

(written between July 1992 and May 1993)

Chapter 1: On The Home Guard

If my memory serves me correctly, the date was the 12th September 1940, the time... 2:30 a.m in the morning. London was being heavily bombed and the sky, from The Boot looking along Common Road, was glowing red and lighting the sky.

Captain Vic Wells with Sgt, Perce Harradine came out of the Boot Pub and Vic said the immortal words, "Men, they' re a cummin , you had better get to your posts, " This sounds funny now, but I assure you it was far from funny at the time. We firmly believed that a German invasion, with parachutes, was far more than just a possibility.

However, four of us got on to our bikes and made our way up Edworth Road to the Tower, where we positioned ourselves so that we could look through the portholes at the top of the Tower. To the best of my recollection we may have had a rifle each and about five rounds of ammo.

If the door at the bottom of the spiral staircase had burst open I wonder to this day what, if there was anything we could have done... and the people in the village slept peacefully in their beds. I was just nineteen. I think the other three people with me were Jimmy Lane (NCO in charge), Ted Wells and Ace Rutt.

In the Winter of 1940 and the Spring of 1941 I was a member of the Langford Home Guard. We met for training each Sunday morning at the Boot Public House. During this period a Flight Sergeant from R.A.F Henlow came along to instruct us in the use of the .303 Rifle. He took us through to the actual firing on the range at Henlow. A pleasant enough chap who enjoyed a pint and was in fact courting one of the village maidens.

However, in July of 1941 i enlisted into the Royal Air Force and was sent for basic training to RAF Padgate in Lancashire. As the training proceeded and time came for instruction with the Lee Enfield Rifle, the word came through the grapevine that the Gunnery instructor (who we had not yet seen) was in fact a right bastard.

About 150 of us raw recruits were assembled in a large marquee awaiting, with some misgivings, the arrival on "stage" of the Gunnery man. Eventually in he strode, and of course, guess who!

He immediately went into his spiel, informing all concerned that anyone not following his precise instruction on the range would be likely to get his Rifle wound around his neck. He then told the story of his training of a village Home Guard, saying in effect, that they were a shower with the local Sergeant, who was also the local Landlord, as far round as a barrel. If he could get through to them, he would in some way get through to us.

You can imagine my feelings, I kept my head down, hoping that on the range when he stood just a few yards in front of me he would not recognise me, luckily for me he didn't.

On this particular Sunday morning we were gathered on parade in the Ivy Leaf Club. Captain Vic Wells in full uniform and dress cap, was seated at a table, with his N C Os. The rest of us sat awaiting the "Orders Of The Day" from Divisional H.Q. Biggleswade.

Halfway through the proceedings George stood up with his hands on his Rifle (Shot gun fashion). I should say at this point that George was a Local District Councillor, and continued in that role for many years after the War. However George rose gently to his feet with the comment "Mr Chairman, I must object to those remarks.. " Vic (Captain) said "George, you can't object these are Company orders, sit down."

A few months earlier, before the proper uniforms had been issued, we were on parade in Edworth Road near the Spinney. Charlie Couzens came along late and got off his bike, he was dressed in the full uniform of an infantryman from the First World War. Captain Vic said he was the "smartest man on parade. "

The following is an extract of what I first wrote in 1946 on my return after four years in the Middle East.

Chapter Two: Journeying

It was chilly that morning early in the month of May 1942 when, together with a thousand more very browned off Airmen, we marched in full kit through the gates of Padgate on the first stage of what was to be a four year adventure. The long train journey along the Pennines and across the border to Port Glasgow. Then the long grey outlines of the 24,000 ton "Trooper" SS Strathaird, which was to be our home for the next ten weeks.

The last check up and handing in of the 1250s – then embarkation – Mess decks – orderlies for the first meal aboard, and whilst we were eating, quite unnoticed the ship began to move as she got under way and made down river to Greenock. It was a lovely evening as we lay offshore, the setting sun, the gulls, the ships gathered in convoy formation, and early the next morning we had our last glimpse of 'Blighty', as we made our way out into the North Atlantic and 'U-Boat Alley'.

