

# **Reminiscences of a Soldier**

**Stanley Dakin**

**Born 24<sup>th</sup> February 1919**

**Reminiscences of a Soldier**  
**Stanley Dakin**  
**Born 24<sup>th</sup> February 1919**

**The Early Years**

I was born in my parents' house at 9 Townend Street, in the Walkley district of Sheffield. Nothing unusual in that, since most babies then were born at home with the help of the district midwife or neighbours. In those days children often continued to live in the same area as one or both of their parents. We lived very near to some of my Dad's family. My Grandma Dakin lived on the next street at 75 Mona Road. My Dad's sister, my Aunt Maggie, lived across from her at no. 74. Sadly, her husband, Horace, had died in WW1, before I was born. When Dot and I married, our first house was also not far away at 34 Mona Road. My Mum's family, who originally came from Taddington, a small village in the High Peak area of Derbyshire, lived just a couple of miles away from Walkley in the Malin Bridge district.

A particular friend of my Mum's was Mrs Fieldsend who lived in a nearby road. Her son, Godfrey, was born a few weeks after me. Godf (pronounced Goff) and I became best pals. We got into many scrapes together as lads and formed a life-long friendship. His girlfriend and future wife Babs was the best friend of my girlfriend and future wife Dot, and the 4 of us spent a lot of time together during our courting days and later on with our children.

Some of the things we got up to included making "touch burners" out of clay which we salvaged from local building sites and waste land. We shaped the clay into a sort of brick with holes at each side, into which we stuffed oily rags, then set them alight. Horrible, smelly and dangerous – but we thought they were great. Most of the houses near us were terraced, that is, joined together, with entrance tunnels leading to a communal back yard for 4 or 6 houses. A favourite trick around bonfire night was to light a banger under a dustbin lid in the entry passage. An alternative was to make a mixture of salt peter, sulphur and charcoal then hit it with a hammer. It used to go off with a heck of a bang and often resulted in irate adults running out of their houses to politely, or more often than not, impolitely, tell us to go and play somewhere else – all part of the fun as we saw it then. We also used to make "bull roars" by stuffing newspapers up drainpipes and then setting fire to them. They went with a right woomph. Fortunately they were metal drainpipes, not plastic, and also fortunately we never managed to burn ourselves nor set fire to any buildings, but, looking back, they were not the most sensible of things to do.

Many of the streets were very steep and made superb sledging tracks in winter. One year I remember Godf hurtling round the corner on his sledge just as the postman stepped out of an entry. He caught him full on. Poor postie went up in the air with letters flying out of his bag all over the road. We hurriedly picked them all up, stuffed them back in his bag and scarpered while he was still rubbing his shins and picking himself up. I don't think he wished us a good morning.

As a child I spent some time in what was known as the "fever hospital" at Lodge Moor on the outskirts of Sheffield, with scarlet fever. In those days this was a very serious illness which could lead to severe problems and even death. It was also very infectious. Before going home I was sent to Winter Street Hospital to be decontaminated. This was to make sure I didn't carry any bugs back home with me.

We didn't go on holiday very often and they were almost always to Auntie Maggie's, who had moved across the country to Lytham, a very popular seaside town near Blackpool. However, I vaguely remember an outing to Llandudno in North Wales and going up the famous Great Orme headland on an old fashioned tram – probably the funicular railway which is still there.

My schools were Western Road Primary and then Greystones Intermediate. As was usual I left school at 14. My first job was in Freeman, Hardy & Willis, a shoe shop in Sheffield town centre, as a general dog's body. I hated it and jumped at the chance to join the Post Office, which was much different from what it is now. Then, it ran all the postal and personal package delivery services plus the telephone and telegram services in the country. These were the days before computers, mobile phones or ipads and when very few families could afford their own house phone, so letters were the main form of personal communication with telegrams used for shorter, more urgent messages. My job, as one of about 25 telegram boys, was to deliver telegrams on my red Post Office bicycle throughout the whole town. Sheffield was then and still is a very hilly town so my job plus football kept me pretty fit.

