



DANGER & ENCHANTMENT

A Soldier's Story

By

EDWARD TOMS



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Cover photos. *Front:* British Crusader tank passes a burning German Panzer IV at El Alamein, Nov 1941; the author in Aleppo, Syria, March 1943; Raiding Support Regiment badge; the author with 6th Seaforths, Vierzele, nr Ghent, Belgium, March 1945; Bcharre, Lebanon in 2008. *Back:* the author at 100.

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Foreword

In reading the war records and personal diaries of others I have most appreciated their anecdotal accounts and personal views. I, therefore, wanted my own account of my war to follow this pattern.

The most dangerous place in war is the front line. I had a relatively safe war with only 5% of my time spent in the front line with its many dangers from close contact with the enemy, subjected to his constant artillery & mortar fire, to aerial attacks. Around 20% of my time I was with Raiding Forces behind enemy lines. Many of my SAS comrades spent as much as 50% of their war so deployed; those in Northern Europe were in greater danger from enemy reaction than those of us operating in the Mediterranean (mainland and islands) mostly with groups of well-trained partisans to hide or support us. Although it was a relatively safe place to be - the initiative and element of surprise was yours - you knew that capture meant summary execution.

As one records one's experiences one realises that there is a longer story developing in one's memory. These are best transferred to an Appendix to avoid cluttering up the chronological flow of the main narrative. My story is based on my vivid memory and my official records; both are liable to inaccuracies. Some of our best living military historians - Antony Beevor, Max Hastings, Ben Macintyre, Dan Snow - have wider sources of information. They interview many veterans and are given much help by regimental records. They are sometimes plied with, and occasionally misled by, Regimental "Legends".

A very pronounced "Legend" in the world of British Special Forces is that of Paddy Mayne as described by Ben Macintyre in his one volume history of that original element of the SAS. They had fought from Egypt through to Tunisia where William Stirling had already formed the 2nd SAS whilst agreeing that Mayne's band of pirates would now be the 1st SAS. But Major Mayne and his men were ordered to return to Palestine to become the Special Raiding Squadron (SRS) of the newly created Raiding Forces to be commanded by Brig Turnbull.

In the last two weeks of May, after violently refusing to recognise or serve under Brig D J T Turnbull, CBE, DSO, Mayne threw a famous drunken "wobbly" in Egypt. With that out of his system he persuaded the OC Troops of a fully loaded troopship about to sail back to Tunisia to take his small SAS force aboard back to Tunisia to expand themselves into the 1st SAS, in readiness for Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, thence Italy. What Ben Macintyre includes in his published volume has Mayne and his men

seizing a ship in Egypt and sailing it direct to spearhead the invasion of Sicily. Thus myths become facts. But what is not a myth but a series of clear well-witnessed facts is that Lt-Col Paddy Mayne, DSO & 3 Bars, Croix de Guerre, Legion d'Honneur was:

- an inspiring leader of men in battle;
- entirely without fear in close vicious combat;
- full of determined drive to push through the enemy;
- the non-recipient of a Victoria Cross 'For Valour' in which quality he abounded;
- occasionally utterly intolerable.

His one regret, which he shared with William Stirling, was in allowing their units to be used as straightforward infantry battalions but without the support weapons found essential to normal infantry. I would plead with Ben Macintyre now to write the second volume of the SAS history covering the operations of that much larger part of the Regiment which remained fighting in the Mediterranean.

Edward Toms.

2023

Dedication

I dedicate this book to all those peace-loving innocent people who have perished in the countless conflicts that have beset our World since the Second World War. In doing so I remember with great sorrow on every day of my long life, those comrades who were killed; they were all so young, 18, 19, 20s; they had yet to live, but did not do so. I know all too well the joys they sacrificed. I see their happy laughing faces as we prepared for battle.

Extract from “The Gates of Damascus”

God be thy guide from camp to camp;
God be thy shade from well to well;
God grant beneath the desert stars
Thou hear the prophets camel bell.

And God shall make thy body pure,
And give thee knowledge to endure
This ghost-life's piercing phantom-pain,
And bring thee out to life again.

James Elroy Flecker (1885-1915)

Edward Toms – War Service 1937-1946

1. Service in a Royal Naval Dockyard

I have always considered that my war service began in September 1937 when I began working on ships of the Royal Navy all of which were efficiently preparing for war. The two ships on which I worked most were HMS Glorious (a battleship already converted into an aircraft carrier) and the battleship HMS Hood.



HMS Glorious

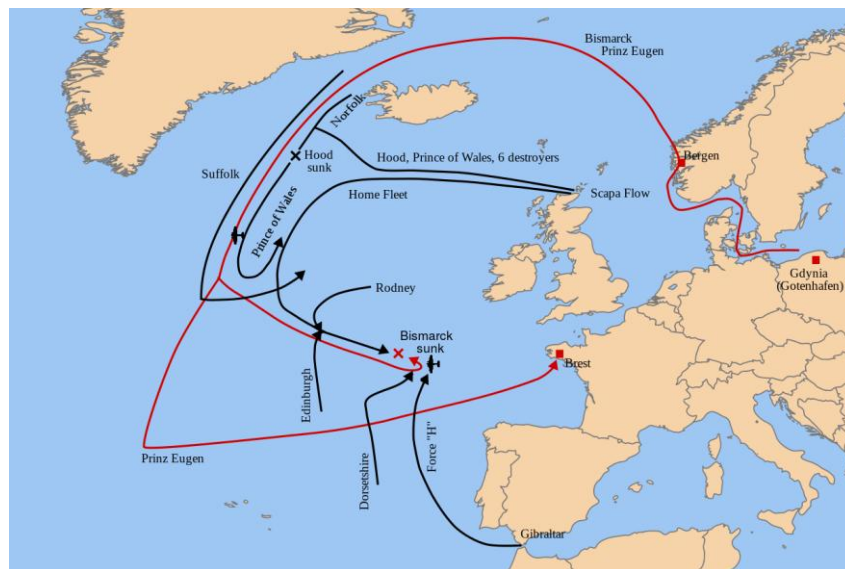


HMS Hood

Eventually I met members of their new crews and some became good friends. This added to the tragedy and sorrow felt when early in the war both ships were sunk (by enemy action I would hasten to say and not because of any failed workmanship on my part).



HMS Glorious listing, on fire and sinking as seen from the Scharnhorst, (total loss of life - 1,207; plus 312 from the destroyers Acasta & Ardent)



Map of the hunt for the Bismarck in which HMS Hood was sunk off Greenland on 24 May 1941 with the loss of 1,415 lives

Sept 1937

I entered HM Naval Dockyard, Devonport as an electrical engineering apprentice, and took part in preparing RN warships for war. I worked “afloat” on HMS Vanguard and HMS Hood installing gun tables for main gun control (an early form of computer).



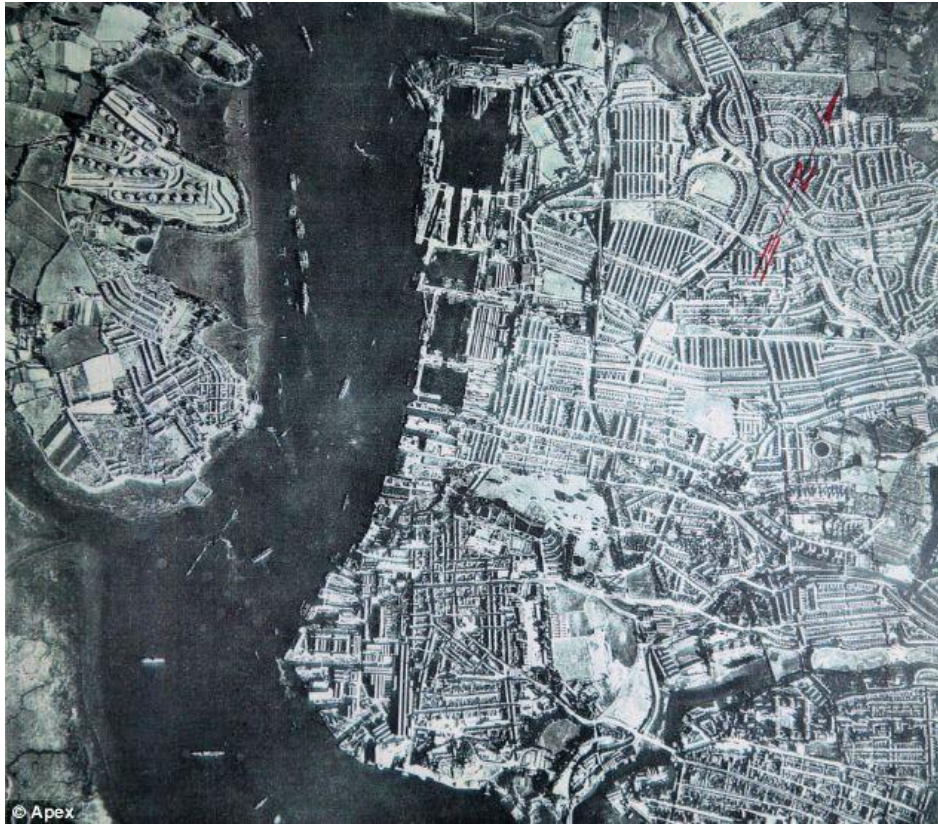
HMS Vanguard

Sept 1939

War declared. I volunteered for fire-fighting duties in the dockyard on being told all naval dockyard employees were exempt from conscription into the Armed Forces.

Sept 1940

I had an interview with the Admiral-Superintendent of the Dockyard to seek permission to volunteer for War Service in the Armed Forces. Permission was granted on condition I would return to complete my indentured apprenticeship when released and that I would volunteer for the Royal Navy, but I failed the naval eyesight test.



Luftwaffe photo of Plymouth with Royal Naval Dockyard Devonport lower centre

Oct 1940

I volunteered for the Royal Tank Regiment, and continued my apprenticeship training until sent for by the military.

Feb 1941

Heavy night “Blitzes” on Plymouth began with HM Dockyard as the main target, in which I was on fire-fighting duties. The German pattern of bombing was to send in a first wave of bombers which dropped phosphorus incendiary bombs; there was then a gap of around 30-60 minutes before the second wave of bombers arrived to drop high explosive bombs. By the time the second wave came the fires created by the first wave were well under way. I placed sandbags on numerous incendiary bombs including those on the deck of an RN frigate in a nearby dry dock. I survived the heavy bombing which completely destroyed the Drawing Office in which I was working by day and fire-fighting by night. I was badly shaken but unhurt.



Union Street, Plymouth, before World War 2



Uncontrolled fires in a number of large commercial buildings in Plymouth's Drake Circus.

2. The Royal Tank Regiment Training

May 1941

I reported to Bovington Camp, Dorset to commence training in all basic aspects of tank crew skills (driving, gunnery, and radio operating). I was then sent on a Gun Fitters course which I passed with Distinction and was offered immediate promotion to Staff Sergeant to become an Instructor on future courses.



Tank training during World War Two

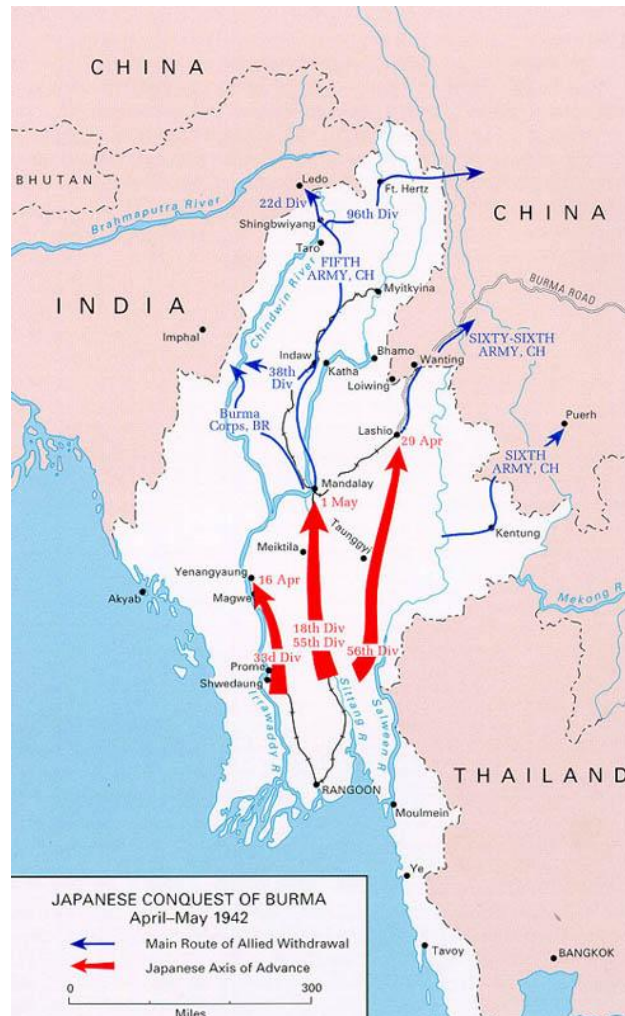
I declined this offer because I was set on becoming a member of a tank crew; therefore I continued the specialised advanced training for tank crews. I passed out in every tank crew role by the end of 1941. I took part as driver/operator in an emergency tank deployment to a defensive line on the North Downs as the threat of German invasion became likely.



Royal Tank Regiment cap badge

Jan 1942

I was sent to join one of a number of overseas drafts being assembled at Lulworth for reinforcing units in North Africa. My draft was earmarked for 2nd RTR in 7th Armoured Brigade (“Desert Rats”). The sailing date for this draft kept being delayed because 7th Armd Bde had suddenly been shipped from Egypt to Rangoon in a desperate attempt to defend it against the rapid Japanese advance into Burma.



Japanese conquest of Burma April-May 1942

The British conducted a heavy fighting withdrawal overland to India. 7th Armd Bde was forced to burn their Stuart tanks on reaching the River Salween, and continued a fighting withdrawal on foot to reach the safety of India, but in a physically weakened state. The Lulworth draft for 2nd RTR was at last rerouted from Egypt to Bombay.

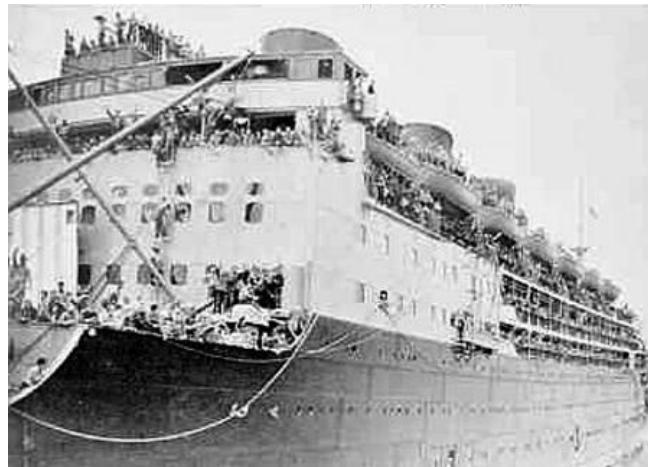


Stuart tanks negotiating a Burmese river crossing

3. Overseas to Egypt – Tank Skirmishes

13 May 1942

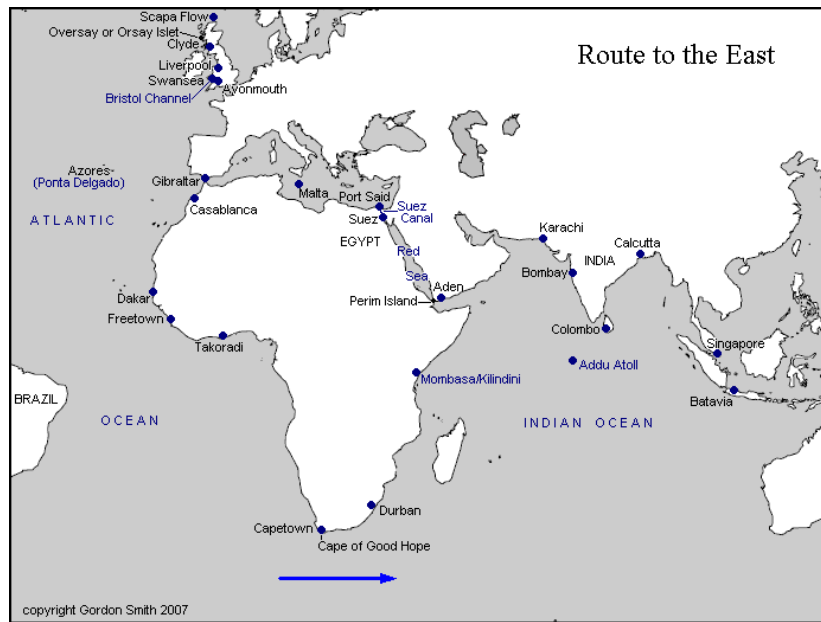
We embarked on Troopship SS Strathaird (P&O) to join a large convoy being assembled in Liverpool and the Clyde. The only other drafts on board were a large contingent of Glasgow-recruited Cameronians and a very large RAF grouping of ground crew units.



The Strathaird kitted out as a troopship and painted grey

The Convoy sailed on 13 May, reaching Freetown on 9 June and then on to Durban where a week's shore leave would be granted to all drafts and everyone would be moved into the comfortable tented camps on Durban Racecourse - a break to which everyone looked forward as reports of South African family hospitality was already legend in the UK.

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12 Jun 1942

The convoy reached Durban. All troops disembarked and comfortably encamped on the Racecourse from where individual white South African families in their large cars collected pairs of pals each day and gave them a lavish time. I was denied all this joyful hospitality because I had become involved in the disciplinary events referred to in Appendix A.

19 Jun 1942

The convoy sailed on to Bombay without this guard but with my AB64 (soldier's Pay Book & Record of Service, etc). A belated record of this appears in my AB64 after noting that I failed to disembark in Bombay but later joined Rear Details of 2nd RTR still in Egypt, a large number of whom were wounded from the battles in North Africa (Beda Fomm, Sidi Rezegh, El Agheila, etc).

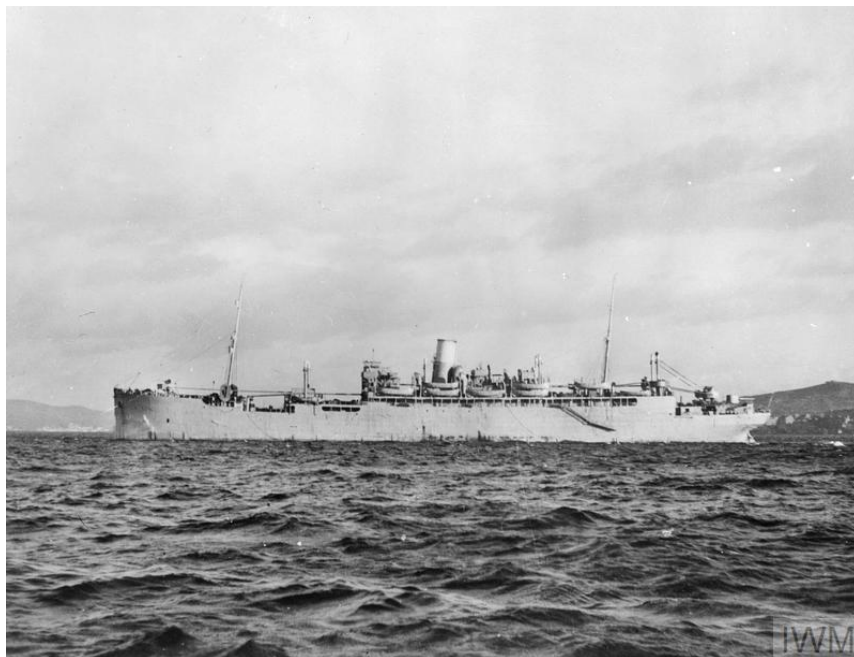


I had missed the hurried move to Rangoon. I talked my way into being sent to Egypt, preferring to go there rather than waiting even longer for the next convoy to India. The RAF Guard had to stay and wait for the next India convoy.

