon barely adequate to curtain his girth. The gun tow-ers of the author's troop were two Thorneycroft – Atheys [?] with villainously dangerous double tran starting handles and two open coal lorries on the decks of which

¹ 1918–1983. The original was written possibly in the late 1970s or 1981-82 and transcribed by Christopher Chevalier in 2023. His elegant handwriting and some military acronyms were sometimes difficult to decipher, which are explained or indicated in [square brackets].

² The Royal School of Artillery

³ OCT – Officer Cadet Training.

triangular shaped batteries had to be nailed to prevent the 6 inch shells from rolling around. Army mattresses on top of the shells provided excellent seating accommodation for the gun detachment enabling 2 schools of “Solo” to operate at the same time. The rate of progress in force in mid 1940 was restricted by the wooden gun wheels to 4 miles in the hour. This gentle pace was of great advantage on the epic march from Sussex through the Kent orchards to Faversham area, enabling the soldiers to accept tin helmets full of plums from adjoining wayside farm lanes without dismounting. After overindulgence of the generously proffered fruit the inevitable calls of nature could be carried out and the column regained thereafter by only a gentle jog up the line of march.

Once in battle frontline in July ‘40 in sophisticated sandbagged gun pits (a la School of Artillery) defending the Isle of Sheppey against the expected German invasion, the Regiment was required to calibrate its guns by visiting gunnery experts—live ammo for the first time and much fluttering in the oast house dove cotes. One 60 pounder with its springs buffer /recuperator system succeeded in projecting its two enormous springs forward a greater distance than the intended projectile which fortunately fell without harm in the adjoining orchard. The Battle of Britain was at its height and the regiment was at some risk from falling spent cannon shell

The accompanying photograph [not available] was taken in May/June 1940 of Sergeant Chevalier (demoted in April when the rank of Troop Sgt Major was abolished – thereby enabling the rest of the sergeants mess of old [indecipherable] to deign to talk to him) and his gun (less) detachment. The troop was repositioned for anti invasion defences between Shoreham harbour (lagoon) to the end RNVR ⁴ headquarters in Hove about to become HMS _____[unspecified]. Sandbag emplacements and barbed wire (Dannert coils) were erected, dismantled, resited and altered at the whim of each inspecting officer ranging from the Div Commander, one General Bernard Montgomery, downwards. At one stage Sgt Chevalier could hardly wait to go to OCTU [officer training]. The Troop’s weaponry to repel the invaders consisted of 10 Lee Enfield rifles much slackened over the years to make suitably impressive noises on guard monitoring duties indeed – indeed bolt heads rattling in the magazines had to be removed to accommodate cartridges. There was additionally an impressive Lewis gun with an AA [anti-aircraft] mounting with one pan of ammunition which was not tested and indeed we knew would not work. There was as consolation an adequate supply of sturdy black pebbles as any visitor to Brighton could and still can testify.

⁴ Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

Much was made our gallant local lads this hot summer – resident belles were allowed to the beach through gaps in the wire usually for bathing purposes. Elderly citizens bought fruit and cakes and thermos flasks of tea by day and night to the grimy sandbaggers. Off duty evenings in the various hope hostelrys silver went by with free beer (in enamel watering cans) being offered by civilian patrons in return for Yeomanry rigger song recitals. Many homes opened their doors for baths and tea afterwards – in a sense the country was pulling together. Spy scares were rampant and a Yeoman guard commander at the end of the West pier on seeing a flashing light out to sea being answered from a fifth floor bedroom in his metropole hotel took a compass bearing on the latter and in consequence a doubtful character was arrested.

Little time remained for training until our guns arrived from the suspected Woolwich Rotunda Museum. Skeleton exercises abounded with “requisitioned transport” previously described. A handsome Norton 600 [hp] motorbike was presented to the author and after a 10 minute instruction from the Battery Sgt Major followed by several unstable circuits of Preston Park perimeter track the unhappy news that an exercise with minimum sidelights was ordered for that night around Ditchling Beacon. These memories would never have been written as the motorcyclist in question only just escaped having written himself off.

The County Ground provided sufficient accommodation for our Battery ⁵– the Sergeants Mess sensibly moving into the first floor of the integral licence premises. Many were “billeted out” at 6 d [pence] per night with local householders. Many of these devoted temporary landladies herbs sitting up till their soldiers returned perhaps nicely full of Sussex ale with a welcoming (?) pot of tea and a tendency to ask how the day had gone–difficult. Even more difficult was the early morning PT parades at 7:30 and all one’s brass buttons, etc had to be cleaned beforehand. Make your own tea left out by the landlady. Make pleasant conversation with daughter of the house who often has got up specially to see you off and still can't understand why you always “go out with the lads” when you are off duty – Mirror on the wall – tell her all!