After a couple of years I noticed a young girl, Dot, who had recently joined as a Probationer and whose job it was to prepare telegrams ready for delivery. The telegrams arrived at the Instrument Room as a typed message on a continuous strip of white paper, about half an inch (1.25cm) wide. Dot's job was to cut them to the right length, stick them onto a telegram form then place the form into an envelope for the likes of me to deliver. As young teenagers we all went around together quite a bit as a social group, including walking in the Derbyshire countryside and going to dances. When I was about 18, I moved into the Sorting Office where I remained until joining the army in 1939. Dot came back into my life when we met by chance in the centre of Sheffield whilst I was home on leave in May 1940 and, apart from being overseas with the army for almost 4 years from 1941 to 1945, we have been together ever since.

## The War Years

- May 1939      For many months, if not years, there was growing concern throughout Europe for what Hitler and Germany were planning and the increasing possibility of war. Rather than wait for compulsory conscription to be introduced, which would have meant having little or no choice over which branch of the forces I was put into and where, I decided to volunteer. In May 1939, aged 20, I went to Norbury Hall in Sheffield to enlist in a locally based regiment of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (R.A.O.C.), which was then part of the Territorial Army (T.A.).
- At the time, I was working at in the Sorting Office at Sheffield GPO (General Post Office). I started there as a telegram boy in 1933, delivering telegrams on my bicycle. There were no computers or mobile phones in those days, in fact most homes didn't have a phone of any description, so telegrams were used for most important or urgent messages.
- Aug            Towards the end of August I heard an announcement on the radio for all T.A. volunteers to report to their units within the next few days. In those days there were no televisions and virtually everyone listened to the radio, or wireless as we called it then.
- 1 Sept        Germany invaded Poland
- 3 Sept        The British Prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, announced that, because Germany had not agreed to withdraw, Britain had declared war on Germany. I remember listening to the radio and I can still recall his serious voice to this day:  
"I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room of 10 Downing Street. This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note, stating that unless we heard from them - by 11 o'clock - that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that, consequently, this country is at war with Germany."
- Sept-Dec     Initial training was in Sheffield at Carfield School, Heeley. We spent hour after hour squad bashing in the schoolyard learning how to march and carry our rifles, and, I suppose, getting used to army discipline and taking orders. Rifle practice was at the outdoor shooting range on Totley Moss, up on the moors just outside Sheffield. I remember once when someone didn't hear the cease firing order and carried on shooting. They demolished the "Cease Firing" flag which had been raised in front of the target, much to our amusement.
- First posting was to Hathersage in Derbyshire, where we "defended" the swimming pool. At first we stayed at a guest house with the grand name of Brushfield Manor. It was on the hillside above Hope station but we got turfed out because we scratched the polished wooden floor with our big boots. Some of us were moved a few miles away to Hathersage church hall and had to sleep on very uncomfortable wooden bed-boards. Then we moved back towards Hope in large wooden huts in a field opposite the Marquis of Granby Hotel at Bamford. Some of the lads were staying in a sort of garage workshop nearby. In the middle of the floor was a big "jumbo" stove for burning

logs and coke. At first, no one could get it going but one of my pals from the Post Office, Nobby Clarke, said that he could – and he did – sort of. He poured 2 gallons of engine oil in the top. Nothing happened at first, then – Whooomph - it nearly took the roof off and created an enormous cloud of black smoke over the whole valley. Nobby had been promoted to lance-corporal but was busted back to private.