In 2018 my AB64 came to me through the post with no covering letter or explanation as to the sender. It was almost falling apart. Fortunately one important page, showing all my postings, attachments, etc throughout my Other Rank service, was intact. A copy of this page is at Appendix 'B' with the story showing details of the disposal of my ragged AB64 and its current archive location.

7 July 1942

I embarked and sailed on RMS “Arawa” carrying 2nd New Zealand Division reinforcement and individual NZ units - the beginning for me of a lifelong love of New Zealanders, enhanced by later fighting in support of 2 NZ Div. I learnt to sing “Po Atarau”, “Now is the hour when we must say good-bye”.



The Arawa



Troops of the 2nd New Zealand Division
with a British Matilda tank, Libya Nov 1941

23 July 1942

I disembarked at Port Tewfik and to my great luck immediately joined a fully trained troop of ex-2nd RTR one of whose tank crews was missing a radio operator familiar with the new No 19 set on which I had been very fully trained during my time of waiting at Lulworth.

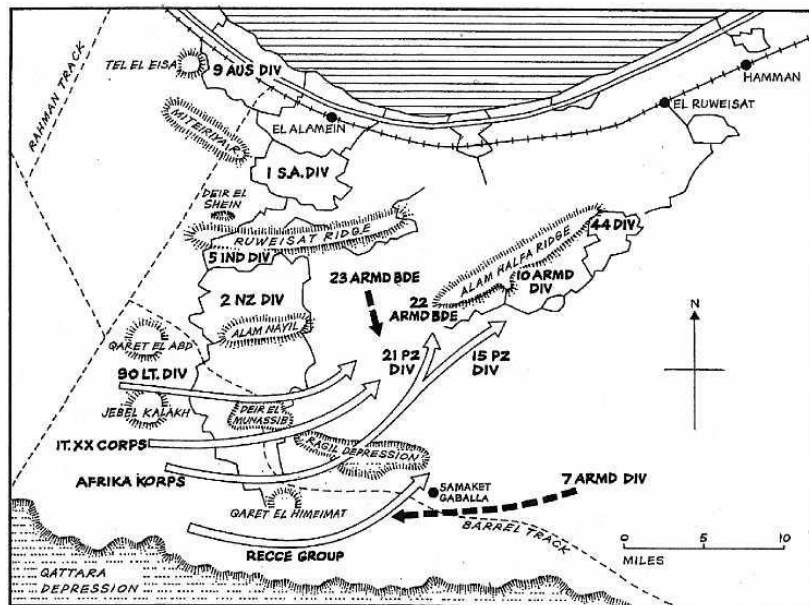


No 19 radio operator in a Sherman tank 1943

4. Western Desert Battles

24 July - mid Aug 1942

Abassia-trained complete tank crews from these 2nd RTR Rear Details became “ready-for-battle” reinforcements for the combined 1st/6th RTR then confronting German/Italian forces garrisoning Tobruk and who were endeavouring with some success to advance towards El Alamein. Commonwealth and Free French forces had formed a number of “Knightsbridge” boxes trying to hem them in.



First Battle of El Alamein

The Commonwealth Desert Air Force played a great interdiction role on enemy supply lines and in targeting heavy & medium artillery.



Baltimore bombers from 55 Sqn RAF on the way to bomb 15th Panzer Division during the Battle of El Alamein

My first experience of battle and of killing the enemy was when I opened fire on Italian infantry leaving their dug positions as our Grant tanks rushed towards them and I opened fire with 5mm Browning in our turret.



M3 tanks: British Grant (left) & US Lee (right) at El Alamein

We continued to engage enemy thrusts as we slowly fell-back to the area of Ruweisat Ridge near El Alamein. We were taking part in what became known as the First Battle of Alamein. There then followed the arrival from the UK of additional formations and the regrouping of existing formations and units, especially armoured.



A British Crusader tank passes a burning German Panzerkampfwagen Mk IV, Nov 1941

Aug 1942

The Rear Detail crews of 7th Armd Bde, now fully formed and battle experienced, became a large element of a new 'B' Sqn of the 3rd Hussars (3rd H from now on) in 9th Armd Bde. The original 'B' Sqn had been rushed to Java

around the same time of panic as the 7th Armd Bde had been rushed to Rangoon. On disembarking they discovered the Japanese were already there in force. The entire squadron were taken prisoner. 3rd H needed to form a new 'B' Squadron for the coming second Battle of El Alamein.



With my 2nd Royal Tank Regiment Troop, Egypt, Sept 1942
(standing on the far left)



Sept 1942

I commenced training with 3rd H and with newly arrived Sherman tanks for the coming offensive at Alamein. Although serving with 3rd H, RTR were allowed to continue to dress as RTR with their black berets. We were called the “cow

pats” by the real 3rd H who still wore the General Service side hats (known obscenely as “c--t caps”). The relationship between the 3rd H and 2nd RTR was a close and comradely one since each had exchanged a squadron at Sidi Rezegh, when 3rd H were equipped with heavy Matildas and 2nd RTR with lightweight Stuarts.



With Sgt Middleton with our Grant tank, Egypt, Sept 1942



I'm sitting astride the 75mm gun of our first Sherman tank, Sept 1942

Mid Oct 1942

We moved up with 9th Armd Bde to forming-up areas in the desert East of El Alamein. We loaded for battle: high octane petrol, 75mm amm, High Explosive, Armour Piercing and Smoke shells, 5mm Browning, etc; followed by final briefings and crew bonding, issue of morphine needle phials and extra field dressings, and letters home. I preferred not to worry my parents and three sisters so only wrote happy combined regular letters to them. I wrote more

regularly and somewhat more colourful letters to my UK girlfriends and to a British WREN I had met during a short break in Cairo.

23 Oct 1942

At 2140 hrs on the dot every gun in the 8th Army opened their immense artillery barrage. The overwhelming noise was more than any of us had ever experienced and was a compounded noise of the guns of both sides, the explosion of the shells of both sides, the whistling of our own shells just a few feet above our heads, and the shrieking noise of the German Nebelwerfers. My hearing has never recovered



Australian 25-pounder gun & crew at El Alamein



German Nebelwerfer in action



The bright muzzle flash from a British 25-pdr during the El Alamein barrage

24-25 Oct 1942

'B' Sqn under Maj Eveleigh moved in single file through the cleared gap in our own deep minefield. I remember the difficulty our driver, Sgt John Prentice (ex-London bus driver like so many in the wartime RTR) had in seeing the white tape so bravely laid by the Military Police, because of the dense smoke laid by both sides. The Military Police and our Sapper mine-lifting teams suffered heavy casualties mostly from enemy artillery well zeroed in on all minefield gaps, but our Desert Air Force played an enormous part in reducing enemy capabilities and supplies, and targeting enemy heavy artillery locations with great success, otherwise casualties would have been much higher still, and making it possible to start fighting our way through the cleared gap in the narrower enemy minefield.



El Alamein: British Sherman tanks move up along paths cleared through enemy minefields by Military Police and Sappers

We lost one tank and all its crew to a well dug-in 99mm German anti-tank gun. In the dense smoke Sgt Prentice charged over a dune only to crash down on another 99mm gun, crushing it and its crew. We then drove on out of the smoke and seemed to be clear of serious opposition as we supported the New Zealand infantry and 51st Highland infantry.

26-29 Oct 1942

Both sides were exhausted by three days of bitter close-quarter fighting with heavy losses of tanks and troops. 3rd H were now left with only 15 tanks mostly in the newly formed (after the First Battle of Alamein) 'B' Sqn. But the advantage was very much with Monty's 8th Army. He had newly arrived entire formations and individual troop reinforcements, very short supply lines and complete control of the Air. Against these advantages Rommel was in great difficulties, short of both ammunition and petrol and with extremely long supply lines.



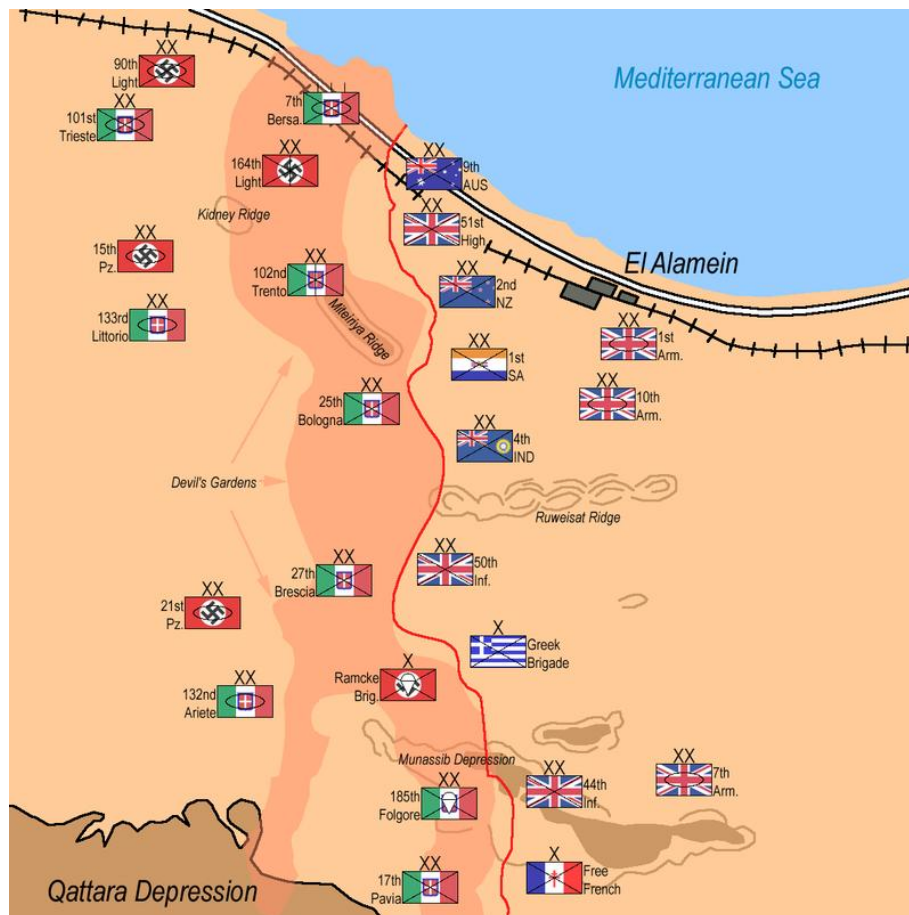
Montgomery watching British tanks advance, Nov 1942

The Commonwealth Desert Air Force under RAF control fought a highly successful interdiction programme which almost closed Rommel's supplies. With these advantages Monty and his Generals were able to plan the final breakthrough. It was given the code word Supercharge.

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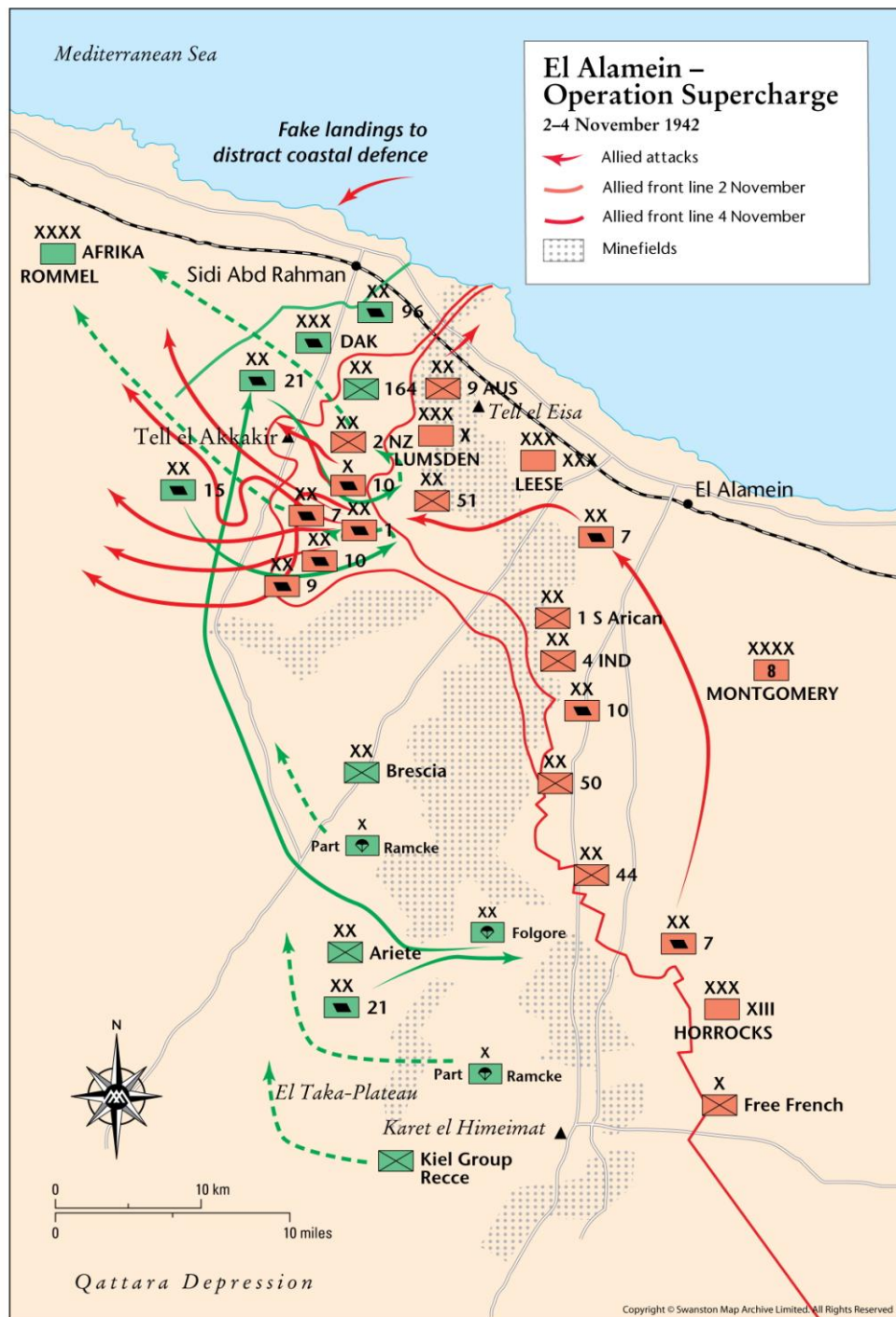


Rommel (left) in his command half-track



Deployment of forces on the eve of battle

5. El Alamein – Operation SUPERCHARGE



31 Oct-1 Nov 1942

Supercharge launched under the overall leadership of the popular New Zealander General “Tiny” Freyburg, VC. He had the following formations and units under his command: 9th Armd Brigade (which included my unit, 3rd H), 2nd NZ Division, and 51st Highland Division.



Generals Freyberg & Montgomery with Capt L.H. Browne
of the Long Range Desert Group, Dec 1942

‘B’ Sqn, 3rd H led 9th Armd Bde out of the now cleared gap in the thin Rommel minefield at 2300hrs and the entire Bde deployed widely in front of the weakened German 88mm dug-in guns. One Bde of 2nd NZ Div and 151 & 152 Beds (Bedfordshire Regiment) of 51st Highland Div went ahead and eliminated these German guns.



Captured dug-in German 88mm gun

We began to advance against the retreating German & Italian armies that comprised Rommel's Afrika Korps, taking many prisoners. A stubborn resistance continued, especially from German units in the period up to 3rd Nov. The retreat began to become a rout. The main hold-ups were caused by the long-ranged enemy artillery firing in mainly smoke and air burst shells; the latter caused a number of casualties amongst our tank commanders with their heads out of their turrets.



Italian & German prisoners escorted from the battlefield

Around midday on 5 Nov 1942 my Sherman tank, in which I was the radio operator and a trooper in the Royal Tank Regiment serving as a reinforcement troop in the newly formed B Squadron, 3rd H, caught fire from enemy anti-tank air-burst shells and had to be speedily abandoned.



A burning Sherman tank

The tank commander ordered the crew to bail out as he himself immediately did and I followed him within a few seconds but my shirt and hair caught fire which I managed to extinguish by rolling in the sand, but could not get up or move without searing pain across my burnt shoulders. I managed to use my morphine phial to inject myself and entered into a painless doze. After about an hour stretcher bearers of the 5th Seaforths picked me up and took me to a joint Regimental Aid Post near El Daba. We had then advanced some 20 miles westward from El Alamein.



Stretcher bearers evacuating
a wounded casualty at El Alamein

7 Nov 1942

I was taken by ambulance, all of which were evacuating wounded to 12th Military Hospital near Helmhieh, an eastern suburb of Cairo and near many Main Depots including that of the RAC/RTR at Abassia. I asked to be dropped off there because, from my previous short stays there, I had discovered that one of my Bovington fellow recruit close friends, an ex London bus driver and expert First Aider was now Sgt Reg Milburn in charge of the Depot First Aid Centre with its very “swish” facilities including private bedrooms.



Evacuating El Alamein wounded by aircraft

I was welcomed warmly by my friend Sgt Millburn who put me in a room in his First Aid Centre and over the next two weeks completed the treatment of the burns on the back of my right shoulder until the new skin began to settle. In the first days I caught up with the news of how well the 8th Army advance was progressing. The only sad news was of how severe were the tank casualties

suffered by the 9th Armd Bde, including the 3rd H, so that the entire Bde had to be taken out of the advance they had helped in ensuring and sent to Aleppo in northern Syria to rest and recover.



Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery, El Alamein

I remained in postal touch with my 3rd H friend, Tpr Hugh Philbrick. I had also kept in touch with a member of my 2nd RTR Draft, Tpr Robin Hood, and heard that the 7th Armd Bde were on their way back to the Middle East, via Basra. On one of the early days in Sgt Millburn's care, I read a GHQ MELF (Middle East Land Forces) notice calling for volunteers for Special Forces which would entail parachute training. The idea of such activity appealed to me so I applied through the Depot Orderly Room. I heard no more in my remaining days at the Depot so assumed I had not been selected.