It was more than comforting to see that the Navy was with us. The cruiser at the head of the convoy, and the destroyers racing up and down, (they always reminded me of greyhounds) everyone aboard was tense those first few days. I will always remember the mess decks after lights out, the hammocks swinging with the roll of the ship, men sleeping in their clothes with lifebelts readily at hand. After about four days, we were through the first danger zone.

The convoy was pushing ahead at about five knots, I remember we estimated our position as somewhere South of Spain. The sea was calmer and a deep blue, we were getting near to the Tropics, a day or so later came the order for all ranks to dress in khaki drill with effect from 12:00 hours. We saw our first flying fish and schools of porpoises.

After almost three weeks at sea, the convoy turned Eastwards as we made our way to the Harbour at Freetown. I remember my first glimpse of the African Coast, thick foliage and the hills behind, then in through the Boom, the stillness as the engines were stopped and the Anchor dropped. It was extremely hot and humid and the decks were a mass of almost naked bodies.

We were a few days at Freetown and during our stay we experienced our first tropical storm.

Then we were at sea again, the days past slowly, the bugle calling us out of our hammocks, the native sailors scrubbing down the decks, descending to the bowels of the ship to collect the rations for the day. I will never forget the smells of bodies and stale air. Ships inspection at 10:00 hours and not long after, if you happened to be mess orderly, you were in the queue for dinner. On deck there was "Housey-Housey" organised by Scotties of the Cameronians, what a racket that was. There were guard duties. One night when the "Swaddies" raided the Beer store the R.A.F. had to take over the whole Ship guard, standing in two's, back to back, each armed with a Cudgel. What a War.

It was almost six weeks after leaving England that we eventually reached South Africa, half the convoy turned to Capetown, we continued round the coast to Durban. A wonderful city after the blackout and restrictions of war time England. Everyone seemed most friendly, although we had been warned that there was a lot of Pro-Nazi feeling in South Africa.

My oppo Jock Smellie and myself made our way to Greenwood Park, outside Durban, to visit relations of his we were made most welcome. I shall never forget those three days at Durban.

Once more the convoy formed, this time bound for Bombay, we were without Naval escort now, There were one or two panics when U Boats were sighted off the coast of Madagascar. Our ship left the convoy and was soon nipping along at about twenty-two knots.

It was days before we sighted the convoy again, About three weeks after leaving Durban, the ships turned Eastwards line astern. About six hours later, we were laying in the harbour at Bombay with the major part of our journey completed.

After almost a fortnight standing in Bombay Harbour during the Monsoon period, we docked with the temperature at about 110 degrees and then aboard a small B.I. boat called "Varsova". That same evening we cast off and made once for the open sea. Sailing out past our previous ship (she seemed huge now) the crew gave us friendly waves. There was a storm blowing at sea that night. The order came down that everything was to be battered down. It was grim below decks that evening, everyone was ill, it seemed the boat would tip over.

Next morning we made our way cautiously onto the upper deck. Ropes had been tied all over the place so we could get a grip. The storm continued for three more days, by that time I think we were more dead than alive, we had hardly eaten, we were in no mood for the greyish looking stew that the Indian sailors were concocting.

Anyhow, on the fifth day we were in the Persian Gulf, the sea was deadly calm, it glistened in the moonlight as if it were ice, and it was very hot and close. About another three days and we were at the top of the Gulf. During the night we commenced the twenty mile journey up the Shat El Arab river to the Port of Basra. We awoke to find thick green foliage either side of us. We passed the point at which Tigris and Euphrates join, said to be the site of the Garden Of Eden - some Garden !

At about ten o'clock we boarded a paddle steamer at Basra bound for Abadan. It was our first taste of real heat, it was 123 Degrees in the shade that morning when we went ashore. I thought we must be going into Hell. The authorities at Abadan panicked a bit when they saw us standing in the glaring sun and we were soon put into lorries and rushed to a large air cooled building. I was glad to see the sun sink below the horizon that evening.