After a few weeks we transferred to Radford Mill, an old cotton mill in Nottingham. We drew our vehicles (lorries and motor bikes) from Chilwell, on the outskirts of Nottingham and drove to Cranbourne in Dorset waiting to be shipped to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

- Dec 1939      Based at Henbury Hall near Stirminster Marshall, Wimbourne. Here we had our first ever inoculations. We were all a bit nervous about this but one of the lads – a big bloke known as “Screaming Ada” because of his very high pitched, squeaky voice – said it was nothing and he would go first. So we all queued up with Ada at the front. The doctor got the syringe out. Ada took one look at the needle and promptly fainted. After our jabs we were given the rest of the day off and told to take it easy. So we went to the pub to celebrate – and were all ill the next day.
- 24 Feb 1940      I “celebrated” my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday by spending the night on fire picket duty at the gates of the Hall.
- Late Feb      We boarded the Tynwald in Southampton and landed in France at Le Havre. None of our lads had driven on the right hand side of the road before and within half an hour of landing we’d brought the centre of the town to total chaos. The Tynwald was an Isle of Man packet boat that normally sailed between Douglas and Liverpool. It was later fitted out as an anti-aircraft ship and was sunk by an Italian submarine in the Mediterranean in November 1942.
- We were billeted in Montevilliers, what was then a village on the outskirts of Le Havre. The farmer wasn’t very pleased to have to put us up and we had to sleep in an old barn on sacks filled with straw, called palliases. The village square was at the top of a hill. I remember a large church, a café and my first sight of a typical French public urinal which was surrounded by metal sheets about 5 feet (1.5metres) high. It amused me and my colleagues one day when we were sitting outside the café and we saw the local priest standing inside the urinal greeting the passing ladies with a polite nod of the head and saying “ Bonjour madame”.
- March 1940      Moved up to Marquette, a suburb of Lille, near to the Belgian border. Our vehicles were parked in a compound owned by Massey Harris, a tractor firm. One day a German plane came round the end of the building and the pilot opened fire with his machine guns. In the middle of the yard we had a bren gun, a type of machine gun, surrounded by walls of sandbags. Fortunately for Len, who was manning the gun at that moment, the plane was headed directly for him so that the bullets ripped open the sandbags on either side of him as we all scattered. “Bloody hell”, he said, “Somebody could have got hurt.”

- April I was a despatch rider on a motor cycle between Lille, La Basse, Lens and Arras. One day I'd finished delivering messages and decided to pinch a bit of time to visit Vimy Ridge, a very famous WW1 battle site which overlooks Lens and Arras. About half an hour after I'd driven through Arras I stood on the ridge and watched with fascinated horror as German Stukas dive-bombed both towns.
- May German air raids intensified. We were on the move and took what shelter there was under lorries and in woods. First to Armentiers (where the popular and sometimes rather rude WW1 song "Mademoiselle of Armentiers" originated), and then over the Belgian border to Ypres. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were killed in this region in WW1. We were billeted in a wine factory near to the Menin Gate, a famous WW1 memorial which looks a bit like a smaller version of Marble Arch in London. There was then and is to this day a moving ceremony each evening when the Last Post is sounded on bugles to commemorate those who lost their lives near here (now in both world wars), and whose names are carved into the walls of the memorial. On several nights me and my mates went to watch the ceremony, then walked through the Gate into the centre of Ypres for a few drinks, then back through the Gate to our billet. A few weeks later the centre of Ypres was totally destroyed, but the Gate somehow survived.
- The air raids continued to intensify. We were informed that a German Blitzkrieg had broken through into Holland and Belgium.
- 25/26 May The Germans advanced fast past Cassel in northern France and were heading for the coast on the French/Belgian border, just south of Dunkirk. To avoid being cut off, our unit was ordered to leave Ypres and rendezvous at Bailleul back in France at midnight. Vehicles were lined up ready to head for the coast. We set off down the main street of Bailleul, by now devastated with bombing. Ruined buildings were blazing and the road littered with debris. I was ahead of the convoy on my motor cycle, taking directions from the military police. At daylight we were ordered to disperse and make for Dunkirk as best we could. Petrol was running low, I had no food and my water bottle was nearly dry.
- 26 May Constant dive-bombing and rushing to shelter in ditches or woods. The roads were long, narrow and straight, lined with tall trees and ditches on either side. The roads were crowded with troops and civilian refugees, both going in opposite directions. The civilians had no knowledge of where to go. Household goods were piled into prams, carts – anything on wheels. Panic prevailed. Many civilians killed and wounded with no help available. Dead bodies and wounded people whom we couldn't help were a distressing sight.
- Now in an area littered with narrow canals. All traffic was diverted into fields and we were ordered to immobilise our vehicles. I smashed the sump of my motor cycle with a hammer which I found and ran the machine into the nearest canal, where it vanished from sight. Nearing Dunkirk we could see a mass of flames. Huge oil tanks had exploded sending black smoke hundreds of feet upwards.