6. Enchanted Lands – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine

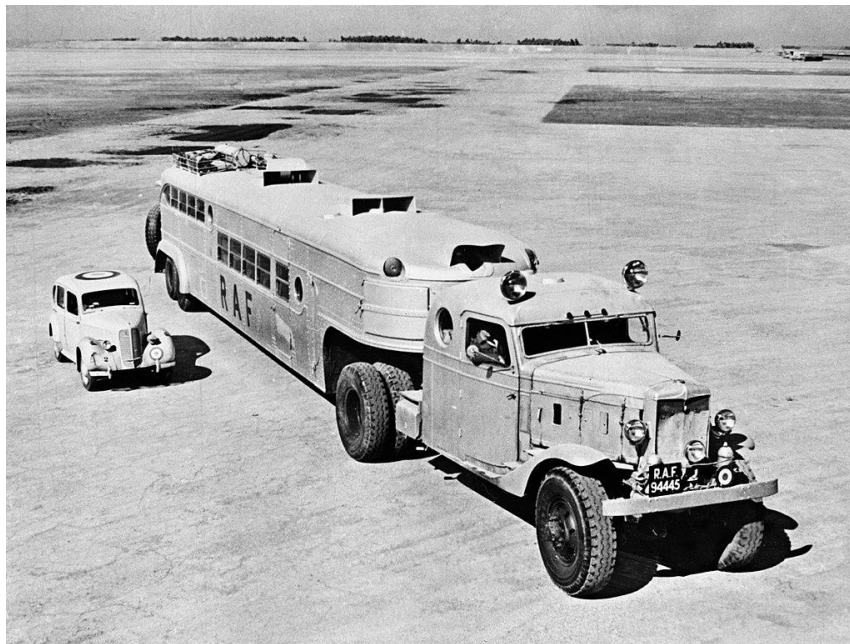
1 Dec 1942

A group of Warrant Officers from 7th Armd Bde arrived at the Depot to collect those members of the Rear Details (i.e. those left behind in the rush to Rangoon) to bring them back to their present location in a large tented and well constructed camp at Latafiya, 30 miles or so south of Baghdad. Amongst this group was Squadron Sergeant-Major (SSM) "Pop" Young from 2nd RTR. I made sure I went with him. We were part of PAIFORCE (Persia and Iraq) commanded by General Sir H ("Jumbo") Maitland-Wilson.



3 Dec 1942

Some 40 or so of us in two 3 tonner troop-carriers left Abassia on what proved for us to be an epic “journey of a lifetime”. We reached Haifa in Northern Palestine that evening and camped near the terminus of the legendary cross desert Nairn Bus. It was built after WW1 for two ex-RAF brothers, the Nairn brothers. Our 7th Armd Bde party was astounded to discover we had been allotted the 44 seat bus for our three day journey to Baghdad via Damascus. I need say no more here because I beg every reader of my War Diary to get on their www browsers and read the very interesting story, and view astonishing photographs of the Nairn Bus.



The Nairn Bus

5 - 7 Dec 1942

I cannot remember the exact date we mounted the Nairn Bus and took to our comfortably-cushioned seats. I remember spending a few days enjoying the facilities of the Haifa transit camp with its NAAFI canteen and old copies of the Lilliput magazine and Punch. I am therefore assuming we left Haifa on 7 Dec. The peacetime journey normally meant a night sleeping on board. Now in wartime and under military control as a “seats only” troop carrier a dismounted midway night stop was required at the vast RAF base at Lake Habbaniya.



Habbaniya airfield, circa 1941

(Note:-Towards the end of this War Diary you will read that I returned to Habbaniya in August 1945 in a Sunderland Flying Boat and landed on the lake for another one night sleep on my way to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to join Force 136 and the War against Japan).



Map of Iraq in World War Two
with Habbaniya to the west of Baghdad

9 Dec 1942

We arrived to join 2nd RTR at Latafiya, south of Baghdad.

9 -24 Dec 1942

The 2nd RTR had the American Grant tank, with which I was already familiar before it was replaced in Egypt by the much better Sherman tank. I was immediately posted to No 1 Troop in A Sqn under Maj Norman Bourne, DSO. Our crew comprised: Lt John Stanton, troop commander; Sgt Dempsey, driver; "Gunner" Lloyd, on main turret with only a 37mm anti-tank gun; Robin Hood, on the larger 75mm side turret gun with its forward pointing, limited traverse gun (40 degrees); and myself as radio operator of the No 19 set and doubling as gun loader when battle was joined. In this period before Christmas we were on almost continuous troop and Sqn training. By its end we had become a well-bonded crew.

My experience of all the happy, efficient units in which I have served is that, in addition to the vital bonding with those with whom you will be training and going into action cooped inside a tank, you find that out of battle (usually much longer periods) you then also become close to other small coteries of like-interest groups such as bridge players, gramophone listeners, avid readers, so called "gentlemen troopers", etc, etc. These little groups never became exclusive cliques or in any way denuded the main loyalty.

24 Dec 1942 - 3 Jan 1943

All four fighting squadrons were given daily leave to Baghdad during this period, except for Christmas Day itself when, following the traditions of all three Services, the entire Regiment sat down to a real Christmas dinner (thanks to the NAAFI's brilliant wartime provisioning) and in the tradition of all three Services, other ranks were waited on and served by their officers.

3 Jan - 15 Oct 1943

In these next nine months the experiences of life in the 2nd RTR was for me personally, and for like-minded members of our ancient history coterie, an idyll.

Early March 1943

The entire 7th Armd Bde set out by tank transporters and troop carrier 3 ton trucks to follow the Nairn Bus route to Haifa. The journey took three days with three overnight camping halts.



M19 Tank Transporter loading a Grant tank

It was an inspiring lesson to us in well-planned long distance military movement: an Advance Party of cooks, their cooking equipment and provisions of food, with a water truck, and a small party of camp markers, direction signers, etc, all under the Regiment's 2nd-in-Command (Maj Mark Bonham-Carter). It set out two hours before the Main Body. By the time the Main Body reached the selected, signed site we were heartened to be welcomed by mugs of hot, sweet tea and the roaring sound and smell of the cooks' petrol burner cookers preparing a tasty stew.



Royal Army Service Corps preparing rations in the desert

On classical travel routes, I was fortunate to have as my best friend and fellow member of the history coterie, Tpr Robin Hood, a graduate in classical history whose thesis had been on the Phoenician civilisation of that area known as the Levant.

17 Mar 1943

2nd RTR encamped on waste ground outside the wire of the permanent hutted camp of Sarafand Garrison. This camp had all of the main facilities of flush toilets, hot showers, drying rooms, etc. These were made fully available to us and we drew up a rota system for their use. Meanwhile the Commanding Officer went north with the Bde Cmdr to find a new prepared site in the Aleppo area.



British Army camp at Sarafand in 1947

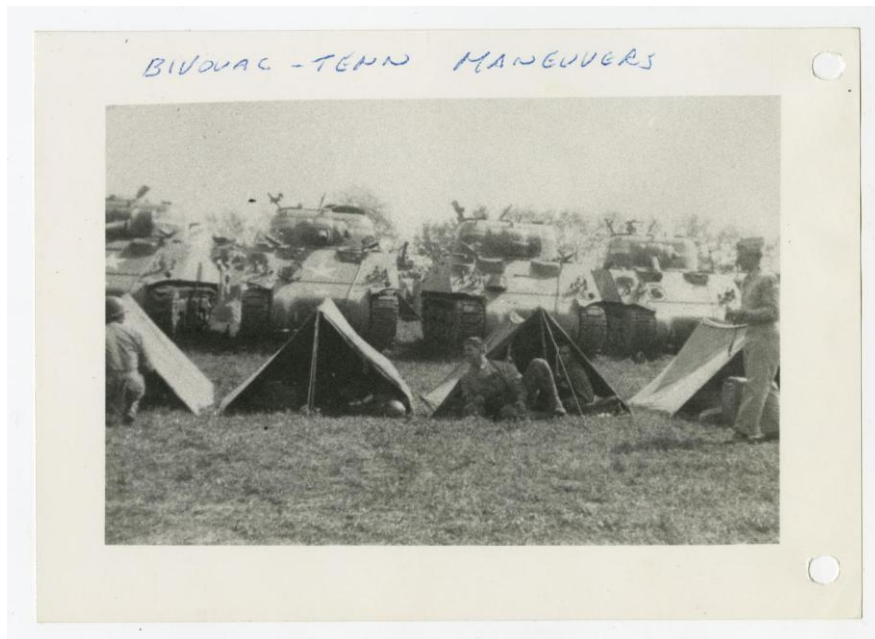
21-23 Mar 1943

The entire Brigade moved by night to new locations near Aleppo. 2nd RTR were lucky to be allotted a fully prepared camp of ridge tents and larger circular EP/IP 'bell' tents within walking distance of Aleppo immediately to the south. On our arrival we were delighted to find the remnants of the 3rd H including my friend Hugh Philbrick. The 3rd H had suffered one of the highest tank casualty rates in the first Battle of Alamein of any armoured regiment in the 8th Army and had been committed to the main Battle of El Alamein and Supercharge in a low tank state, apart that is from its newly formed composite 'B' Sqn of which my ex-2nd RTR Tp was part and which was to lead the attack. Their dynamic CO, Lt-Col Sir Peter Farquhar had been told by XIII Corps Commander to accept 100% tank losses to achieve the Supercharge aim of an enemy withdrawal. The entire 9th Armd Bde (3rd H, Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, Warwickshire Yeomanry and 14th Sherwood Foresters) had suffered such losses in attaining its aim that it had to be withdrawn to northern Syria to rest and recover.



9th Armoured Brigade formation badge

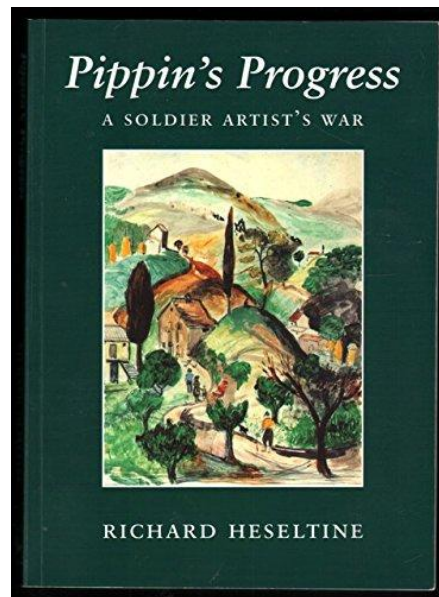
Unfortunately its survivors took no part in the subsequent rapid advance of the 8th Army. This is where I found my bedraggled 3rd H comrades living in one-man bivouacs, whilst I in my 7th Armd Bde was in a fully developed tented camp with a well laid out tank park with its mixture of Grants, Crusaders and Lightweight Stuarts. I could not understand why 9th Armd Bde were not blessed with the same good accommodation as the 7th Armd Bde unless it was their own choice to be rugged.



US bivouac camp with tanks

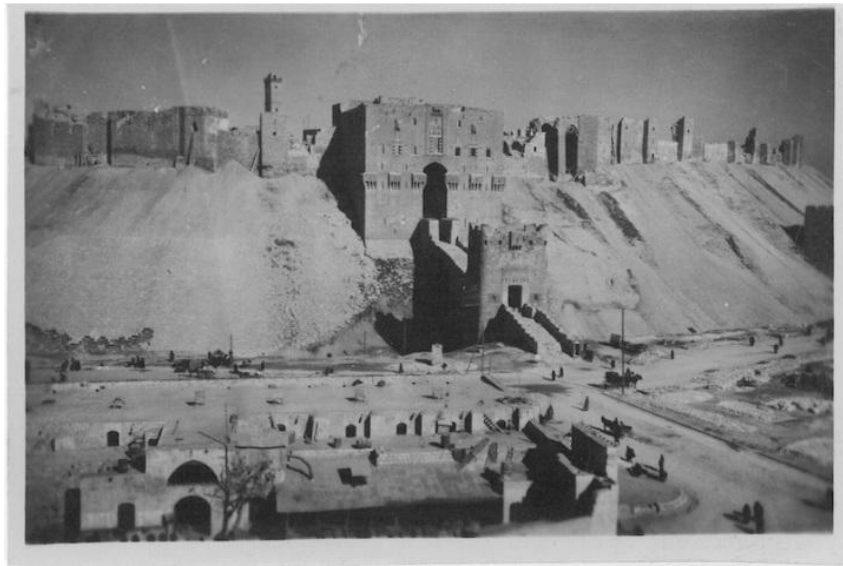
Note. Dear reader, I hope this war diary reveals that the war experience of most of those serving in front line fighting units is a strange blend of short periods of dangerous contact with the enemy, long periods of training and movement, most of which is really enjoyable, and many periods of even greater enjoyment on leave with friends (including new friends of both sexes - for me. and many like me - falling in love knowing it could not flourish as you had to move on).

There have been chroniclers far better than this very ordinary diarist. I thoroughly recommend the very best of all chroniclers I know of who happened to have spent the entire war as an officer of the 3rd H, Richard Heseltine, known in his Regt as "Pippin". He had many artistic attributes including that of being a brilliant water colourist. His own book is a true classic called "Pippin's Progress", still in print as a paperback publication by Silver Horse Press - ISBN 10: 0954162307.

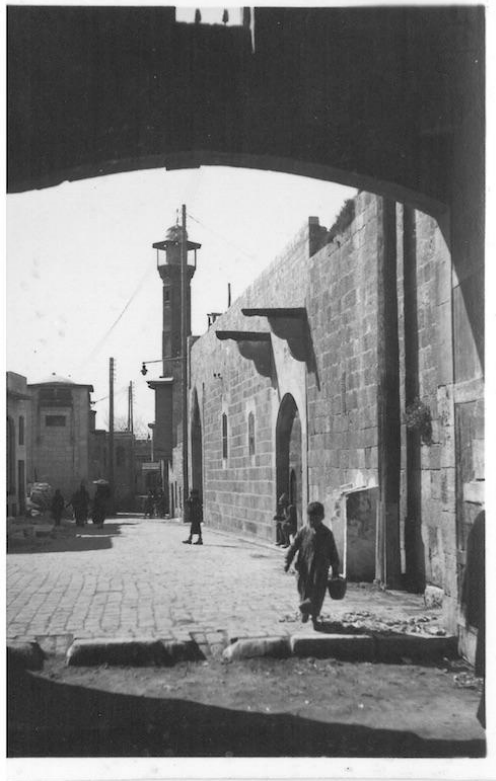


23 - 29 Mar 1943

The CO 2nd RTR gave half the Regiment at a time three days leave to explore the ancient wonders of the marvellous city of Aleppo. Robin Hood led a small party of myself, three or four of our 2nd RTR “History” coterie and my 3rd H friend, Hugh Philbrick, each day of our three days. It was a fascinating insight into the treasures of that beautiful multi-faith contented city. We later understood what an absolutely magical country was Syria with its layers of sequential civilisations.



The Citadel of Aleppo, 1942



Ancient street in Aleppo, 1942

Dear reader of this war diary, I know you will be able to sympathise with the few of us old veterans still alive in this constricted coronavirus world, who have lived to see on our TV news channels, the total destruction of this jewel of the Levant, not only Aleppo but the entire enchanted land of Syria, so much of it now man-made rubble.



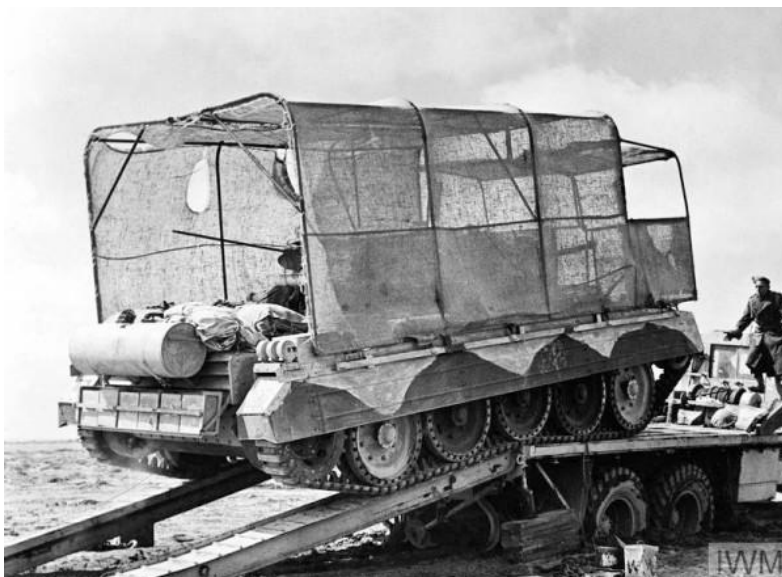
Looking smart in Aleppo, March 1943

2 – 30 Jun 1943

All units of 7th Armd Bde were given an operational Warning Order that They would be a major participant in a PAIFORCE Psychological Warfare and Deception operation, codenamed Royal Flush with a large element of RASC tank transporter companies. The first half of the operation would be entirely during the hours of darkness, and the second half would begin at first light before around 0600 hrs. It would continue for a week for each of the two tracked Regiments of 7th Armd Bde (7th H & 2nd RTR), three weeks in all. All units participating now had a week or more to change from normal daily routine by a full twelve hours, so that reveille became 1800 hrs and not 0600 hrs and lights out was at 1100hrs not 2300 hrs. In a well disciplined Bde like ours this routine was soon mastered and rigidly enforced. 2nd RTR took the second week.

11 – 18 Jun 1943

Operation Royal Flush was easy in its execution and meant setting out from our Aleppo Base at 2200 hrs, driving our tanks in long single file with only blue rear minimum lighting on the tarmac main road through sleeping towns and villages to join the camouflaged transporter base, some ten miles short of the Turkish frontier, settling down to a ready-made well-cooked lunch before loading all our tanks onto the prepared number of transporters, which task had to be skilfully done in the minimum of lighting, and had to be completed, including camouflaging, to look as though the transporters were empty. The lengthy convoy then drove back to the main base in Aleppo fully arriving by around 0800 hrs for hot cocoa and sleep.



Loading a camouflaged Crusader tank on to a transporter

I took part in 2nd RTR's turn of following this exciting routine. In my later studies of WW2 I discovered that Operation Royal Flush was but one cog in a widespread Allied cover operation in the build-up to 'D' Day in mid-1944, Operation Fortitude.

Before we set out for our Turkish Border foray (Op Royal Flush) under Maj Mark Bonham-Carter, we (by 'we' I mean the lower ranks like myself) were aware that some new activity was being planned. The 7th Armd Bde commander, Brig Prior-Palmer, with all his Ops Group (i.e. the Commanding Officers of all the Brigade's major units) had headed off south. So it was no surprise when we arrived to hide our road-driven tanks on to their transporters to be briefed by Mark Bonham-Carter, that the entire Brigade would be moving south on the night of 26 June. We arrived back at our main Aleppo base camp early on 18 June for our morning cocoa and sleep. We would be leaving PAIFORCE (Persia & Iraq) in a month and returning to MELF (Middle East Land Forces) under General Sir Harold Alexander (highly popular with all ranks). We then joined in with the hectic activities required for a major move.



General Harold Alexander with
Major-General John Harding, Aug 1942

All four squadrons of 2nd RTR in Aleppo had a mixture of troops of three different tanks: the American Stuart (known as the Honey); the American high flat-sided Grant; and the British Crusader. My troop were blessed with Stuarts and these tanks were to move south with us on transporters on the night of 28 July. All the other tanks had to be emptied of ammunition, water, rations and all personal items and driven to the PAIFORCE main Ordnance Depot just to our north.