I spent ten weeks at Abadan, by far the longest ten weeks of my life. Getting up at 3 a. m, starting work at 4 a.m. The thermometer rising until at ten o'clock it was again at the 120 mark. Finish work at mid-day. Lying down though the intense heat of the afternoon, how we used to long to see that infernal sun disappear for another day. About half the unit were down with heat-stroke by the end of the first fortnight, and the rest of us were suffering badly from prickly heat rash.

We were forced to drink huge quantities of water some containing salt. Grim stuff for a thirsty man.

I was more than relieved when my posting to Middle East command arrived. I left Abadan on the 15th September 1942 en route for East Africa by way of Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt.

Chapter Three: From Abadan to Cairo

I left Abadan in the Persian Gulf on Friday 18th September 1942, travelled back up river by Motor Launch, to Basra and after two extremely hot days in a tent, I boarded the night train at Basra station (at that stage travelling alone dragging full kit along the platform between the throng of Arabs). I spent an uncomfortable night sitting on a very hard seat. Next to me was a Sikh in full turban. He sat bolt upright the whole night. I awoke to find my head resting on his shoulder.

During the early hours of daylight the train stopped in the Desert, and the troops on board walked along to the engine with their cans and mugs and made a brew up from the boiling water from the engine. We reached Bagdad station at about 10:00am.

After briefing, the R.A.F. personnel, now assembled at one point, were given a rifle and ammo and for the 55 miles across the Desert to Habbaniya we stood side by side in a lorry fenced in by wooden struts. There were three lorries in the convoy, and the idea was to arrive at our destination intact. The Arab Marauders had a way of making vehicles disappear, so we were told.

However we arrived at Habbaniya intact and we were allocated a Bell tent outside the main camp. It was at this point that I first met David Horne. We two out of all the R.A.F. types in transit were bound eventually for Kenya. We became firm friends, and spent the next eighteen months together. The next stage of our journey was by the Nairn Transport Desert bus across six hundred miles of desert to Damascus. We arrived at the transit camp at three o'clock in the morning after a very bumpy journey. We left Damascus later on that same day by train from Damascus main station for the journey through and across the Golan Heights and down to Haifa in Palestine. This was a remarkable journey winding through the mountain passes. The engine stopped by the Sea of Galilee (signboard stated 609 feet below sea level). We could see the town of Tiberias nestled in the hillside on the other side of the lake.

We finally reached Haifa at nine o'clock in the evening on the 24th September. Haifa is a beautiful City right at the foot of Mount Carmel. The thing most noticeable to David and myself was the wonderful temperate climate and the greenery after the dust, heat and flies of the Persian Gulf. After a very pleasant few days touring the beauty and night spots, swimming in the Med etc. We left on the 27th September by train across the Suez canal bound for Cairo which was reached at ten o'clock in the morning of the 28th September.

The dates mentioned with the knowledge of hindsight were crucial, in fact everything was being prepared for the desert push from Alamein. I spent some days working on the 5th floor of the Middle East War Headquarters- sleeping in a tent in the grounds. We could see the Nile and the Pyramids from the balcony of our office. On the 2nd October I noted in my diary that it had started to rain, the first rain I had seen since the monsoons in Bombay. On the 4th October I was moved to a tented transit camp on the edge of the Western Desert at El Maza where for the next ten days I was working in the movements office - a large Marquee. We worked late into the evening with the help of hurricane lamps, getting the aircrews to their various desert squadrons ready for the 20th October. I worked like the clappers with another fellow who was a Pilot, grounded at the time, who had worked for the Beckton Gas Co. We were using Olivetti typewriters with only three banks of keys and two shift locks. We soon learned to make them operate.

In between times we did all the sites and for two Sundays we attended evensong at All Saints Cairo. On the second of these Services in a very packed Cathedral (it was the 11th October and coming up very fast was the Battle at Alamein - although we could only surmise at the time), the lesson was read by a very senior Army Officer, in battle dress and sporting a considerable array of medals. He

walked with stately tread down the main aisle of the cathedral.