Hungry, thirsty – no food or drink – and no means of getting any. I remember pinching a bottle of rum from a deserted “estaminet” (café/bar) and shortly afterwards we broke into an abandoned NAAFI wagon (mobile “canteen” for navy, army and air force personnel) and I found a box of fruit and nut chocolate. At least I had something to eat, but drinking neat rum on an empty stomach made me violently ill. I don’t recommend that mixture as a diet even now in my nineties.

27 May Daylight was welcomed with dive-bombing Stukas. We took cover in ditches and woods. We had to proceed on foot around the perimeter of Dunkirk and walk about 8 miles to a small coastal village of Bray Dunes, just inside the French border and just below La Panne. All the area had long beaches to the water’s edge with deep, soft, sandy dunes stretching inland.

Air raids continued but our saving grace was 2 days of heavy cloud which reduced the intensity of the air raids. I spent those 2 days on the beach, retreating into the sand dunes during daylight to avoid aircraft raids, dug in to self made small trenches for shelter. Down to the water’s edge to queue ankle deep in seawater at low tide. The tide rose and fell – up to waist and then chest height. Small numbers of soldiers were being taken at a time onto small boats with a shallow draught which could come well in.

28 May I was standing chest deep in the sea, wearing a tin hat, army uniform, overcoat and boots, when a Royal Navy destroyer came in sight and a motor torpedo boat (MTB). The MTB couldn’t come in any closer so the cry went up for those who could to swim out. I could and set off – probably about 50 yards - fully clothed as described. I reached the MTB completely exhausted and was dragged on board by someone with a large boat hook, which they must have hooked into the webbing or holster belt on my overcoat. Just as well they did because I couldn’t have climbed into the boat and wouldn’t have made it back to shore. The MTB went out to the destroyer, HMS Jaguar, where we were hauled aboard. My MTB trip was the last to transfer before the destroyer set off at full speed with 700 of us on board, weaving through minefields to Folkestone. There we were handed out food and drink by, presumably, WVS volunteers. Then I boarded a train to a holding camp at Netheravon, a fighter plane base in Wiltshire, for 3 or 4 days of peace and quiet. It was heaven.

29 May Many others were not so lucky. The day after I was rescued, 650 lost their lives in a double incident when first, HMS Wakeful was torpedoed and sunk in Dunkirk harbour and then HMS Grafton, which came to pick up survivors, was also torpedoed. On the same day, HMS Jaguar was bombed and damaged on its next trip to Dunkirk but managed to make it back to Dover. It was eventually torpedoed and sunk by German U-boat U-652 off the northern coast of Egypt in March 1942. Of the crew of 250, 200 were lost, presumably many, if not most of them, being the sailors who had helped save my life.

June 1940 The evacuation of Dunkirk was officially called Operation Dynamo and lasted from 27<sup>th</sup> May to 7<sup>th</sup> June. It was subsequently described by

Winston Churchill as a miracle. About 350,000 men were saved and brought back to England, but sadly some 68,000 were killed or captured.

#### Extract from Churchill's speech to Parliament 4<sup>th</sup> June 1940

"Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. **We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...**"

#### Extract from Churchill's speech to Parliament 18<sup>th</sup> June 1940

'What General Weygand has called the Battle of France is over: the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: **This was their finest hour**'.

I didn't think, or perhaps didn't realise, that I was living through a key moment of history.