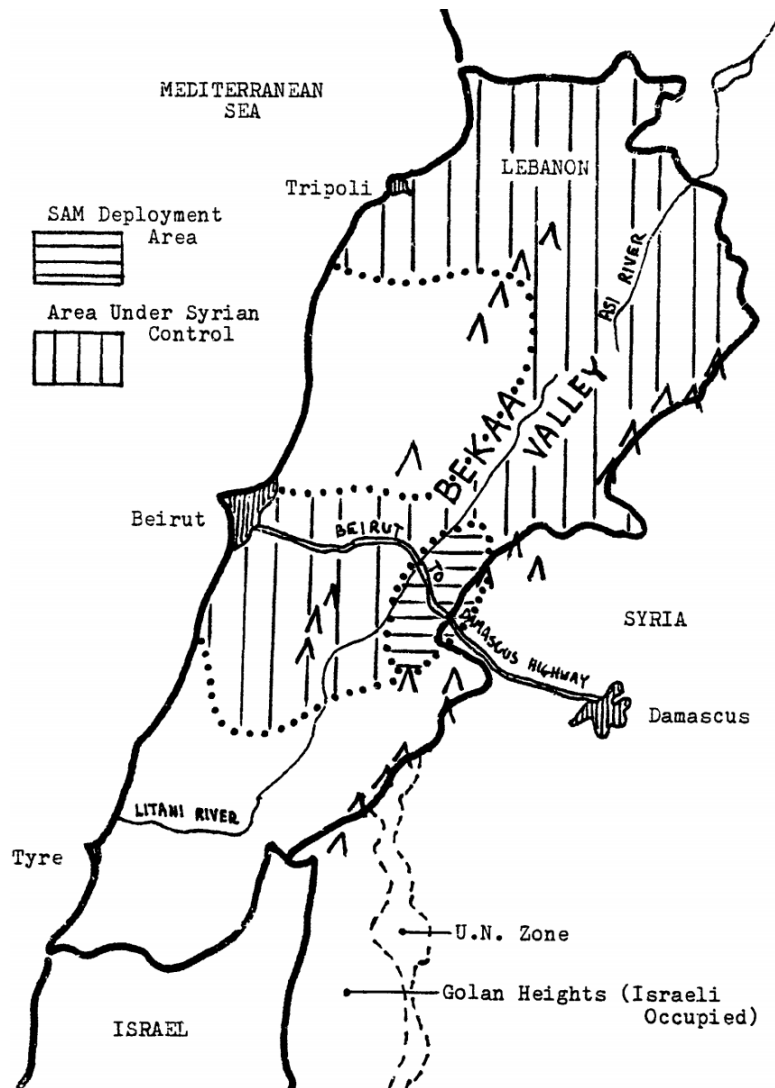
Men of the Royal Tank Regiment
training on the Stuart tank, Egypt Aug 1941

19 – 26 Jun 1943

On 20 June 7th Armd Bde issued the following Classified Order, “The Bde will move south into new locations at the southern end of the Bekaa Valley on the night of 26/27 June”. The Order went on to list in detail the many actions to be completed before the move by troop-carrying soft-skinned vehicles. Only the Stuart tanks would be transported to a newly set-up Bde Tank Park near Baalbek for reallocation.

Night 26 – 27 Jun 1943

Departing Aleppo at 2300 hrs we travelled slowly in darkened convoy order along the ancient Phoenician route, now a major tarmac road. Most of the troops slept in their seats on troop-carrying 3 ton trucks. I, with Robin Hood and our history coterie of four others, made ourselves comfortable behind the transporter driver's cabin sitting on our bedding rolls. And so it was such a joy to find ourselves quietly creeping through and reading the modern signposts in areas of street lighting: Homs, Hama, Palmyra, Galilee and smaller villages that Robin would expound on.



Map of Lebanon in 1988 showing the Bekaa Valley

27 Jun - 1 Sept 1943

This period was one of those most enjoyable experiences of my life – utter enchantment. So much of it is etched forever in my brain. We arrived in the astonishingly lush green and gold Bekaa Valley just as the sun began to rise over the Anti-Lebanon mountains on the East side of the Valley and gold-tip the peaks of the Lebanon Mountains to our West. I find it impossible to understand how so many separate enjoyments occurred in so short a period. To summarise them as follows:-

1. At least four days off for visits clambering over the beautiful ruins of the Roman Temples. These always included an excellent lamb lunch in the close-by Baalbek Hotel after a swim in their swimming pool fed with ice cold waters from the mountains of the Anti-Lebanon.



Baalbek: the Temple of Bacchus with the Temple of Venus on the left

2. A week's leave in a tented beach camp in Beirut in the grounds of the fashionable St Georges Hotel where we dated British WRENS from RN HQ in Beirut. Carefree days with one special day when I found in a French bookshop a copy of the selected works of a favourite British poet, James Elroy Flecker. It has travelled the world with me ever since and permanently resides on my bedside table, constantly read.



St Georges Hotel, Beirut, c. 1950

3. Charging up and down the Valley in our very fast rubber-covered tracks on troop training games, before having to hand these topmost light tanks back to an Ordinance Depot of the RAOC and receiving in their place the same 30 cylinder high octane petrol tank that a few of us “Rear Details” had fought in at El Alamein to make up a reformed ‘B’ Sqn of 3rd H.

4. A week when the entire 2nd RTR drove in every available soft-skinned vehicle (Jeeps, 15cwts, 3 tonners) from Baalbek up the difficult narrow tracks to the summit of Mount Lebanon itself; then over the top to the Cedars of Lebanon where only a half dozen now remain from the forest from which Solomon built his temple.



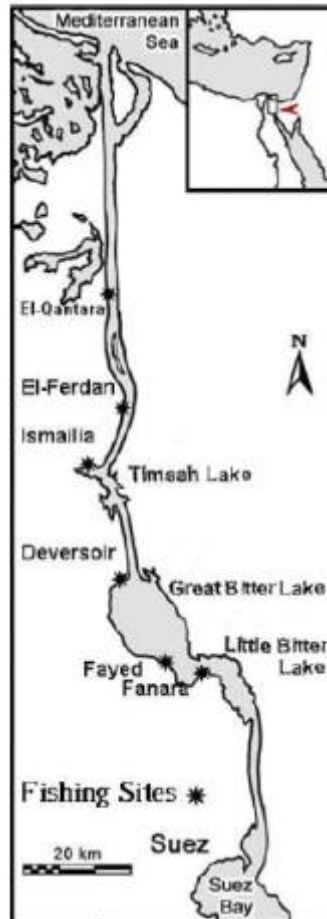
Bcharre and its Cedars, Mount Lebanon, 2008

We lunched amidst these resin-scented unique trees before we moved down a few hundred feet to camp for two nights outside the inspiring peaceful multi-faith famed City of Bcharre, where James Elroy Flecker was British Consul in the Levant Dept before the First World War. There then followed an intensive period of training and live firing in our Shermans.

7. Becoming an Infantry Officer

Early Oct 1943

We then moved by tank transporter on a two night journey to Fayed on the Suez Canal by the Great Bitter Lake.



Map of the Suez Canal showing the Great Bitter Lake & Fayed

After a week I was sent to the RAC Abassia Depot with an order to report to the Officer Selection Board located there. I reported to the Depot Orderly Room and was unusually led into a waiting room and, with murmurings and whisperings, heard the door locked. Nearly an hour passed before I heard it being unlocked. There then occurred one of those ridiculous incidents that can only happen in the Armed Forces and which still sets everyone laughing when I regale them with it.

The Orderly Room Sergeant said the Depot RSM was waiting to see me in his office. When we entered he was standing alongside a RMP Sergeant, behind whom were two military policemen. The scowling RSM barked at me, "You are under close arrest. You're being taken under escort to the RMP HQ and charged

with desertion in December 1942". My laughter and response of "Is this some joke?" seemed to make matters worse. When I insisted they should check with 2nd RTR with whom I had been serving since early Dec 1942 and check their own Depot records, I could see that the RMP Sergeant was beginning to have doubts about the RSM's version of the events he said he vividly remembered from Dec 1942. He asked the RSM to go through them again for my comments.

He amazed me with his memory of mid-Dec 1942 when a signal came to him from MO 4, GHQ Middle East Land Forces, saying that Tpr Edward Toms had been selected for SAS training and was to report to Kabrit; he searched for me and discovered I was not to be found anywhere in the Depot and therefore marked me down as AWOL. When I'd turned up he'd telephoned the RMP and changed his charge to Desertion, asking them to come and arrest me. When the RMP Sergeant heard my response he asked for all Depot records for Dec 1942 to be searched - a difficult task for the much changed staff but they eventually found proof of my collection by SSM "Pop" Young on 1 Dec 1942. The RMP escort party left bidding the RSM a somewhat grumpy farewell. He made no apology to me, merely dismissing me.

I found my old friend Sgt Millburn in the First Aid Centre and was again welcomed with my own room. That night I gave much thought to the day's disclosures and decided I would try to resurrect my acceptance for SAS training once I had received my Commission. The following morning I went to report my decision to the RSM. His response was, "Good God! No wonder they've decided your officer material, you're as thick as a plank! Firstly, you've been sent here to become a tank officer, and secondly you were accepted for SAS training as a trooper, not as a b----y officer. Now F--k Off."

Like all old soldiers I had become a "barrack room lawyer". I knew my rights and applied to the Orderly Room to see the Depot Adjutant, a remote figure to a transient trooper. The RSM sent for me and demanded to know why I wanted an interview with the Adjutant. Again, knowing my rights, I replied it was a private personal matter.

8. Raiding Forces – Middle East & Adriatic

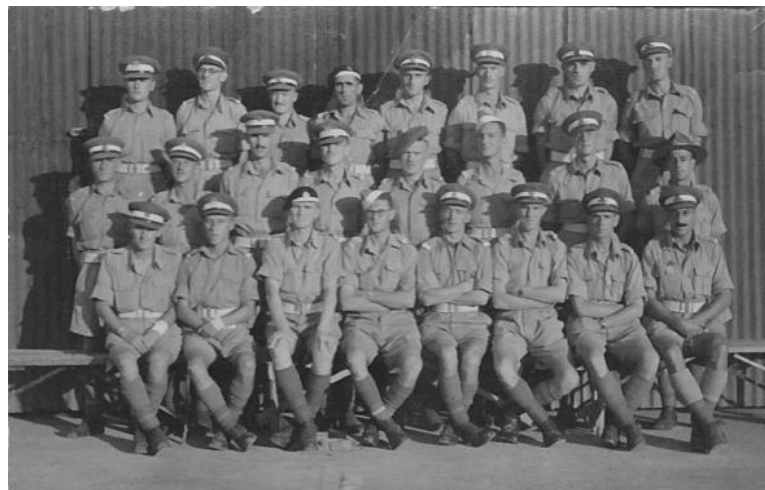
Early Oct - Mid Nov 1943

More life-changing events were about to hit me and others like me joining the RAC (Royal Armoured Corps) Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) at Abassia. We had our white headbands sewn onto our headdress to indicate we were Officer Cadets. On Mon 11 October 1943 we assembled in the Main Hall at 0900 hrs, we assumed to be welcomed by the Abassia Commandant to the process of becoming tank officers. The Commandant appeared exactly on time and with him was a Major-General, whom he introduced as the Chief-of-Staff, Middle East Land Forces, who he said wished to address us.

He did so with terrible effect, shattering our hopes and changing the rest of our lives by his first few sentences, "Gentlemen, I bring you some bad news but also some very good news too. First the bad news: we do not need any more tank officers; there already is a surplus of newly commissioned RAC officers waiting about here at Abassia, many newly arrived from UK OCTU's. The course you were to begin today is cancelled. Now for the good news: you are to be given a choice and twenty four hours to make it. You can choose between joining the next Infantry Officers Course at their OCTU at Sarafand in Palestine, or you can return to your tank Regiment in the rank you currently hold.

His audience reaction was an immediate burst of noisy anger which drowned his remaining words and away from which the Commandant quickly ushered him. The following morning a long, noisy queue gathered outside the Orderly Room as our small group had been joined by the large contingent of those already commissioned into tank regiments but who had no choice but to transfer to infantry regiments and attend a separate conversion course. In our smaller group there were two or three senior Warrant Officers who chose to return as such to their tank regiments.

A day or two later our small group went by military train to Sarafand and entered the camp outside of which I had camped as a member of 2nd RTR on 17 Mar 1943. The next day our course numbers were increased with the arrival of two New Zealand and two South African potential officers. It was good to have them with us.



Officer Training Camp Sarafand, Palestine, Nov 1943.

In both photos I am the only one wearing the RTR's black beret

Mid Oct 1943 - 25 Feb 1944

Five weeks of concentrated tough infantry training followed, including many three or four day live-firing, heads-down exercises in the mountains of Palestine and the hills of southern Lebanon where Christ had walked and where Robin Hood had shown us the likely site of the Sermon on the Mount.



View of the Lake of Tiberiade (Sea of Galilee) from the Mount of Beatitudes

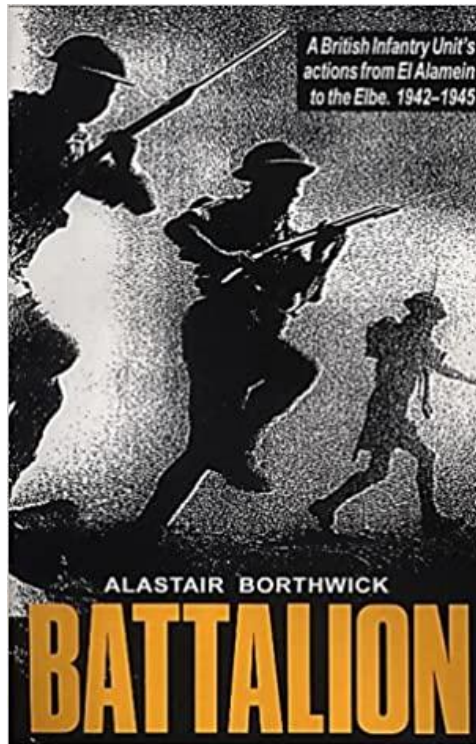
Before mid Feb we had to submit three choices of infantry regiments into which we would want to be commissioned. I suppose I should have gone for the three County regiments in the West Country where I was born and grew up, but both my Alamein experience and Celtic vanity led me to choices of three Highland Regiments: the Seaforth, the Camerons and the Argylls.

A week later I was told I would become a Seaforth officer. It was to the RAP (Regimental Aid Post) of the 5th Bn Seaforth that I had been taken with my burnt shoulders on 5 Nov 1942 - to me a significant link, also a vain delight, because in the two days in a Seaforth RAP, I came to admire the unit and the officers' headdress: into a solid silver round medallion, bearing the motto "Sans Peur" was inserted a tall (7") solid silver Eagle's Feather, one for a Lieutenant, two for a Captain, three for a Major and a very impressive four for the CO. What no one had explained to me, as their Medical Officer (3 feathers) and his orderlies (no feathers) smoothed camomile lotion on me after some awful sticky yellow paste, was that the 5th Seaforth were a completely unique Seaforth Battalion with their own uniform, tartan and headgear; no other Seaforth Bn dressed like them.



Seaforth cap badges showing 5th Seaforth 'Sans Peur' Sutherland wildcat and CO's with four silver eagle feathers

Note: I recommend the WW2 book, "Sans Peur" by Alastair Borthwick, published privately, or its later edition for the general public renamed "Battalion". I find both versions can still be found for sale at reasonable prices on the Web from specialist book finder sites.



When on 25 Feb 1944 I arrived at the vast Infantry Reinforcement & Training Depot (IRTD) at Fayed on the Great Bitter Lake and close to the Suez Canal, I was quickly disabused of all my false ideas about my new regiment. My vanity was soon rightly deflated. The war had moved on into Italy and it would not now be long, I thought, before I would be facing the dangers of the front line there. “How long?” I asked. “Oh! Most of us have been hanging about here for months”, I was told.

It was then I remembered my private and personal interview with the Adjutant at Abassia. He turned out to be an ex-wounded officer of the 3rd H, who discovering I was from 2nd RTR and therefore a close comrade, sat me down and sent for coffee & biscuits. When I told him of the RSM's insistence that I had been accepted for SAS training only as a trooper and not as an officer, he immediately telephoned a pal in MO4 GHQ (Military Operations with MO3 the branch responsible for all Special Operations). As a result I was assured that as soon as I became an officer I could contact MO4 and take up my SAS acceptance. As he told me this there was a loud knocking on his door and the RSM entered; on seeing the coffee cups and my relaxed status he almost exploded as he managed to shout that private interviews with both the Commandant and Adjutant were limited to ten minutes. Over the years I have thought how lucky I was to be forcibly transferred away from Abassia to the Infantry Depot. Now I decided to contact MO4.

We were marvellously fit for our ceremonial commissioning on 23 Feb, so were also able fully to enjoy, with our one pip on our Officer shoulders, the ball we

gave that evening, to which we had invited all British nursing and other officers and other ranks in female units within a fifty mile radius. I danced the night away with Staff Sergeant Ann Dunton, WAAF, who was an Instructor at the Palestinian WAAF Recruit Training Depot - a peaceful multi-faith organisation of Jews, Arabs and Christians, all serving happily together. Where did it all go wrong?



WAAFs at a dance in Cairo, 1943-44

27 Feb – 28 Mar 1944

On 27 Feb I reported to the IRTD at Fayed, where the Suez Canal enters the Great Bitter Lake. When I telephoned the GSO3 (General Staff Officer) at MO4, GHQ, he looked up my file and confirmed my application for parachute training for service with Special Forces (SF). He explained that much had changed since my original application in Nov 1942 which he could not discuss over the open telephone. If I still wished to parachute train and join SF, he would issue a posting order and send it with a protected document to the IRTD. This document would describe the situation into which I would be moving. I confirmed I wished to go ahead.

A few days later I was summoned by the Depot Adjutant who showed me my posting order and bade me read the secret document that came with it. I was to report to Raiding Forces HQ at Ramat David in Palestine but not before mid-March because of further moves pending. The Adjutant, sympathising with my disappointment, helpfully suggested I used the waiting time to attend three consecutive infantry heavy weapons courses, each of a week. It turned out to be quite brilliant advice, not only in my SF operations yet to come in 1944/45, but in my future Seaforth peacetime career. One of my happiest periods in 1st Seaforth was in 1956-59 when I commanded Support Company in Munster, BAOR.

In the first three weeks in March 1944 I completed courses in the new 4.2" mortar, the 6-pounder anti-tank gun and in the use of high explosives.



4.2" mortar in action in Italy, March 1944



6-pounder anti-tank gun

Life presents most of us with fortuitous incidents and events and some of us enjoy opportunistic meetings, etc. After I had completed almost a month of training at the IRTD, the Mediterranean war had taken the CMF (Central Mediterranean Forces) well into southern Italy which was where all newly trained troops at Fayed were being despatched by troopship from the comfortable, hutted Transit Camp at Port Said. I duly followed this routine and on 29 March arrived in Port Said with my newly issued canvas-rolled officer's awkward-to-carry equipment of fold-up wood-framed bed, chair and wash basin (relics of the Great War trenches).



Port Said harbour showing a convoy preparing to leave for Sicily

We quickly discovered that individuals (especially officers), as opposed to formed units, were a low priority for troopship space. Some had already been stuck for weeks in the transit camp. There was, however, one enormous benefit to be enjoyed from these delays. The camp was right on the outskirts of the marvellously “French-influenced” city of Port Said with the best of all facilities any of us had experienced so far in wartime, and we were free to spend every day enjoying them: morning coffee and snacks in the fashionable Gentlemen’s Outfitters, Simon Arzt, and personal supplies of all goods from the long-established British firm of Spinneys (see appendix C).