It was only later that I realised that the officer was General Montgomery, who in a few days time would commence the battle which would clear Rommel and the Panzer Divisions out of North Africa.

On 16th October we were moved in transit to Port Tewfig on the Gulf of Suez and boarded the SS, Takliwa. On the evening of the 19th/ 20th October we moved out into the Red Sea. As we departed from Egypt bound for Dar Es Salaam, we could hear the gun barrage in the desert. The battle had commenced.

Chapter Four: On The SS Takliwa

I boarded the British India boat the S.S Takliwa (8000 tons) at Port Tewfig on the Gulf of Suez at mid-day on Sunday 23rd October 1942. As we boarded the lighter to take us out to the ship we could hear the gun barrage at El Alamein. The battle had commenced early that morning.

After a few days in the Red Sea and a re-fuel stop at Aden the ship made for the Indian Ocean bound for Mombasa, some 3000 miles and three weeks away. I noted in my diary at the time "below deck drinking cocoa.. very dangerous part of the voyage... we hear that enemy U boats are operating in the Indian Ocean."

We were sailing completely alone without escort. The real significance of this only revealed itself in an article in the Telegraph. A ship containing Gold Bullion was sunk in early 1943 at the entrance to the Red Sea. The reason for her vulnerability was that our Naval command had broken the German enigma code and knew exactly where the U boats were operating. What they did not know was that the German High command knew this, and were in fact passing false signals to their U boat captains.

We carried on down the coast of East Africa to Dar Es Salaam where we spent ten days in the Harbour (and a pleasant time ashore) before moving back 300 miles overnight to Mombasa Harbour where we arrived on the morning of the 11th November 1942.

After 12 months in the White Highlands of Kenya at Eldoret, we again made the 600 mile train journey back to the coast and boarded the SS Selwyn another quite small BI boat to make our way back to Egypt and the Desert Sands. It was on this voyage that we heard that the Takliwa had been lost with no survivors. She was carrying Askari troops from Mombasa to Bombay.

We in due time arrived back safely in the Suez Canal and were sent to El-Gedida in a tented camp near to Heliopolis.

The sequel to this was a further recent article (attached) informing me that a Japanese submarine commander had been sinking unescorted ships during 42/3 and quite deliberately killing any survivors. This wretched man committed suicide at the end of the war.

After eight months of quite tolerable conditions at Heliopolis my next somewhat dicey assignment was a journey by road in a three ton truck from Cairo to Aleppo in the northern part of Syria.

Chaper Five: On A Visit To Aleppo In Northern Syria.. On the Turkish Border (July-October 1944)

After eight months at El Gedida (Heliopolis) which culminated in fourteen days in sick quarters with sand fly fever, I found myself posted to nearby R.A.F transit camp at Elmaza... I was so weak from illness that I lay alone in a tent at El Maza still with my cap on my head and full pack asleep in the sand for twelve hours.

After a few days a special squadron was formed consisting of a small contingent of R.A.F personnel combined with an equal number of army people... most unusual. After briefing by an Air Commodore, the only time in six years that I encountered anyone above the rank of Group Captain. We loaded ourselves and our equipment aboard three ton trucks (I was assigned "Driver's Mate" to a Brummy Driver) and the convoy made its way across the Suez Canal to Gaza and the Sinai Desert. We moved on day by day across Palestine (East of the Jordan) through the orange groves and on and up to the Golan Heights. We spent one night in the mountains - one could see the lights from the small villages scattered around the sides of the mountain. We slept close to the vehicles wrapped in mosquito nets.

The next day we moved down to the Syrian Plains. Our lead driver for whom we gained a tremendous respect was a Flight Lieutenant who had served in that part of the world in the early Twenties with Lawrence of Arabia. At the Syrian frontier (an archway in the desert controlled by Syrian soldiers) our lead driver simply led the convoy out onto the sand and around the control point without stopping.