I was given some leave to go back home to Sheffield. One lunch-time I was walking in the middle of town and by chance met Dot, a girl I'd known and been friends with for 3 or 4 years before the war, when we'd knocked around with the same group of pals from the Post Office. We'd had a few dates but then drifted away from one another. This time it was different. We started seeing one another again and then wrote to one another whilst I was away – and eventually married in January 1946. If I hadn't gone home after Dunkirk, my future life could have been totally different.

Jun-Dec

Then began a series of mundane postings prior to departure from the UK for 4 years in Iraq and India.

First stop was back to Nottingham. As a group of us were walking down the street, a kiddy ran a stick along some railings. It sounded just like a Tommy gun and we all threw ourselves onto the ground. I don't recall exactly but I imagine we made a few polite comments!

Then we spent 2-3 weeks in the Royal Victoria Hotel in Llanberis, North Wales, at the foot of Mount Snowdon. Proper sheets and eiderdowns – real luxury! But unfortunately there were 2 rather sad events here. One of the lads fell very quickly and seriously in love with a local girl but she became ill and died. The other event was when 3 of our troop went out on a boat on nearby Lake Padarn and didn't return. My team had to patrol the lake each morning at dawn in a motor patrol boat but their bodies were not found for about 3 weeks, which was 2 weeks after we had moved on to Hereford. There we had another water incident when Tony Bingham got seriously stuck in weeds whilst swimming in the River Wye. This is very fast flowing and Old Cecil (Cis) Armitage, the Motor Corps sergeant, had to go in to rescue him.



- Dec 1940      Then followed a couple of brief postings to Scotland - Cambus Barron in Stirling and Garter House near Selkirk. Whilst here I heard that it had been Sheffield's turn to be "blitzed". It was very badly bombed and the town centre and parts of the steel works area had been destroyed. I was granted compassionate leave for a few days to go back home. Happily everything was okay with my family.
- Early 1941      Back to Nottingham, this time in Bestwood Lodge. From here, the Unit was split up and some of us went to Aldershot for a period before setting off overseas.
- Aug 1941      Sent by train to Liverpool and boarded H.T. Otranto, a merchant ship which had been commandeered by the Government to serve as one of Her Majesty's Troopships. Spent 2-3 days moored in the River Mersey, opposite the Pier Head waiting for the rest of the convoy to assemble. At this time the German U-Boats were doing a lot of damage in the Atlantic and ships had to be grouped together for protection.
- 30 Aug      Sailed from Liverpool. First we joined up with a group from the Bristol Channel, then off the coast of Scotland, with a group from the Clyde. At that stage there were 10 troop ships with 24,430 soldiers. More ships joined us before we were split into 2 WS convoys (Winston Specials).
- 4 Sept      My group, WS 11F, set off round the North Atlantic escorted by the battlecruiser HMS Repulse (sunk in December 1941 by Japanese torpedo-bombers off the coast of Malaya with the loss of 500 lives), and destroyers HMS Nestor and Encounter. We moved down the eastern side of America, before crossing back over the ocean to about half way down Africa.
- 13 Sept      Arrived at Freetown, Sierra Leone, but were not allowed ashore.
- 18 Sept      Set off down the coast of Africa and round the Cape of Good Hope.
- 3 Oct      Docked at Durban, South Africa, where we were tied up close to the Mauritania, at that time the biggest ocean liner in the world. We did get some shore leave here. One amusing incident was when one of my mates from the Post Office, Toby Thompson, who was in the RAF, was dancing with his hat on. His partner persuaded him to take it off, but when she saw his bald head, she made him put his hat back on again.
- 7 Oct      Still escorted by the Repulse (later replaced by cruiser HMS Ceres), we set off across the Indian Ocean.
- 22 Oct      Arrived in Bombay. Here we stayed for a week to wait for our vehicles, which had been shipped separately.
- 27 Oct      Boarded a Bibby Line merchant ship H.T. Takliwa and headed up the Persian Gulf to Margil, the port for Basra, in Iraq. Memories of cemeteries and the smell of decaying bodies left according to local ritual to be eaten by vultures. On a brighter note, bought a bracelet for Dot from a local silversmith. Unfortunately it was stolen from our house during a robbery some 40 years later.