Simon Arzt store, Port Said.



Spinneys first store in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1920s

29 Mar - 9 Apr 1944

Four or five officers like myself, who were destined for Special Forces, all of whom were already posted to the Long Range Desert Group which pre-dated the SAS and wore the black beret of the RTR with a unique brass scorpion badge, formed a close friendship in Port Said and soon discovered the gem of the French Club with its marvellous food and daily supply of fresh oysters. It seemed the only other British officers who had discovered it were majors, colonels and above.

On our very first visit we most fortuitously met Brigadier Turnbull who the previous year had been given command of all Special Forces in the Eastern Mediterranean under the new title of Raiding Forces. It was based on the recommendations of David Stirling before he was captured. The small very junior group of us were not only “meeting the boss”, but being joyously welcomed by him. When he heard I had only recently trained in the newest infantry support weapons, he called to a major at the bar, “Alan, I’ve got the very man for you”. I was then introduced to Major Alan Wilkin, second-in-command of the Raiding Support Regiment. It was the heavy weapons wing of Raiding Forces and wore the SAS beige beret and, after completing parachute training, the special SAS wings that are still worn today. He was newly returned from German occupied Greece.



Raiding Support Regiment cap badge



Wearing the SAS beige beret

Alan Wilkin had gone in answer to an urgent appeal from SOE's "man-in-Greece", Col Christopher Woodhouse, a 27 year old Oxford professor of Greek, who was facing a serious armed clash between the two main partisan groups, the left-wing ELAS and the Royalist right (which included the fascist supporting Andartes).

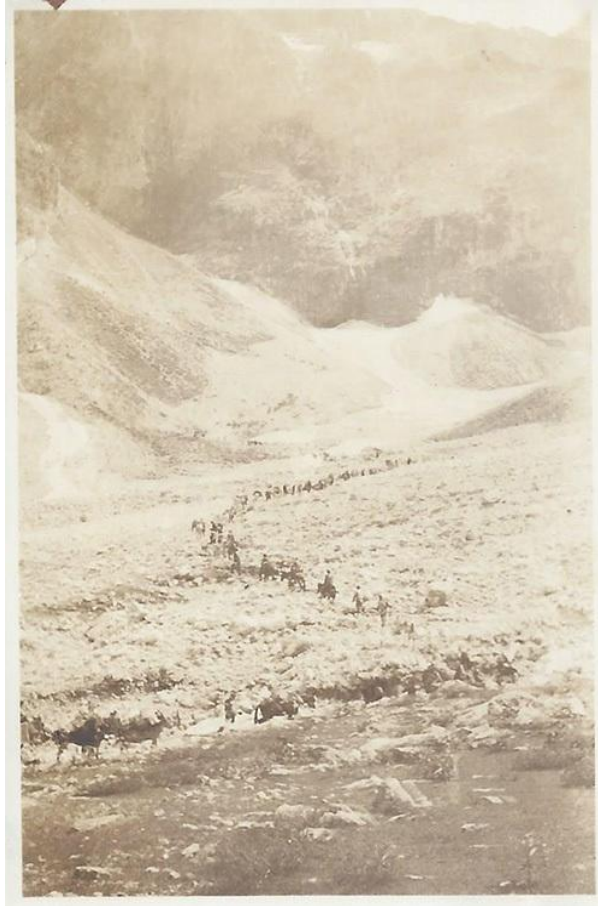


Col. Christopher Woodhouse in the Greek mountains



Meeting of Communist & Nationalist Albanian partisans at Mukje, Aug 1943

The Woodhouse plan was for two large RSR groups to make a combined amphibious landing on the western coast at Parga to the South of Corfu and for both to drive north west on separate parallel mountain top mule-tracks and establish a combined British/Partisan safe base in Thessalonica.



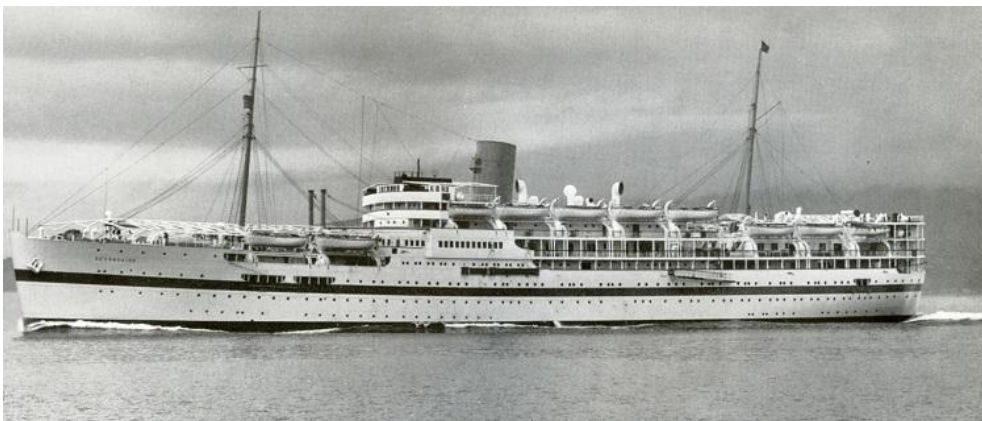
A mule column in Greece



Maj Alan Wilkin had supervised the launchings at Parga. He had already reported on the inadequacy of the 3" mortar in terms of range and trajectory and he would be pressing for the RSR to be equipped with the new 4.2" mortar. I was later to discover that his enthusiasm for "the better weapon" was not supported by the Mortar Battery detachments of the RSR, mainly because all three parts (barrel, tripod and base plate) were twice the weight of those of the much more popular 3" mortar. He told me my first task on arrival in Italy would be to conduct a series of short courses on converting to the better weapon. He and Brig Turnbull boarded a troopship two days later with their Advance HQs to be deployed near Bari with the RSR near Mola di Bari, where SOE now had its Mediterranean HQ known as SOM (Special Operations Mediterranean).

The good fortune given me by the French Club was not yet finished. Two days after the departure of Brig Turnbull and Maj Wilkin, two New Zealand officers came into the Club, one of whom was a close buddy of mine, Ron Storey; we had gone through infantry officer training together at Sarafand near Haifa. They were in the second wave of the NZ move to Italy and about to board a troopship a few days hence. This second wave were still stationed at Mena near the Pyramids. When the four of us explained our plight of having to await individual troopship spaces, Ron Storey, without hesitation, said, "You can come with us. We're here arranging for the arrival and immediate boarding of the second wave coming direct from Mena". (Note: Mena is almost a part of New Zealand; in two World Wars it has been home to the large New Zealand contingent sent without delay to fight for the 'mother country' alongside other Commonwealth contingents.)

The next day Ron Storey returned to the Club and said, "All fixed. You'll be boarding the MV Devonshire the evening after next". Thus I enjoyed for the second time the great emotional experience of leaving harbour at dusk and, with hundreds of New Zealand men and women, lining the ship's rails and singing the famous Maori Farewell song, Po Atarau.



MV Devonshire

9 Apr – 18 Jul 1944

We disembarked in Taranto in the early morning some days later where I climbed into RASC troop carrying convoys taking the NZ soldiers and nurses to their new base, the small town of Trani, just north of the city of Bari.



Map showing the Italian Adriatic coastal region round Bari

The coastal route taken passed the building now housing SOM. I was dropped there with my kit and Maj Wilkin immediately collected me in his jeep and took me to Rutigliano just 2 miles inland where he had established the RSR base. He told me he had arranged for me to collect four 4.2" mortars from the Ordnance Depot in Bari the following day. So my active life with the RSR began in April 1944. The RAF No 4 Parachute Training School (PTS), having closed in Ramat David, was busy establishing itself in the recently captured Italian Air Force main airfield and base at Gioia.

By now the RSR were deployed in four definite quarters each of which had elements of all batteries and their different weapons: the first quarter under Maj Jack Gage was driving and fighting up the Western mountains of Greece;



Major Jack Gage

the second quarter was similarly fighting up the Eastern Mountains of Greece under Maj Norman Anstell;



Grave of Major Norman Anstell

the third quarter was split into several small detachments and spread extensively throughout Crete and the Aegean Islands with raiding elements of the Special Boat Service (SBS), Special Raiding Squadron (SRS) & Greek Sacred Bde; the fourth quarter virtually commanded by Maj Wilkin remained based in Rutigliano and took part in small detachments in raids of the various commando units as well as small raids of its own - all operating around the Adriatic coastline of Albania, Yugoslavia and Italy



Map of the Adriatic showing the Italian, Croatian & Albanian coasts

I remained in this last quarter throughout my RSR service, firstly with my Troop of 4.2" mortars, then as Assistant Adjutant to Maj Douglas Farr, and finally as Regimental Intelligence Officer (IO). In this quarter were most of my RSR close subaltern comrades and friends: Ian Coltart, David Grimsdale, "Pee Wee" Melville, Peter Bates, Peter Keane, David Gaunt, Freddy Williams, "Benny" Osler, Gordon Dunnett, Peter Pearman and Jimmy Crawford. In October, after nearly a year behind enemy lines, the two Greek quarters returned to Rutigliano and our group was soon joined by Dick Furber, Harry Coxhead & Philip Hartley. A summary of a report by Col Woodhouse on the achievements of Raiding Forces operations in Greece can be found in Appendix E.

By the end of May we were all very fit after our long periods of intensive training in the mountainous country to the north of Altamura, in the rocky coastal area and mountains of the Cargano peninsula and on the sandy beaches between Mola and Monopoli, where we enjoyed relaxed swimming breaks. During these periods we had to despatch small detachments to support raids by the SBS on Crete and some of the Aegean islands of Greece, in addition to the one I went on to help in the occupation of the remote Yugoslav Island of Vis. In early May we received a Warning Order that the entire available elements of the Regiment would be involved in supporting a full-scale Commando attack on Spilje on the Albanian coast opposite Corfu.



Sketch map of the area by Harry Fecitt MBE, TD

This seemed to clash with a new message from the RAF that they would be ready to take our entire backlog for parachute training at Gioia on 24 July. The ubiquitous Alan Wilkin (who to me was my CO - the titular CO, Sir Thomas Devitt was a remote, quiet, seldom seen figure who had somehow avoided the indignity of throwing himself out of aeroplanes) went off to see the RAF. He was highly successful in getting No 4 PTS to curtail the length of their own staff training by three weeks (normally one full month when first opening in a new location).

I and twenty or so of my comrades reported for our parachute training on Sunday 2 July. We did our seven qualifying jumps and were presented with our SAS wings on 18 July, a few days before Brig Daly's full-scale dress rehearsal with live ammunition on the shore about four miles south of Mola di Bari. The actual raid would now go ahead on the nights of 28 /29/30 July 1944.



RSR parachute training in Italy

25 – 31 Jul 1944

The remaining fighting elements of the RSR moved to a Monopoli Forming Up Point (FUP) with all weapons, ammunition and personal Bergens over two days, 26 & 27 Jul. We were commanded by Maj Alan Wilkin. Then an entire day was devoted to briefings, detailed orders and marrying up with supporting elements. From lessons learned from the dress rehearsal, we were allotted an entire company of the HLI (infantry) for close protection and manhandling duties.



Highland Light Infantry (HLI) cap badge

They proved invaluable, particularly for helping to hump my 4.2" mortars off the landing craft and then getting them to their firing locations. We landed just four miles to the south of Spilje shortly after midnight on 28 Jul and some three hours before the main assault led by No 2 Commando under Colonel Fynn who then commanded the entire force.



Lt Col Ted Fynn and Admiral Sir Walter Cowan



Captain David Peters leading 1 Troop No 2 Commando up a ridge at Spilje

The plan required us to be in full readiness to fire all our weapons in support of the main assault. It was hoped we could do this without alerting the enemy, but as soon as we began to get off the beach and onto the higher cultivated ground, dogs began to bark in all the farms within a wide area - a situation that had not

arisen in the uncultivated area of our dress rehearsal. The enemy were now alerted and stood to. Some desultory Spandau fire was opened towards the shore.



Bundesarchiv - Bild 1011-721-0388-15
Foto: Jesse I. Juni 1944

German soldiers firing a Spandau machine gun

I now had to move with my troop of 4.2" mortars south-east along the high ground past where the main assault was due and four miles beyond it until my longer range mortar could engage the larger German garrison in Borsh which included armoured vehicles - it was this task in rehearsal that only proved feasible with the help of the HLI company. We set out in good time and, apart from having to mop up at close quarters three German two-man Observation Posts (OPs) where I used in anger my cherished captured German Schmeisser machine pistol effectively, we were in position in good time.



German Schmeisser machine pistol

I chose my OP from which I had a very good view of the road going northwards out of Borsh, then led my troop off the high ground to find a good firing site. We soon found a small but deep hollow which was the best type for the firing of mortars. Sgt Jones, my troop Sgt, with the great help of the HLI, began the unloading of our ammunition from where we had left it on landing now guarded by partisans who helped the HLI load carriers.



A 4.2" mortar in action in Sicily in Aug 1943

Many years later I met again the SOM (Special Operations Mediterranean) officer whom most RSR officers knew well, not only as a friend enjoying breaks in the Officers' Club in Bari (a Mussolini showpiece - Hotel Imperiale) but also in our earlier briefings for Ops in the Corfu area. We talked much about Spilje and a later raid. He was then the very first Secretary of the SAS Association, of which I was a member. We met at its offices in The Duke of York's Barracks in Chelsea. He was a retired major, Dare Newell. On the night 28/29 Jul 1944 he was hiding in front of enemy positions ready to greet Col Fynn to give him the latest intelligence and guidance. As the dogs barked and the Spandaus opened up, he was caught in their unaimed fire and had to dive for cover.



Commandos forming up in an olive grove for the attack

The main assault duly started around 0300 hrs and as planned used the beach two miles or so south-east of our landing site. Nevertheless the now fully alerted enemy opened up not only with Spandaus but with artillery and Nebelwerfer rockets. Casualties in the leading assault wave were very heavy. The astounding bravery of the commandos took control of the quick capture of the town of Spilje, the elimination of the garrison and the destruction of two German 'E' boats in the harbour.



Commandos with German prisoners



German prisoner being searched at Spilje

By then the local partisans were there in large numbers and ruthlessly took full part until by nightfall the only surviving enemy were those who had fled eastwards into the forested mountains. The partisans began a round-up of these as Col Fynn ordered the withdrawal of his entire force.

It was done with comparative ease and we had used every round of ammunition we had brought ashore. We all felt a sense of achievement saddened somewhat as we loaded 25 of our dead onto one of the landing craft. SOM estimated that my four mortars had killed around 200 enemy; partisans had accounted for many more.



Commandos attending to the wounded



Commando stretcher party returning the wounded to the beach at Spilje



A troop of commandos after the attack

We returned to spend two days in the Monopoli Base, attending debriefings in which all ranks took part, weapon cleaning and repairs, baths and two nights sound sleep. We returned to Rutigliano on 31 July.

1 - 31 Aug 1944

The accepted view from the Spilje debriefings was that Land Forces Adriatic (LFA) had now established such secure partisan bases on the Adriatic coast that all future ops there could be jeep supported; only inland and mountain parachute ops would require mule-train support. It was decided to leave 'B' Bty with its 3" mortars and convert 'C' Bty from its Italian anti-tank gun role into a 4.2" mortar Bty. Peter Melville and Sgt Jones would run 4.2" courses until mid-Aug. I was appointed into a newly created role of Asst Adjutant and Intelligence Officer (IO). This became an immensely absorbing, interesting job as it led to frequent contact with other Special Forces units and with meetings at HQ LFA.

1 - 7 Sept 1944

Peter Melville and Sgt Jones, completed retraining 'C' Bty with a mortar "feu-de-joie" at San Severo in the Cargano mountains, to which I was invited.

8 - 15 Sept 1944

The RSR had already received a Warning Order of another full-scale Commando Op in which all our familiar raiding units allotted to Col Fynn were again to be deployed. At sometime around 16 Sept I attended an intelligence and organisational conference at HQ LFA. I was also warned that plans were afoot to make this raid into a much longer operation because SOM intelligence confirmed by air recces that a large-scale withdrawal from Corfu was in progress but suggested that Sarande and other German Dalmatian garrisons were being reinforced.

16 - 22 Sept 1944

Two days were spent in loading our RSR jeeps. I went to Col Fynn's HQ and loaded my kit roll and my signaller's kit and two wireless sets onto one of his fighting jeeps.



SAS fighting jeep in Germany, Nov 1944

On 19 Sept the entire 2 Commando Force, now also supported by large elements of 23 Royal Marine (RM) Commando and 30 Commando, assembled in the Monopoli holding camps for three days of briefings and final loading. Now it was confirmed that the entire operation code-named MERCERISED was being expanded to a much larger force. Col Fynn with all his commandos would return to their Vis base and be committed to other Commando ops, whilst Brig Jack Churchill's No 2 SS (Special Service) Bde sailed from Brindisi at dawn on 24 Sept. "Mad Jack", a much decorated officer worshipped by his troops, was held in awe by the enemy who wrongly believed him to be a relative of our Prime Minister. With his Brindisi convoy would sail a complete Gunner Regt and Sapper Sqn with a number of ancillary units.



Jack Churchill leading a beach assault in training, claymore in hand

22/23 Sept 1944

Fynn Force including all RSR detachments set sail from Monopoli just before midnight on 22 Sept arriving by dawn four to six miles to the north of Sarande.



Sarande beachhead, Albania, Oct 1944

24 Sept – 19 Oct 1944

The very much larger force commanded by Brig Churchill sailed from Brindisi round dawn on 24 Sept. Once again the German garrisons facing Corfu were fully alerted. The RSR detachments came under heavy Spandau and artillery fire on their landing beach so that Brig Churchill's force, hoping to avoid such a reception, landed on the same extensive beach but two miles further north.



The RSR with their guns, Sugar Beach, Sarande, Oct 1944

Unfortunately they came under similar heavy fire until Brig Churchill's artillery support established their gun positions and began to engage the enemy artillery, while RSR 4.2" mortars of C Battery engaged the enemy mortars. This enabled the Commando troops to advance into the hills and destroy enemy positions. By midnight I had transferred my small liaison detachment of myself, two signallers and one bodyguard to Brig Churchill's HQ.



Commando Signal Section with carrier pigeons, Sarande, Oct 1944

As already planned Fynn Force Commandos withdrew entirely to Vis on 26/27 Sept and 2 (SS) Brigade Commandos continued the battle against enemy positions. By 19 Oct Sarande and its hinterland were fully liberated and B Battery RSR had handed over their 3" mortars to the partisans and a small party remained to train them in their use.



Commandos leaving Sugar Beach, Sarande, after the raid

Large fighting groups of partisans ruthlessly destroyed the escaping Germans in the mountains above. The whole of this area of Albania was now one vast partisan base (not only Albanian partisans but groups of Greek and Yugoslav partisans had filtered into it). Following the handing over of the 3" mortars the entire 2 (SS) Bde returned to Vis and the RSR detachment (less the small training staff) returned to Retigliano to be re-equipped and for B Battery to convert to 4.2" mortars. No 2 (SS) Bde were taken over by Brig Tod and renamed No 2 Commando Bde. Meanwhile regular British forces which had been involved in the operation advanced eastwards into Macedonia.