After an overnight stay in Homs we eventually reached Aleppo and were assigned to quarters in what had been French Foreign Legion Barracks in the very ancient citadel fortress. It was built solidly at the top of a hill. At the time this Turkish border was terrible for malaria. An old Flight Sergeant (probably all of thirty six) looked after us extremely well, literally watching us take our "Atabrin" tablet and ensuring that after nightfall the proper protective clothing was worn. The area was very much in the control of the Vichy French and very anti British, because of this we had to perform Guard Duties (at the top of the hill and under arc lights) protected only by a piece of wood. One night I was doing guard duty with Fred Sedgely (who I knew well from my days in Kenya).

At two' o clock in the morning the Orderly Officer came out from the mess stating, "Put this on Corporal, " handing me his belt and revolver, "One of our people has just been shot a mile away on the perimeter fence . "

This was the first time I had even seen a service revolver. So I said to Fred... "You serve out my two hours back to back with me and I will carry on during your guard period . "

The C.O Squadron Leader came along in his jeep at six' o clock. His question "Who gave the order to double the guard?" . . . I was put on a charge for acting without full authority.

During the few weeks in Aleppo I was able to visit an old Roman site with a Christian Temple and mosaic flooring still intact. I visited an English Church for Sunday Evensong. The Bishop of the Sudan preached from the Gospel of Saint Paul. His text "Go Though Circumspectly" walking out alone from Evensong into the turmoil of an Arab town is something to experience.

I also visited an hotel, which at the time appeared incongruous. It was completely English and Edwardian with a small three part orchestra playing in the corner. It was recently I read in The Telegraph that this was the hotel used by Lawrence in the early Twenties. To this day it remains something of a time capsule, the clock has stopped the wallpaper very dowdy; but all the fixtures

and fittings are still in place. Our expected move to Ankara in neutral Turkey was stopped at the last minute: so having achieved absolutely nothing we set off in convoy, by road, back by way of the Sea of Galilee and Jerusalem to the canal zone of Egypt.

Chapter Six: The Return From Aleppo To Egypt

As stated in the previous chapter our journey to Aleppo, which was a very clandestine affair- see signals exchanged by Montgomery and Churchill, had ended somewhat fruitlessly. At the Turkish border the Turks wanted our equipment, but they did not very much like the idea of accepting us clad in civvy suits. The return journey to Egypt was a much more relaxed affair, and in its way very pleasant and instructive.

We left Aleppo again by road convoy on the 16th September, crossing the Syrian plains to the City of Homs where we spent the night in a desert camp previously occupied by the Foreign Legion. Washing off the desert dust was done by standing under a huge pipe sticking out of the sand. The water was very cold. We queued for a meal which the cooks travelling with us had somehow prepared. A London fellow with me pointed to a notice in French which stated - No Smoking. . he said "Cor look 'Defense de fumer' Maurice, theres a bloody dance on here tonight. "

The following days the journey was extremely long and tiring. We climbed slowly into the Syrian mountains and the Golan Heights and as we started to descend we could see the town of Tiberias with the Sea of Galilee shimmering very blue way below us.

There was a single small yacht on the lake, I noted in my diary, it reminded me of the childrens hymn "A Little Ship Was On The Sea". We reached the shore of the lake at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and we immediately went for a welcome swim, The water was of course fresh water, very clear and warm.