Nov 1941      Collected my workshop lorry, a 3 ton Leyland Retriever. I called it "Dot" in honour of my girlfriend back in England and painted a big black spot on the front nearside wing. (Now my wife of over 60 years, she says she doesn't feel very flattered to be likened to a 3 ton truck!).

Drove to Baghdad via the railway junction at Ur and then followed the river Tigris upstream and camped in the grounds of the British Embassy for a few weeks before pressing on to El Musayab. There, workshops were already built for us, into which we offloaded the heavy machinery. We employed Arab labour to help us service and repair British and American tanks which were then sent on to help the Russians. One of our employees was the son of the local sheikh. We were invited to his wedding and I remember eating sheep's eyeballs and drinking Canadian bottled beer. The wedding was held at Hilla where I visited the ruins of Nebuchadnezer's palace and the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon. I also remember going on leave to a rest camp at Penjuin in the foothills of Kurdistan.

1943            After 2 years we headed back to Margil and embarked for Bombay (now called Mumbai). However, an explosion on an ammunition ship in Bombay docks meant we had to land at Karachi, in what was then still India, but is now the capital of Pakistan. We had to complete our journey to Bombay with a 7 day train ride. We collected our vehicles and drove over the Western Ghats and via Puna to reach Bangalore where our workshops were built on the Polo Ground.

One day I went with some pals to the cinema in Bangalore and heard someone shouting "Hello Brian". This had been my nickname at work. When I joined the Post Office, there was already a messenger called Stan, and someone suggested that my surname "Dakin" sounded similar to the name of a Sheffield company called "Brian Donkin" – so I became known as "Brian". The call came from a real good friend called Ken Lindley whom I hadn't seen since 1940. He had joined the RAF and was on leave in Bangalore. Ken was a gifted footballer who represented Combined Forces in International matches and was friends with many England football stars, including (Sir) Alf Ramsey who managed England when they won the World Cup in 1966. Ken's wife, also Dot, and family have been firm friends ever since.

April 1945      The end of the European war was in sight. Some of my mates were sent to Burma, but the lucky ones, including me, were sent 150 miles north of Bombay to a transit camp at Deolali. This was also a hospital for injured troops and had been a British transit camp for over 100 years. Soldiers who had served their time with their regiments in India during the days of the Raj and British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were sent here awaiting the next available troopship home, very often after many years away. The wait could be long and boring and proved too much for some. The Hindustani word for fever is "tap" and "Doolally tap" became a common term for those suffering with mental wear and tear. "Going doolally" is still used to describe someone behaving a little strangely. In 1944 in this area, Ghandi and his supporters were causing trouble and riots, which led to Indian Independence and the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

After 3 weeks we boarded the P&O liner SS Orian at Bombay and set off for a 3 and a half weeks voyage home.

Since joining the army in 1939 I'd been promoted to lance corporal, to corporal and, 5 months before we left, to sergeant. As I boarded the ship I was greeted with the inspiring news that a "field promotion" had to be in place for at least 6 months to be "substantive" and that since I had "left the field" before that time was up, my rank was reduced to corporal and the third stripe was removed from my uniform there and then. I wasn't very impressed but the thought of coming home was more important.

We crossed the Indian Ocean, then up the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal, with just one day's shore leave in Port Said.

8 May 1945 We celebrated Victory in Europe (VE) Day somewhere in the Mediterranean and ceremoniously threw our solar topees (Indian sun hats) into the sea. As we approached home, we had to anchor off the coast of North Wales because of a dockers' strike in Liverpool. We were stuck there for about 3 days. Some of the lads had been away for 4 to 5 years and were ready to rip the dockers limb from limb.

After landing, it was train to Nottingham, then to a camp near Leeds. Finally I was de-mobbed in Doncaster, then back home to Sheffield for the first time in almost 4 years.

Looking back there were some horrible times, especially at Dunkirk and whenever news came through about the loss of friends and others who suffered. There were also a lot of boring times. But there were also some bloody good times and I made some great friends along the way.