5 Troop RSR 1 Section, Florina,
Western Macedonia, Greece, Oct 1944

19 Oct – 31 Dec 1944

The main force of the RSR were freshly returned to Rutigliano near Bari from Greece and, enjoying freedom after nearly a year behind enemy lines, they were undergoing refresher weapons courses and the conversion from the 3" mortar to the much better 4.2" mortar. The remainder of the RSR under the second-in-command Major Alan Wilkin and with me as IO, moved by Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) on 15 November, first and briefly to Vis and then to set up a base on the Tito partisan-occupied island of Hvar 80 miles nearer the Yugoslav mainland than the Allied/Partisan main base of Vis.



Map showing the positions of the islands of Vis, Hvar and Brač



British anti-aircraft guns on Vis, Aug 1944

Our task was to support the operations of 2nd Special Service Bde on Hvar, which we reached on 28 November and joined the main Brigade base in the town of Hvar. We did some training and rehearsals before moving to an advanced base on the eastern part of the island in mid-December close to our enemy target.

By mid-1944, Vis had its Spitfires, Hurricanes and Wellington bombers, Dakotas, etc, as the British/American Balkan Air Force gained air domination of the entire Dalmatian area. Vis then became an utter jamboree of units and enjoyments with NAAFI & American PX shops, and Partisan Bazaars - a veritable Emporium. More importantly it contained both Tito's HQ and the Fitzroy-Maclean Mission to Tito.



Maršal Tito govori postrojenim pilotima posle smotre na Visu

Marshall Tito reviewing pilots on Vis



British Commandos at Komiza on the island of Vis, 1944

During our stop there in late November I visited the NAAFI and found it full of preparations for Christmas including orders to be taken for turkeys, puddings, mince pies, etc, etc . I could not resist buying a properly made haggis to cram into my kit in case I could celebrate St Andrews Night on 30 November. I did indeed, when my soldier servant/bodyguard, Jimmy Thomson and a Ronnie Tod aide dug up some turnips to boil and mash with our whisky-drizzled, properly cooked and ritually killed haggis. Ronnie, myself and our two diggers shared an excellent meal.

German forces were garrisoned on the large island of Brac in great strength and well-dug-in positions. But the smaller, long narrow island of Hvar to the immediate south had been occupied by Tito's Partisans in early 1944, apart from its easterly tip around the town of Sucuraj which was defended in such strength that repeated Partisan attacks were driven back.

The RSR task under Alan Wilkin was to support with our heavy weapons the 2nd Special Service Brigade in destroying this German garrison. As IO, I was to be with the Bde Commander Ronnie Tod, and in direct wireless contact with Alan in coordinating our fire plans. This force moved to Hvar in late November 1944. It consisted of 40 Commando, 43 Commando, a Bn of HLI, and the supporting units of gunners, sappers and the RSR detachments.

On 15 December we moved to join the Brigade advance base with patrols in contact with the German Sucuraj garrison. The plan given out in Ronnie Tod's orders on 18 December involved a three-pronged attack to begin at 0500hrs - first light - on 20 December. It would start with a simultaneous left hook by 40 Commando and a right hook by 43 Commando. At 0600hrs the HLI would launch a full frontal attack. The aim was to destroy the enemy and free the town of Sucuraj to become the main partisan base on Hvar, much closer to the mainland, from which to threaten major enemy mainland garrisons from Dubrovnik in the south to Split in the north. The operation was a classic success. Over 200 enemy were killed or wounded, many more surrendered and remnants fled to the mainland. Our losses were 15 killed and 40 wounded, none were captured.



Sucuraj on the island of Hvar in 2005

On 24 December the British Force withdrew to the western town of Hvar where it found the Brigade rear party and the local residents had prepared a Christmas celebration for us. From the Vis NAAFI had been delivered the full works: turkey, stuffing, chipolatas, sprouts, roast potatoes, the hottest juiciest gravy, and even crackers with paper hats and idiotic mottos. Our meal was served to us by a selected group of the prettiest Hvar ladies.

Threatened by the enemy on Brac, we were reminded that we were still “behind enemy lines” - nevertheless I enjoyed one of the greatest Christmases I have ever had.

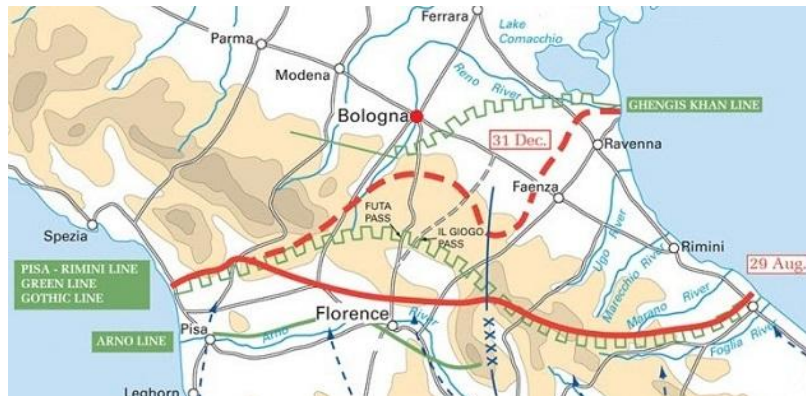


Memorial plaque on Vidova Gora, Brac's highest peak

9. North West Europe – Belgium, Germany

1 Jan – 15 Mar 1945

Events that happened to me in this period were varied and life-changing. After a period spent in intensive training at San Severo in the Carcano Peninsula we began planning what was to become one of the final battles in Italy around Lake Comaccio.



Map showing location of Lake Comaccio

There followed in March a period of rest and leave when many of us were able to hitch flights on RAF planes to Naples, Rome and Italian resorts. During this pleasant period I went one evening to the Hotel Imperiale in Bari in my parent regiment uniform as a Seaforth officer. To my utter confusion the Bar was full of identically dressed Seaforth officers.



King George VI inspects 2nd Seaforth officers in a snow storm at Gorhambury Park in Hertfordshire, Feb 1944

I was dancing with my FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) friend, Lynette Jooste, and was immediately quizzed by the senior Seaforth officer present who must have returned that evening to their temporary camp at Trani, north of Bari, and reported my presence to the CO, Ted Snowball. I had discovered that 6th Seaforth in 17 Inf Bde of 5 British Div had returned to Italy from post-Anzio recovery in Palestine and were heading for the Italian front line to relieve 78 British Div on the Gothic Line and they were short of officers.



HMS Spartan shelling the shore as landing craft approach Anzio, Jan 1944

The very next morning Ted Snowball, in his Humber staff car, arrived at RSR HQ in Retigliano and demanded my transfer to him. As I was the most junior officer in the RSR, Col Meynell had no hesitation. I was sent for by him and given two hours to pack my bags. I went back with Col Snowball to spend the rest of the war in 6th Seaforth.

Mid March – 24 Mar 1945

This move back to being an infantry officer was, I am sure, a life-saver because of the following sequence of events:

1. Field Marshall Montgomery was planning the crossing of the Rhine. The intelligence available suggested that, as this was the gateway to the Fatherland, it would be contested bitterly. The assault troops would, in his opinion, need a completely new force to follow up into Germany. He sought the Chiefs-of-Staffs' authority to transfer a number of divisions from Italy, through the south of France and on to Belgium.
2. Operation GOLDFLAKE confirmed the move of three Canadian Divisions and one British Division (5th in which 6th Seaforth served).

3. So instead of the dangerous entry into the Gothic Line, 6th Seaforth enjoyed a pleasant odyssey from Naples to Marseilles on a US coastguard ship. Then a most pleasant rail journey with good food and facilities at stopping camps on the three day journey into Belgium where the entire regiment were billeted in friendly Flemish farms.
4. From these billets we paraded in the main square of Vrierzele and dispersed each day for training.



With 6th Seaforth, Vierzele, nr Ghent, Belgium, March 1945

5. We moved to a Divisional Forming Up Point (FUP) some five miles west of Wesel.
6. Early on the morning of 23 March our sky was filled with the planes of Boy Browning's Airborne Corps heading for their landing on the eastern bank of the Rhine.



C-47 transport planes release hundreds of paratroops and their supplies over the Rees-Wesel area to the east of the Rhine in the greatest airborne operation of the war

7. A bridge-building bridgehead was formed at Wesel. Within three or four days the entire east bank of the Rhine was in Allied hands.



The town of Wesel after the Allied bombardment



Men of the 15th (Scottish) Division use a small assault craft to cross the Rhine near Xanten, 24 March 1945



Men of the 1st Commando Brigade fire their Vickers machine guns against German positions on the outskirts of Wesel.



Churchill, Brooke, and Montgomery arrive on the east bank of the Rhine, south of Wesel, 25 March 1945

27 Mar – 12 Apr 1945

5 British Division crossed the Wesel pontoon bridge on 27 March, passed through the assault divisions and headed in a three pronged advance into northern Germany.



Pontoon bridge at Wesel (with the bridge bombed by the Allies behind) and two men of the US 17th Armored Engineer Battalion who built it enjoying a rest

6th Seaforth in 17th Infantry Brigade led the centre prong towards Uelzen, whose three battalions leap-frogged one another against weak opposition, reaching the outskirts of Uelzen on 12 April.

14/15 April 1945

On the night of 14/15 April the Brigade fought its way into Uelzen which it completely captured by the end of 15 April.



Uelzen, April 1945, a Seaforth sniper taking aim

Before we had finished digging in we were surprised by a sudden attack by three or four German Messerschmitts. For the last week there had been no signs whatsoever of a Luftwaffe presence. My platoon fired its rifles and Brens at these low-flying aircraft who machine-gunned the bridge. I later discovered that Messerschmitts of the Luftwaffe, determined to fight until the very end, were using the main autobahn as runways.



German Ju 88 warplanes concealed along the autobahn in 1945

I made a reconnaissance into Lubeck and found it empty of German troops who had already withdrawn through us and were obviously the people we had disarmed and sent westwards. As I walked into the city with a section of my platoon I was approached by Lubeck's Head of Police who told me he had assembled his entire police force in a series of barns just off the main road, and he wished to surrender the city to me.



German prisoners marching through Lubeck, 2 May 1945

He had been left in charge of the entire city. He was a very friendly person who spoke excellent English. We remained together while his staff found

accommodation for the now arrived remainder of my C Company under Maj Colin Mackenzie who took over from me in all future dealings with the Head of Police. Colin established an Officers' Mess in a most attractive pub with a delightful Beer Garden, the entire staff of which, including the owner and its attractive barmaids, were at our complete disposal and prepared us the best evening dinner we had had for some time. I should say here that Lubeck had survived the war almost untouched. There were signs of only a few bomb craters on its western outskirts.

Our Good Life lasted under a week before C Company were ordered to move further eastwards to Wismar, again an undamaged attractive town, where we repeated the process of allotting comfortable accommodation to the entire Company. Here we learned of the German surrender on Luneburg Heath which formally ended the war in Europe on 8 May.



Montgomery accepts Germany's unconditional surrender,
Luneburg Heath, 4 May 1945

8 – 12 May 1945

Colin Mackenzie had been warned that we were nearing the advance of the Red Army along the Baltic coast. He sent me with 14 Platoon along the road towards Stettin to meet the advancing Soviet troops. In anticipation of this joyous meeting I loaded on my jeep a box of 12 bottles of Bells Whisky. We had driven about five miles along the Stettin road when we saw Soviet tanks heading towards us. The great moment when two friendly armies meet had arrived. We stopped our vehicles facing one another and all my platoon and their troops ran together and engaged in a hugging session.



Men of the UK 6th Airborne Division greeting the crew of a Russian Army T-34/85 tank near Wismar, Germany, 3 May 1945

The Russians began pouring a colourless liquid into plastic beakers which they offered us and started drinking themselves; our first sips showed the liquid to be undrinkable for us Westerners – it turned out to be high-octane petrol, the fuel from their tanks. I quickly produced the box of Bells which proved such a joy to the Russians that they disposed of the entire dozen bottles within half an hour or so.

Whilst all this spread of happiness was taking place I had not noticed that a party of Russians had built a complete barrier of wooden framed barbed wire across the road in front of their tanks. As those of them engaged in this reunion appeared to be about to be ready to return to drinking their 'liquor' I realised that it was time for me to pull back. A coolness had already set in. When I returned to Wismar and reported to Colin Mackenzie we both commented that it appeared to be the beginnings of the next war.

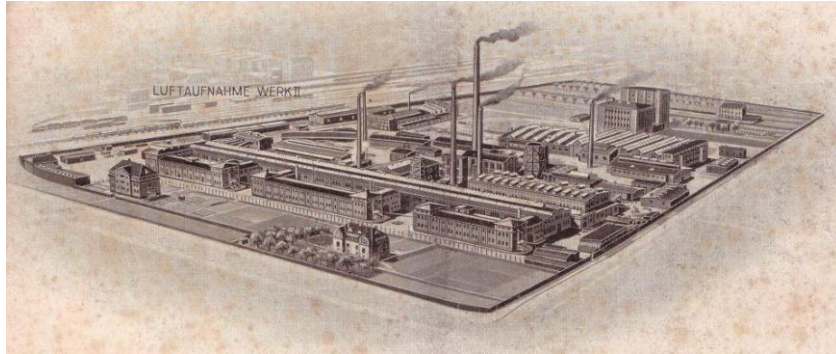
12 – 16 May 1945

After a short stay in Wismar and the area round it the 5th British Division was ordered to take control of the city of Magdeburg from the US Army who had captured it. This was all part of a reshuffling of British and US Forces between north and south Germany. This transfer was completed by 14 June.

14 Jun - 1 Jul 1945

6th Seaforth occupied the west bank of the River Elbe in Magdeburg. My platoon were ordered to take over a German POW camp from its US guard.

This camp was in fact the totally undamaged Polte-Werke factory which had been given over to German war industry for the manufacture of artillery shell cases. It amazed me that it had not been bombed by either the RAF or USAF. When I entered the main machine shop there was an enormous red-handled junction box on the wall which I switched on and to my astonishment every machine began moving and appeared to be skimming shavings off shell cases.

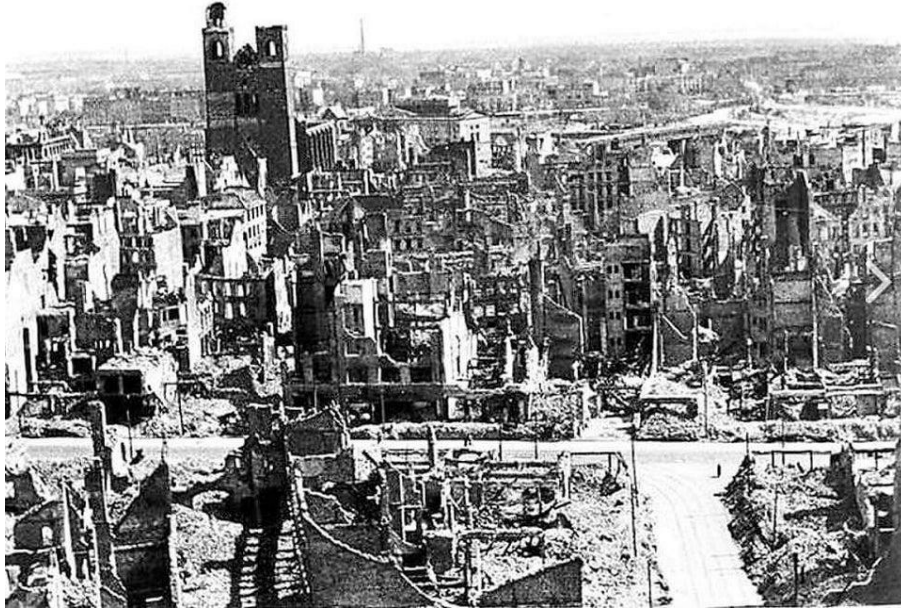


Aerial view of Polte-werke plant II in Magdeburg, 1920

On 14 June or thereabouts Col Snowball told me he had received a signal together with a movement order for me to be transferred to the Far East where the war against Japan was about to take a dramatic development. The Allies, through Operation Zipper, would land on the Malayan and Penang coasts and begin what would appear to us at the time to be long years of warfare because of the various countries that would need to be reoccupied including large colonies of France and the Netherlands, and whose forces would join us in this difficult task.

I was to leave 6th Seaforth to return to the UK for leave and preparation on 1 July. But a day or two later 6th Seaforth received secret orders to withdraw from Magdeburg to Brunswick. Only the CO and adjutant were 'in the know' that the Russians would be taking over the west bank of the Elbe on 1 July; the rest of us were unaware of this exact date but in the days to come we were given further details about how west Magdeburg was to be handed over.

On or about 29 June the date was revealed to us and the method of handover. By midnight on 30 June we were to be completely clear of the city and established in Brunswick. We were to have no contact whatsoever with the incoming Russian forces who would use the remaining hours of darkness after midnight to silently enter the city on foot; all their vehicles, including tanks, would move in on daylight on 1 July.



Magdeburg city centre in Jan 1945 after RAF bombing



Magdeburg today showing the restored cathedral

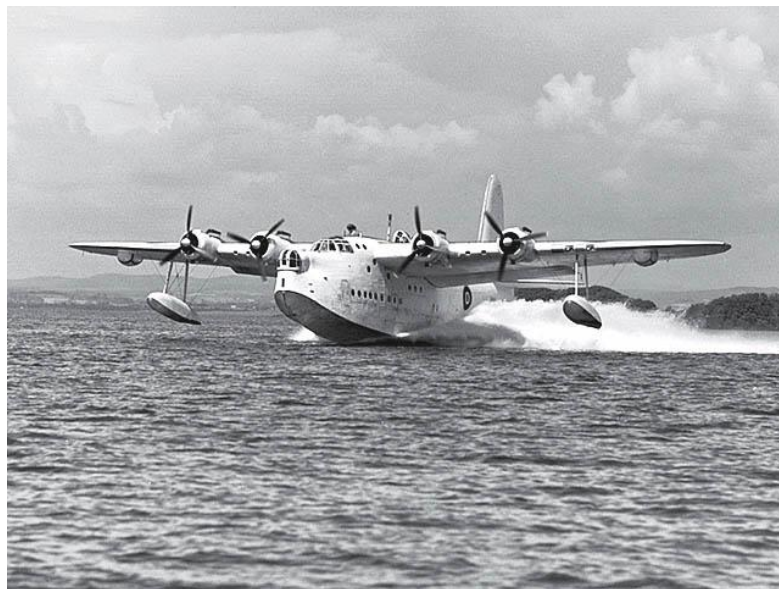
10. Far East Land Forces & the End of the War

1/2 Jul 1945

I did not stop with 6th Seaforth but continued my journey with one other officer, Ian Stewart, to Antwerp. I was starting my move to the Far East; he was being discharged from the army on compassionate grounds. We boarded a crowded LCI and, after a stormy night on the Channel, reached Tilbury on the morning of 2 July.

2 - 30 Jul 1945

Following the instructions in my Movement Order, I went straight from Tilbury to report to MO4 in the Operational Division of the War Office. I was given immediate leave with instructions to report to Imperial Airways at Airways House, Victoria, at 1600hrs on 30 July with all my allowed kit. I was to fly by Sunderland Flying Boat to Colombo in what was then Ceylon. This was yet another of my fortunate enchanted journeys. To fly by Sunderland is an enjoyable unique experience; landing on and taking off from water feels so different from ordinary air travel as waves rush past the portholes.