What about one's own folk living half a mile away who tearfully sent their hero off to war on 1st of September and who still turns up for Sunday lunch in May, “not a bit like the last time –they all seemed to go to war to France so quickly – perhaps it's a good sign dear that it will be over soon!”

⁵ A battery is an artillery unit equivalent to an infantry company (100-150 soldiers). Sub-units of batteries are called troops (25-30 soldiers). An administrative collection of artillery batteries was called a brigade until 1938, and since then a regiment (@650 soldiers).

What about one's friends and acquaintances. Embarrassing moment for Pilot officer Paul – to whom you give a slap up regimentals salute outside Hove Town Hall – Cramwell ⁶ – brand new uniform – soon to die “somewhere in France” while the uninitiated could not understand why no Spitfires or hurricanes were available over Dunkirk. Capt. Johns – still doesn't know one end of a gun from another – wasn't good enough for the Yeomanry and never would be.

Corporal of WAAF ⁷ – looks super in uniform – always seems to be on duty at weekends or when I'm off – obviously on something “hush hush” and will never talk about it – anyway nice to think she's still willing to go out with a “Brown job”. ⁸

Douglas [possibly a relative] – would have made a good soldier but not surprised he's exempt – early consumption has left a dicky lung – but it didn't stop him from joining the LDV – ⁹still he looks and no doubt feels very out of it in the pavilion bars amongst all the uniforms.
[end]

⁶⁶ Cramwell – RAF Training School

⁷ WAAF – Women's Auxiliary Air Force

⁸ Brown job – any army soldier in khaki uniform

⁹ Land Defence Volunteers – Home Guard or Dad's Army

Notes:

The Phoney War is the name given to events from the start of the Second World War on the 1st of September 1939 when was declared against Germany by Britain and France, to the May 1940 when the Germans invaded France. There were British troops (the British Expeditionary Force) in France until the evacuation from Dunkirk in May 1940. In this period, there was some action at sea but little activity on land and surprising to many in the air. Apart from a brief few brief skirmishes, both sides were content to remain behind their defences, which concept contrasted and allowed with the blitzkrieg or lightning war tactics of the Germans in the Polish campaign. This was little over 20 years since the end of the calamitous casualties of the First World War and Anglo-French build-up of forces were fundamentally defensive and a lengthy process.

Peter Chevalier was born Pierre Jacques Hilaire in April 1918 near Poitiers in France, the only child of Georges Chevalier, a French school teacher, and Monica Hughes whose family home was in Hove, Sussex. They married in Margate in 1917 when he was on leave from the French Army in WW1. He suffered shrapnel wounds during the war and died in Paris aged 59 in 1938.

Peter was educated in England at Xaverian College at Mayfield in Sussex. Peter changed his name by deed poll from in 1936 and enlisted in the Sussex Yeomanry in 1937-38 (Yeomanry regiments were British Army Reserve Units). He had trained as a surveyor in 1936-37 and his knowledge of maps and topography no doubt fitted him for service in the artillery. He became a Troop Sergeant Major by 1939, which was a Non Commissioned Officer rank in charge of a Royal Artillery troop of 25-30 soldiers). The rank was revived in 1938 as an appointment at the level of a Warrant Officer 3rd class. It was a short lived experiment to give experienced NCOs command of platoons formerly reserved for commissioned officers (2nd Lt) – those officers had gone through officer cadet training and graduated with a commission. The experiment was not considered as success and no promotions were made to the rank which was abolished in 1940. Most of these senior NCOs were later commissioned as officers (as 2nd lieutenants). After Peter was promoted in the Royal Artillery to the rank of 2nd Lt (we have a photograph of him as such in 1941. He became a captain in 1943 prior to the invasion of Sicily and major (acting) during the Italian campaign, including Monte Cassino, and confirmed major after the war. His beginning in the ranks as an NCO might also explain his choice to keep the honorific title of major after retiring from the army in 1959. Wearing dinner jacket, cummerbund and medals, he regularly attended Sussex Yeomanry reunion dinners when we were living in Brighton from 1959 to 1972. He also named his daughter Barbara, born in 1950, after the patron saint of artillery and gunners (feast day December 4) with the middle name Monica after his mother who died in 1950.