Sunderland Flying Boat

At 1700hrs I boarded a Pullman Carriage train with a group of twenty three other people, none of whom I knew, and we were taken to Poole in Dorset to spend the night in the luxurious Sandbanks Hotel. The only snag was the fact that we had to leave it at 0530hrs the next morning. It must have been a Saturday because the weekly dance was happening in the ballroom.

1 – 15 Aug 1945

After a sleepless half night twenty four of us were taken by bus to Poole Harbour where an RAF launch took us to the moored Sunderland in the middle of the harbour. After all the necessary checks were completed I remember that it must have been around 0700hrs that we took off and headed south. We were told nothing about details of the journey and only discovered these when we landed. At around midday we landed at Augusta in Sicily to refuel before taking off again and heading along the Mediterranean to land on the River Nile in Cairo and anchored for the night. We were taken by RAF launch to an allotted House Boat on the eastern bank of the Nile in time to spend a nostalgic evening in my old Cairo haunts of Groppi's and the Gezira Club before returning to sleep on the House Boat.



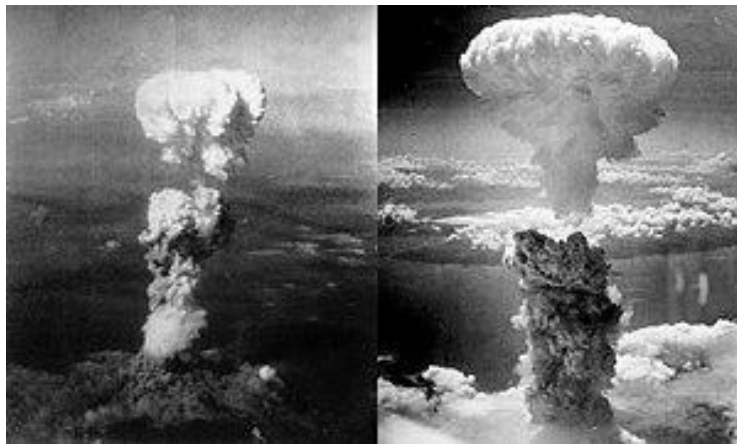
The pool at Gezira Sporting Club in the 1940s

Far too early on the morning of 2 Aug we took off from the Nile for a long flight to Bahrein on the Persian Gulf where we spent the night. Taking off again early on 3 Aug, we flew another long leg to Lake Habbanyia which ever since the 1st World War was a major RAF base for both normal aircraft and flying boats and which I had already visited with 2nd RTR at the end of 1942 to play rugby against the RAF. We had a very comfortable night there with delicious food for dinner and breakfast.

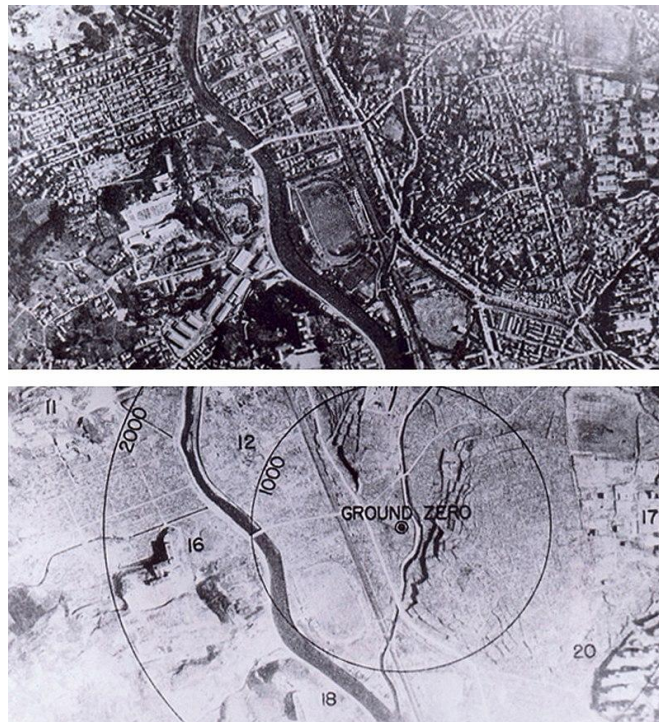
We took off at a reasonable hour and reached Karachi on the evening of 4 Aug. Instead of the one planned night to be spent in the comfortable Inter-Continental hotel, we were driven to a rather uncomfortable Services Transit Camp, only to be told that we were to stay there until our flight could be continued. This turned out not to be until 20 Aug because the following events intervened:

1. The grounding of all RAF aircraft from midnight on 5 Aug;

2. The dropping of the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare on the city of Hiroshima (we now realised why our continuing flight had been interrupted). The Allies called upon Japan to surrender immediately or suffer more such terrible death and devastation;
3. No immediate response from Japan came so a second bomb was dropped on 9 Aug on Nagasaki;
4. Allied Intelligence heard that the Japanese government wished to surrender but had a difficult constitutional issue to solve. We therefore waited until the Emperor, speaking on World Radio, announced the surrender. Thus ended World War Two.
5. RAF flying began again.



Atomic bomb mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki



Nagasaki before and after the bombing & firestorm

20/21 Aug 1945

I was flown by Dakota from Karachi to Colombo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where an atmosphere of joy at the end of World War Two pervaded.

24 Aug – 31 Sept 1945

On 25 Aug I took the comfortable train from Colombo up the mountains to Kandy and reported to HQ Force 136. When I did so I met a considerable number of my FANY friends whom SOE had already transferred from Italy to Force 136. Amongst them was my Bari girlfriend Lynette Jooste and we took up together again but our friendship lasted a very short period because she was discharged from the FANY and returned home to South Africa. I met her again sixty years later in the Special Forces Club in London.



Meeting a wartime FANY girlfriend, Lynette Jooste
(Italy & Ceylon) after 50 years.

I had my own room in the Officers' Mess. Before the end of August Colin Mackenzie sent me to join a GHQ FARELF (Far East Land Forces) that was headed for Java to take the surrender of the Japanese forces occupying the Dutch East Indies. We met the Japanese Command in Jakarta, accepted their surrender and drew up a programme for disarming them. Before this disarming was complete large groups of Communist led Javanese began attacking Dutch civilian concentration camps, sadly killing a number that had survived Japanese occupation. We had to rearm Japanese troops assembled near these camps in order to protect them. This situation obtained until regular Indian Army formations could be deployed in such places.

The GHQ party remained in Jakarta until these Indian Army forces arrived, but I returned to Force 136 to be told there was no longer a job for me. Luckily two

friends of mine were running the Officer Career Branch of GHQ FARELF. They advised me to ask to fill a vacancy that had just occurred to be an assistant to the lone Indian Army officer, Col John Meiklejohn, Rajputana Rifles. I was sent to be interviewed by him and he accepted me there and then. Thus began my first post-war military appointment which lasted all the way through to my return to the UK in May 1946. It was one of the most enjoyable jobs I have ever had and during it I must finally record the most pleasant event of my life so far.



With Force 136 Kandy, Ceylon, Sept 1945

1 Oct 1945 – 6 Jul 1946

At some date in my early days in Ceylon I went to a performance by the newly formed FARELF Footlights of the play 'George and Margaret' by Gerald Savory. The leading female role of the daughter was played by a Lance-Corporal Veronica Rose whom I found so attractive that I sought how to meet her. In our return to normality religious services became a feature of military life.

There began a regular Sunday Mass at ten o'clock in the Sampan Theatre where I had witnessed the performance of Veronica Rose. At my first attendance at the Sunday Mass I was delighted to see her walk to the altar ahead of me to take Holy Communion. We shared with others the bus ferry from the Sampan Theatre back to the Officers' Messes of GHQ FARELF. I already knew that the ATS Company Compound was next door to my Mess. Working for Col

Meiklejohn and me was an ATS typist called Dorothy who, at my request, arranged for me to be introduced to Veronica Rose. This she did and from that moment on Veronica and I were inseparable and sought every opportunity to spend time together. These included beautiful afternoons when we got a local boatman to take us across the fast-flowing Mahawell river running past all the British camps and took picnic baskets into the hills looking down on GHQ. We both moved with GHQ FARELF on different troopships from Trincommalee, a naval port on the east coast of Ceylon, to Changi peninsula on the eastern tip of Singapore Island.



Veronica Rose, Changi Beach, Singapore, Oct 1945

Veronica left Singapore before Christmas 1945 and was discharged from the ATS in Jan 1946. I remained in Singapore until May 1946. We became engaged on Changi Beach (she had selected a blue diamond engagement ring which I had bought and presented to her when she accepted me on Changi Beach). We were married in the Catholic Church in Dovercourt, Essex, on 6 July 1946. We had a long and happy married life for fifty seven years, early on during which our four children, Rosemary, Duncan, David and Jamie, were born.



Our Wedding at Dovercourt, Essex, 6 July 1946

DANGER & ENCHANTMENT – A Soldier's Story



Our Family in Berlin 1960, Aberdeen 1964, and Shortlands 1995

APPENDICES

Appendix A

A Complete Mystery

Throughout WW2, as with WW1, alcohol was only available on troopships to officers, Warrant Officers and sergeants. For other ranks alcohol was strictly forbidden. It was therefore of serious concern to OC Troops and his small office staff when, after only ten days at sea, numbers of drunken Cameronian riflemen began appearing on the troop decks. Fortunately for OC Troops there was amidst the RAF a formed RAF Police unit including a CID detachment; they were given the task of both investigating this, as well as taking disciplinary action, including full use of the ship's cells. The assumption at first was there had been a break-in of a liquor store.

It was soon widely rumoured that a Glasgow criminal gang, on the run from the Glasgow Police, had enlisted en bloc, knowing that they could quickly volunteer for overseas service with the 1st Cameronians in India. The gang had made itself into its own sub-unit and had brought aboard a sophisticated "spirit still". Immediately on boarding they volunteered to undertake the vast daily chore of potato peeling from which, using their still, they made a powerful "Biddy" that sold well on board.

After hours spent in the most thorough research, including downloading the Logbook of HMT Strathaird, I can find no record whatsoever of this incident. It is as if a deliberate effort has been made by which all reference to this specific disciplinary incident has been wiped away as of no consequence. But for me it was a life-changing event worthy of full description.

Ringleaders were taken off the ship in close arrest in Durban. I was promoted to Acting Corporal as Army member of the RAF Police Guard to contain the gang leader prisoners in the unoccupied and highly secure cash office of Durban Racecourse. I heard later, much to my amusement, that the RAF (CID) at first imagined that they would be wanted back in Glasgow, but had received a reply from the Glasgow Police, "We don't want them back in Glasgow! Send them on to Burma".

Appendix B

The Story of My AB 64

To include (1) as Skilled Tradesman, (2) as Specialist, e.g., Signaller or M. Gunner.

30.7.41 - 16.8.41	Privilege	Yes	
22/11/41 - 29/11/41	7 Days Privilege Leave	Yes	
6.2.42 - 13.2.42	PRIVILEGE LEAVE	YES	
19/4/42 - 27/4/42	EMBARKATION	YES	
12/5/42 for 2 RTR for 1st INF	EMBARKED CLIP	Yes	
Disembarked	Bombay 1 July 42		T.2
Cpl Jones left for 1st Durban for 48 hrs			T.2
Cpl Jones embarked	RMS "ARANA" 7/7/42		S.A.
Disembarked	Suez 23/7/42		
25/7/42 joined Royal 6th Div 2 RTR Egypt			
Joined 6 RTR 26/7/42			em
C.O.S. B (Composite) Sqn 3.1 Hussars 1/10/42			
unwounded 5/10/42			
posted 2nd RTR IRAQ / SYRIA / PALESTINE 1/12/42			ONE
Commissioned South Highlanders			29/12/42
RECORD OF SERVICE Transferred To AF B199A			

With me at the time I rather belatedly received my ragged AB64 were two representatives of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), Colonel Mike Bullen, Deputy Director and Tim Brearley, newly appointed Head Archivist, who was keen to acquire memorabilia items and documents pertaining to major campaigns. This, he hoped, would give some deeper background to the lives lived by our War Dead, immediately before they were killed in action. When he saw my ragged AB64 and heard me describe its purpose, he immediately saw it as the type of memorabilia he wished to collect. After photocopying the only elements of importance for me to retain, I gladly handed over my tattered AB64. It now rests in perpetuity in the Archives of the CWGC.

Appendix C

John and Buffy Slim

In July 1948 I was posted from the War Office General Staff to take over as Adjutant of the Seaforth Depot at Fort George and served as such until becoming a student at the Staff College, Camberley in January 1950. In the Autumn of 1949, I met teenager Buffy Spinney at Fort George and at nearby family parties. Such parties usually had potential debts and those already “presented”. Buffy married one of my comrade Highland Officers, John Slim of the Argylls, in 1954 and they soon became lifelong friends of my wife Veronica and I. We met frequently over the many years of our service in Scotland, continuing throughout our retirement years.

Throughout his military career John served mostly in the SAS. Having joined the Malaya Scouts as a subaltern, he went on to command 22 SAS and eventually to become President of the Regimental Association. Finally he became its Patron in succession to David Stirling and George Jellicoe. In 1963, when I was commanding the Queen's Own Highlanders (QOH) Depot, Buffy made a special visit to Fort George in order to be a comfort to a friend of hers whose Seaforth/QOH fiancé, Mike Adam, had recently been killed in a car accident on duty in Norway; they were attending his memorial service which I had organised on behalf of the Adam family in the beautiful Seaforth Chapel at the apex of the Fort. I am, sadly, now the only survivor of this friendly Highland foursome; Veronica died in April 2003, Buffy in October 2018, John in January 2019. R.I.P.



Fort George on the Moray Firth, Inverness-shire

List of Raids involving detachments of RSR**Appendix D****Early March 1944**

Two large RSR patrols (approx 150 men each) under the command of Maj Norman Astell and Maj Jack Gage landed at Parga on the Greek coast just south of Corfu. They arrived in answer to an appeal by SOE's man in Greece (Col Christopher Woodhouse, a 27 year old Oxford professor of Greek). The aim of both patrols in separate hill ranges of Greece was to establish a cooperation between the two main partisan groups of Greece, ELAS the communist group and Andartes the Royalists. Both patrols were highly successful and inflicted high casualties on German garrisons; they also blew up viaducts, of which there were many in the mountainous areas, and railway lines and were particularly successful in ambushing German troop trains. The price they paid for this boldness was to be relentlessly hunted across the two main mountain ridges of Greece. Six members of the RSR were captured, four managed to escape, nothing more was heard of the other two who must have been executed. Both patrols remained in Greece until Sept 1944 when they then returned to Rutigliano to rejoin the main body of the RSR.

31 May–5 June 1944

A night raid on the enemy held island of Brac involving Commando Units of 2 SSB (Special Service Brigade) primarily from 40 and 43 RM Cdos, and 2 SSB HQ, supported by RSR men with 2 captured Italian 47mm anti-tank guns.

28-29 July 1944

Designed to reopen the coastline around Himara so that supplies could be delivered to the Albanian Partisans. The attacking force was over 700 strong, consisting of 2 Cdo, 9 Cdo, 40 (RM) Cdo, 180 men of the RSR, HLI, Force 266 and partisans.

31 July-2 Aug 1944

“C” Battery RSR as Light Anti Aircraft support to 24-pdr Bty Royal Artillery whose task was to shell enemy positions at Orebic Korcula Town and Postraiya and silence coastal guns at Oberic.

25-27 Aug 1944

To cause casualties and damage to enemy dispositions in and around Pupnat (Korcula) and to provide AA defence for own gun positions and for LCIs. Force consisted of 476 Fd Bty, 11 Tp RSR, B Coy 2HLI, 2825 Fd Sqn RAF and AA Dets sailed from Vis.

11-18 Sept 1944

43 Marine Cdo and our troop to land at Lucica bay in an attempt to damage or prevent the movement of enemy troops evacuating from Brac.

12-13 Sept 1944

Reconnaissance operations ahead of the major operation APLOMB.

16 Sept-10 Oct 1944

Operation TARANTO to Kithera involving FOXFORCE, comprising 9 Commando, 7 Tp RSR, 10 Tp RSR, 12 Tp RSR, a detachment of SBS and a detachment of LRDG.

17 Sept 1944

3 x.50 Brownings (Capt Bocquet) and 2 x 4.2 Mortars sent to support 43 RM Commando attack on island garrison on Solta, formerly part of Yugoslavia.

22 Sept-17 Oct 1944

Op involving RSR, 40 RM Cdo, 2 Cdo, 2 SS Bde Staff, to harass enemy communications and transit areas, to support attack designed to capture Sarande, to cut communications with island of Kerkyra (Corfu).

13-15 Oct 1944

Operation POROS to Athens involving COMMANDFORCE, comprising 9 Commando, 7 Tp RSR, 10 Tp RSR, 12 Tp RSR, a detachment of SBS and a detachment of LRDG.

30 Oct-23 Nov 1944

Operation PIRAEUS to Salonika involving SCRUMFORCE. Comprising 9 Commando, 7 Tp RSR, 10 Tp RSR, 12 Tp RSR, a detachment of SBS, a detachment of LRDG and a det of RE.

25 Mar-30 Apr 1945

An attack across Lake Comacchio to capture the spit of land between the lake and the Adriatic Sea, from the River Reno to the Valetta Canal, approx 7 miles.

3-10 Apr 1945

Stickforce, 11 Tp RSR and One Flight 2771 Fd Sqn RAF Regt, to support attack on Pag Island with objective of destroying all enemy positions and holding the island. RAF Regt Flight to provide the local protection for RSR gun positions and OP parties.

12-15 Apr 1945

A follow-up to Operation Roast, at the Fessina Canal east of Argenta.

Achievements of Raiding Forces in Greece**Appendix E**

SOE reported the following list of achievements by Raiding Forces in Greece:

Casualties

Enemy	<u>Killed</u> 288	<u>Wounded</u> 119	<u>Prisoner</u> 3,724	<u>Total</u> 4,131
Own	<u>Killed</u> 19	<u>Wounded</u> 35	<u>Prisoner</u> 39	<u>Total</u> 93

Of these cases 58 were sustained by Greek partisans and 35 by British personnel

Shipping

The Axis lost 125 ships totalling approx 5000 tons as a result of raiding activities and Royal Navy seaborne activities. Our own losses were 4 motor torpedo boats, 4 motor launches, 2 dories and 1 caique.

Raids and Reconnaissances

British and Greek troops raided 70 German held islands in the Dodecanese, Aegean, Cyclades and Sporades.

Installations

The Axis lost over one million pounds worth of installations and material (this does not include weaponry). The main items destroyed were cable and wireless stations, unique building and repair yards, petrol installations, fuel pumps, telephone exchanges, harbour installations, signals equipment, and workshops. Khios was raided in June 1944 by an Anglo-Greek force which damaged the caique building yards, 13 caiques, the onshore cable installation which was the junction point of all German mainland and inter-island cables, as well as cutting the cables themselves with explosive charges some distance out to sea.

Greek military leadership

Col Zervas and the EDES (National Republican Greek League) movement were a tiny force in the background, distrusted by many for their alleged extreme Right Wing and Royalist opinions, and still more distrusted when it was reported that they had helped the Germans against Left Wing irregulars in the same way as Mihailovic and his Chetniks had done in Yugoslavia. The Allies abandoned support for Mihailovic in late 1944. The men who joined ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) were of all political parties from Centre to extreme Left. Many of them neither knew nor cared about the policy of EAM (Greek National Liberation Front). After three years of Nazi occupation any Greek party was better than German occupation and dictatorship.

Glossary of military abbreviations and acronyms

3rd H: 3rd Hussars (cavalry regiment, re-equipped with tanks pre-WW2)
25-pdr: 25-pounder field gun
AA: anti-aircraft
amm: ammunition
Armd Bde: Armoured Brigade
ATS: Auxiliary Territorial Service
AWOL: Absent without leave
BAOR: British Army of the Rhine
Bde: Brigade
Bde Cmdr: Brigade Commander
Bn: Battalion
Brig: Brigadier
Bty: Battery
Cdo: Commando
CMF: Central Mediterranean Forces
CO: Commanding Officer
Col: Colonel
Coy: Company
Det(s): Detachment(s)
Div: Division
DSO: Distinguished Service Order
ELAS: The Greek People's Liberation Army
FANY: First Aid Nursing Yeomanry
FAREL: Far East Land Forces
Fd Bty: Field Battery
Fd Sqn: Field Squadron
Feu de joie: celebratory gunfire
FUP: Forming-up Point
GHQ: General Headquarters
HLI: Highland Light Infantry
Inf Bde: Infantry Brigade
IO: Intelligence Officer
IRTD: Infantry Reinforcement & Training Depot
LCI: Landing Craft Infantry
LCT: Landing Craft Tank
LFA: Land Forces Adriatic
LRDG: Long Range Desert Group
Lt-Col: Lieutenant-Colonel
Maj: Major
MELF: Middle East Land Forces.
MO3: Military Operations (Special Ops)
MO4: Military Operations (General Ops)
NAAFI: Navy, Army & Air Force Institute
OC: Officer Commanding (also CO)
OCTU: Officer Cadet Training Unit.
OP: Observation Post
Op(s): Operation(s)
PAIFORCE: Persia (Iran) and Iraq Force.

PTS: Parachute Training School, run by the RAF
PX: Post Exchange; US Armed Forces shop; equivalent to British NAAFI, with joint membership of each other's facilities
RAC: Royal Armoured Corps
RAOC: Royal Army Ordnance Corps
RAP: Regimental Aid Post
RASC: Royal Army Service Corps
RE: Royal Engineers
Regt: Regiment
RM: Royal Marines
RMP: Royal Military Police
RSM: Regimental Sergeant-Major
RSR: Raiding Support Regiment
RTR: Royal Tank Regiment
SAS: Special Air Service
SBS: Special Boat Service
SF: Special Forces
Sgt: Sergeant
SOE: Special Operations Executive
SOM: Special Operations Mediterranean, answerable to SOE
Sqn: Squadron
SRS: Special Raiding Squadron
SS: Special Service
SSM: Squadron Sergeant-Major
Tp: Troop
Tpr: Trooper
WAAF: Women's Auxiliary Air Force
WREN: an individual member of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)

Photo & map credits

1. Service in a Royal Naval Dockyard

HMS Glorious (*Royal Navy official photographer; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*).

HMS Hood (*Royal Navy official photographer Allan C. Green; Restoration Adam Cuerden; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

HMS Glorious listing, on fire and sinking as seen from the Scharnhorst (total loss of life - 1,207; plus 312 from the destroyers Acasta & Ardent) (*German Propaganda Company still; Leighton Rolley via Ben Barker, hmsglorious.com*)

Map of the hunt for the Bismarck in which HMS Hood was sunk off Greenland on 24 May 1941 with the loss of 1,415 lives (*Citypeek - work based upon the map Rheinuebung Karte2.png; Creative Commons; Wikipedia*)

HMS Vanguard (*Seaman of Royal Navy; Wikimedia Commons*)

Luftwaffe photo of Plymouth and Devonport (*Apex; Daily Mail 01.05.2013*)

Union Street, Plymouth (*Unknown, uploaded on cyber-heritage.co.uk by Steve Johnson; Wikimedia Commons*)

Uncontrolled fires in a number of large commercial buildings in Plymouth's Drake Circus (*Plymouth City Council*)

2. The Royal Tank Regiment Training

Tank training during World War Two (*Forces War Records*)

Royal Tank Regiment cap badge (*National Army Museum*)

Japanese conquest of Burma April-May 1942 (*U.S. Army Centre of Military History; Wikimedia Commons*)

Stuart tanks negotiating a Burmese river crossing (*desertrats.org.uk*)

3. Overseas to Egypt – Tank Skirmishes

SS Strathaird (*Reuben Goossens; ssmaritime.com*)

SS Strathaird kitted out as a troopship and painted grey (*Reuben Goossens; ssmaritime.com*)

'Route to the East' map (*Gordon Smith; naval-history.net*)

Western Desert Campaign 1941/42 (*Stephen Kirrage, Wikimedia Commons*)

The Arawa (*Royal Navy Official Photographer; Imperial War Museum*)

Troops of the 2nd New Zealand Division with a British Matilda tank, Libya Nov 1941 (*Australian War Memorial*)

No 19 radio operator in a Sherman tank 1943 (*National Army Museum*)

4. Western Desert Battles

First Battle of El Alamein (*desertrats.org.uk*)

Baltimore bombers from 55 Sqn RAF on the way to bomb 15th Panzer Division during the Battle of El Alamein (*Australian War Memorial*)

M3 tanks: British Grant (left) & US Lee (right) at El Alamein

(*No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

A British Crusader tank passes a burning German Panzerkampfwagen Mk IV, Nov 1941 (*National Army Museum*)

With my 2nd Royal Tank Regiment Troop, Egypt, Sept 1942 (*Author's collection*)

With Sgt Middleton with our Grant tank, Egypt, Sept 1942 (*Author's collection*)
I'm sitting astride the 75mm gun of our first Sherman tank, Sept 1942 (*Author's collection*)
Australian 25 pounder gun & crew at El Alamein (*Australian War Memorial*)
German Nebelwerfer in action (*German Federal Archive; Wikimedia Commons*)
The bright muzzle flash from a British 25 Pdr during the El Alamein barrage (*No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
El Alamein: British Sherman tanks move up along paths cleared through enemy minefields by Military Police and Sappers (*Chetwyn (Sgt), No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
Montgomery watching British tanks advance, Nov 1942 (*National Army Museum*)
Rommel (left) in his command half-track (*German Federal Archive; Wikimedia Commons*)
Deployment of forces on the eve of battle (*Noclador; Wikimedia Commons*)

5. El Alamein – Operation Supercharge

Operation Supercharge map (*Alex Swanston, themaparchive.com*)
Generals Freyberg & Montgomery with Capt L.H. Browne of the Long Range Desert Group, Dec 1942 (*Andrew Honeyfield; Te Ara Museum, NZ*)
Captured dug-in German 88mm gun (*No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit, Windows (Sgt); Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
German & Italian prisoners escorted from the battlefield (*British Official Photo; US Library of Congress; Wikimedia Commons*)
A burning Sherman tank (*Army Signal Corps photo*)
Stretcher bearers with a wounded casualty at El Alamein (*National Army Museum, NZ*)
Evacuating El Alamein wounded by aircraft (*Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections*)
El Alamein Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery (*CWGC*)

6. Enchanted Lands – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine

Syria and Lebanon on the eve of the Second World War (*Philip Khuri Hitti; Wikimedia Commons*)
The Nairn Bus (*RAF official photographer; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
Habbaniya airfield circa 1941 (*British military; HMSO; Wikimedia Commons*)
Map of Iraq in World War Two (*Kirrages; Wikimedia Commons*)
M19 Tank Transporter loading a Grant tank (*Martin (Sgt), No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
Royal Army Service Corps preparing rations in the desert (*Maj Wilfred Herbert James Sale, MC; National Army Museum*)
British Army camp at Sarafand in 1947 (*Palmach archive 101; Wikimedia Commons*)
9th Armoured Brigade Formation Badge (*Cole, Howard, Formation Badges of World War 2; Wikimedia Commons*)
US bivouac camp with tanks (*Abilene Library Consortium; 12th US Armored Division Memorial Museum*)
Pippin's Progress (*Silver Horse Press*)
The Citadel of Aleppo, 1942 (*Stuart Leslie Sillars via the Sock Mistress*)
Ancient street in Aleppo, 1942 (*Stuart Leslie Sillars via the Sock Mistress*)
Looking smart in Aleppo, March 1943 (*Author's collection*)
Loading a camouflaged tank on to a transporter (*Murray (Lieut), Travis (Sgt), No. 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum*)

General Harold Alexander with Major-General John Harding, Aug 1942 (*No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit, Keating G (Capt); Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Men of the Royal Tank Regiment training on the Stuart tank, Egypt Aug 1941 (*Jarche J; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Map of Lebanon in 1988 showing the Bekaa Valley (*Maj David E. Clary, US Air Force; Wikimedia Commons*)

Baalbek: the Temple of Bacchus with the Temple of Venus on the left (*Lodo from Moscow, Russia; Wikimedia Commons*)

Beirut seafront in the 1940s with St Georges Hotel on the right (*Willem van de Poll; Dutch National Archives; Wikimedia Commons*)

Bcharre and its Cedars in the Kadisha Valley, Mount Lebanon (*Vyacheslav Argenberg; Creative Commons*)

7. Becoming an Infantry Officer

Map of the Suez Canal showing the Bitter Lakes & Fayed (*Hamed A El-Serehy, Khaled A Al-Rashid, Fahad A Al-Misned; Researchgate; Creative Commons*)

8. Raiding Forces – Middle East & Adriatic

Officer Training Camp Sarafand, Palestine, Nov 1943. In both photos I am the only one wearing the RTR's black beret (*Author's own collection*)

View of the Lake of Tiberiade (Sea of Galilee) from the Mount of Beatitudes (*Olevy; Creative Commons*)

Seaforth cap badges showing 5th Seaforth 'Sans Peur' Sutherland wildcat and CO's with four silver eagle feathers (*militarybadgcollection.com*)

Batallion by Alastair Borthwick (*Baton Wicks Publications*)

WAAFs at a dance in Cairo, 1943-45 (*RAF official photographer; Imperial War Museum*)

4.2" mortar in action in Italy, March 1944 (*Lambert (Sgt), No 2 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

6-pounder anti-tank gun (*Flack (Sgt) No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Port Said harbour showing a convoy preparing to leave for Sicily (*Australian War Memorial*)

Simon Arzt store, Port Said (*National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands; Wikimedia Commons*)

Spinneys first store in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1920s (*Spinneys*)

Raiding Support Regiment cap badge (*Raiding Support Regiment*)

Wearing the SAS beige beret (*Dan Snow, the History Guy*)

Col. Christopher Woodhouse in the Greek mountains (*Denise Harvey*)

Meeting of Communist & Nationalist Albanian partisans at Mukje, Aug 1943 (*Unknown; Wikimedia Commons*)

A mule column in Greece (x 2) (*raidingsupportregiment.com*)

MV Devonshire (*National Library of Australia*)

Map showing the Italian Adriatic coast round Bari (*ontheworldmap.com*)

RSR parachute training in Italy (*raidingsupportregiment.com*)

Major Jack Gage (*raidingsupportregiment.com*)

Grave of Major Norman Astell (*raidingsupportregiment.com*)

Map of the Adriatic showing the Italian, Croatian & Albanian coasts (*ontheworldmap.com*)

Sketch map of the area by Harry Fecitt MBE, TD (*Harry Fecitt MBE, TD; comandoveterans.org*)

Highland Light Infantry cap badge (*BuzzWeiser196; Creative Commons*)
Lt Col Ted Fynn and Admiral Sir Walter Cowan (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
Captain David Peters leading 1 Troop No 2 Commando up a ridge at Spilje (*commandoveterans.org*)
German soldiers firing a Spandau machine gun (*German Federal Archive*)
German MP40 Schmeisser machine pistol (*Quickload at English Wikipedia; Creative Commons*)
A 4.2" mortar in action in Sicily in Aug 1943 (*No 2 Army Film & Photographic Unit, Stubbs (Sgt); Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
A troop of no 2 Commando forming up in an olive grove for the attack on Spilje (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
Commandos with German prisoners (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
German prisoner being searched at Spilje (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
Commandos attending to the wounded (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
Commandos stretcher party returning the wounded to the beach at Spilje (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
A troop of commandos after the attack (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
SAS fighting jeep in Germany, Nov 1944 (*Sergeant Hewitt, No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
Jack Churchill leading a beach assault in training, claymore in hand (*Imperial War Museum; found in 1969 "Commando" by Peter Young for Ballantine Books*)
Sarande beachhead, Albania, Oct 1944 (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
The RSR with their guns, Sugar Beach, Sarande, Oct 1944 (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
Commando Signal Section with carrier pigeons, Sarande, Oct 1944 (*Commando Veterans Archive*)
Commandos leaving Sugar Beach, Sarande, after the raid (*Reginald Wise*)
5 Troop RSR 1 Section, Florina, Western Macedonia, Greece, Oct 1944 (*Raiding Support Regiment*)
British anti-aircraft guns on Vis, Aug 1944 (*Johnson (Sgt), No 2 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museums; Wikimedia Commons*)
Marshall Tito reviewing pilots on Vis (*Unknown - Milanović, Djordje (1978). Naši Piloti u Borbi (Our Pilots in Combat), Četvrti Jul, Belgrade; Wikipedia*)
British Commandos at Komiza on the island of Vis, 1944 (*National Army Museum*)
Islands of Croatia's Dalmatian coast with Vis on the left (*UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations Cartographic Section*)
Sucuraj on the island of Hvar (*Creative Commons; Wikipedia*)
Memorial plaque on Vidova Gora, Brac's highest peak (*Raiding Support Regiment*)

9. North West Europe – Belgium, Germany

Map showing location of Lake Comacchio (*mikesresearch.com*)
King George VI inspects 5th Seaforth officers in a snow storm at Gorhambury Park in Hertfordshire, Feb 1944 (*Lt Cook, War Office official photographer; Imperial War Museum*)
HMS Spartan shelling the shore as landing craft approach Anzio, Jan 1944 (*National Army Museum*)
With 6th Seaforths, Vierzele, nr Ghent, Belgium, March 1945 (*Author's collection*)
C-47 transport planes release hundreds of paratroops and their supplies over the Rees-Wesel area to the east of the Rhine in the greatest airborne operation of the war (*US Army Signal Corps photographer; User W. Wolny; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)
The town of Wesel after the bombardment (*USAAF; Wikimedia Commons*)

Men of the 15th (Scottish) Division use a small assault craft to cross the Rhine near Xanten, 24th March 1945 (*No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit, Smith (Sgt); Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Men of the 1st Commando Brigade fire their Vickers machine guns against German positions on the outskirts of Wesel (*Norris (Sgt), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Churchill, Brooke & Montgomery arrive on the east bank of the Rhine. 25 March 45 (*Morris (Sgt), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Pontoon bridge at Wesel (with the bridge bombed by the Allies behind) and two men of the US 17th Armored Engineer Battalion who built it enjoying a rest (*17th US Armored Engineer Battalion in World War 2*)

Uelzen, April 1945, a Seaforth sniper taking aim (*Laing (Sgt), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Allied advances to the Elbe River, Apr-May 1945 (*Ralph Zuljan, onwar.com*)

German Ju 88 warplanes concealed along the autobahn in 1945 (*United States Strategic Air Forces; US Library of Congress; Wikimedia Commons*)

German prisoners marching through Lubeck, 2nd May 1945 (*Mondadori; Daily Telegraph 7.5.2018*)

Montgomery accepts Germany's unconditional surrender, Luneburg Heath, 4th May (*Malindine E G (Capt), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Men of the UK 6th Airborne Division greeting the crew of a Russian Army T-34/85 tank near Wismar, Germany, 3 May (*Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Aerial view of Polte-werke plant II in Magdeburg, 1920 (*Polte Product Catalogue; Wikimedia Commons*)

Magdeburg city centre in Jan 1945 after RAF bombing (*Penfold (Fg Off), Royal Air Force official photographer; Imperial War Museum; Wikimedia Commons*)

Magdeburg today showing the restored cathedral (*Chris 73; Wikimedia Commons*)

10. Far East Land Forces & the End of the War

Sunderland Flying Boat (*Canadian Forces; Wikimedia Commons*)

The pool at Gezira Sporting Club, Cairo, in 1943 (*Maj W H J Sale, MC; National Army Museum*)

Atomic bomb mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*George R. Caron; Charles Levy; Wikimedia Commons*)

Nagasaki before and after the bombing & firestorm (*Fastfission; US National Archives; Wikimedia Commons*)

Meeting a wartime FANY girlfriend, Lynette Jooste (Italy & Ceylon) after 50 years. (*Author's collection*)

With Force 136 Kandy, Ceylon, Sept 1945 (*Author's collection*)

Veronica Rose, Changi Beach, Singapore, Oct 1945 (*Author's collection*)

Our Wedding at Dovercourt, Essex, 6th June 1946 (*Author's collection*)

Our Family in Berlin 1960, Aberdeen 1964, and Shortlands 1995 (*Author's collection*)

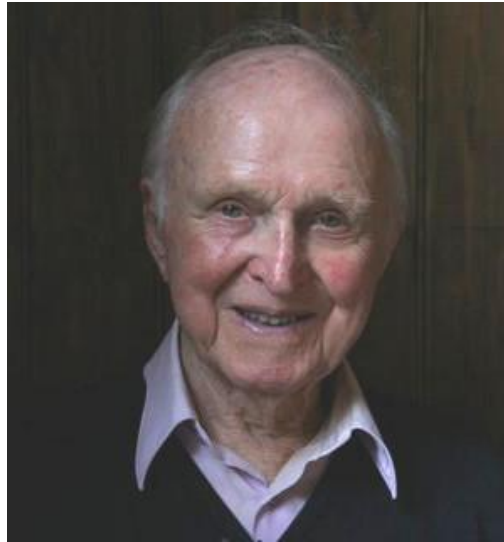
The postings page from my ragged AB64 (*Author's collection*)

Fort George on the Moray Firth, Inverness-shire (*Stephen Branley; Creative Commons; Wikipedia*)

Acknowledgements

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Edward Toms was born in Plymouth in 1920. At the outbreak of the Second World War he was training as an electrical engineering apprentice in the Royal Naval Dockyard at Devonport. In 1941 he signed up as a trooper with the Royal Tank Regiment, seeing service in the Western Desert and Near East including at the Battle of El Alamein, followed by a period based in Italy with the Raiding Support Regiment and taking part in raids across the Adriatic into enemy-occupied Albania. Meanwhile he had been commissioned into the Seaforth Highlanders and went on to take part in the crossing of the Rhine and the pursuit into Germany. When the war in Europe ended he served briefly in the Far East where he met his future wife, Veronica Rose, who was serving with the ATS in Sri Lanka. He went on to pursue a post-war military career, seeing service in the UK, Germany, Egypt, Cyprus and Gibraltar and rising to the rank of Colonel. On his retirement from the army in 1969 he joined the Civil Service, working first in the Department for Employment as a Principal, and later joining the Foreign & Commonwealth Office at the British Embassies in Bonn and Vienna as Labour Counsellor. In 1981 he retired from the Civil Service and started a successful picture framing business in London with one of his sons. He now lives on the coast at Hythe in Kent where he moved after the death of Veronica in 2003. He has one daughter, three sons, eight grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.