We were called very early the following morning, and the officer commanding, who as already stated knew the area like the back of his hand after working with Col. Lawrence, called the Squadron together to state that if the other lorry drivers would follow he would drive the lead vehicle through the mountain passes so that we could all spend a couple of days in Jerusalem. This was agreed and off we set, once again I was drivers mate to my friend "Brummy. "

By now we were good pals. The journey was the most hazardous I am ever likely to make. Most of the time from my side of the lorry I was looking over a sheer drop hundreds of feet below, Brummy said "and to think that before I joined this mob the only vehicle I had driven was a laundry van . "

As we started to descend towards the Nazareth hills the officer commanding stopped the vehicles, gathered us together and pointed across the Plains with the words "Now my lads, these are the Plains of Armageddon where the last battles in the world will be fought. "

The journey from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem was 109 miles and took us four hours. We passed through Nazareth and along the road to Bethany and as we approached Jerusalem again the convoy stopped so we could look down onto the City, a remarkable sight. We spent the rest of that day visiting The Holy Sepulchre and following The Stations Of The Cross along The Vvia Dolorosa. We also visited the Mount Of Olives and The Church Of All Nations.

We saw the "Golden Gate" from the Mount Of Olives, appears to be set very high up in the city wall. We slept that night in the back of the vehicles again with a very early call to continue our visits to the Damascus Gate and the old city.

We left Jerusalem at 1 o'clock on the 19th September and arrived on the edge of the Sinai Desert at 3.30. I noted 70 miles, some ride. On the 20th September 1944 we crossed the Sinai Desert. I noted in my diary... desert sand... and then some. We crossed the Suez Canal and made our way to 21 ptc at Kasfaret.

We were hot and dusty from the journey, but before being allocated to our tent we were told to get something to eat. It was at this point that I met Tony Brown. With tin plate in one hand and a mug of tea in the other I pushed open the cookhouse door with my foot, and there sitting on the bench at the table just inside the door was Tony.

He had just arrived from Italy that day en route for the Sudan. An amazing chance meeting, I noted in my diary... spent over 3 hours in the Naafi talking. We saw quite a bit of each other over the next few days before we went our separate ways.

I was posted nearby at 73 OTU Squadron at Fayid on The Bitter Lakes where I was to spend the next twelve months. It was at Fayid that I first met up with Tom Elderkin, and also one or two other people I had been with in Kenya. I noted that on the 25th September... trying to get organised.. . not feeling too good. . and back into "dock" again... I am cheesed .. don't know whether its sandfly, German measles or heat rash. I was sent to the 19th General Hospital to see a lady skin specialist. I remember I hitched the 20 miles back to Fayid on the pillion seat of a dispatch rider's motorbike. When I got back to sick quarters I was put back in bed. On the 30th September I finally started work.

Chapter Seven: The Return home After Four Years In The Middle East And East Africa

It was on Monday the 1st October 1945 I noted in my diary, "three more months now". Then of all things on the 29th October I was posted to Gianacclis I was told that I was to be in charge of the equipment office.

What a laugh - there were rows of desks and files, and I was the only person there - everyone else had been posted back to the UK. There were literally piles of unactioned documents everywhere. The equipment store which was very large was about two miles away across the desert. I was given bicycle (German made) so that i could "keep an eye" on the equipment store! !

On the 7th December 1945 I managed to get one last leave in Cairo. Took a taxi to the Pyramids. Also back for a last look at Heliopolis, On the 15th and 26th December, I noted Gianacclis is grim, sand storm blowing. On the 27th December I went to the Ballet at the Globe Theatre in Alex. , it was on the 8th January 1946 that at last my "boat was in,". Frantic clearance from the camp and those of us going home set off by road to the transit camp at El Maza, by now I knew this camp well. It was a journey of 240 miles from Giannacclis. We had two tyre bursts and got lost in Cairo... eventually reaching the transit camp in the evening.

On the 17th January 1946 revellie was at 4 'o clock and we boarded a train heading for Port Said. We passed by my old RAF camp at Fayid at dawn – and at 11'o clock we boarded the SS Ascania and we sailed with the tide at six o'clock that same evening. I remember to this day watching the Arab dockers heaving the ropes into the water as the tugs pushed us out into the harbour.

For the first time i really believed that I might be going home after four very long years.

We were four days crossing the Med before eventually arriving at Toulonne Harbour. We passed through The Messina Straits. Stromboli and the towns on either side of the straits. The last night at sea was terrible, everyone was sea sick, as we passed into the harbour at Toulonne we saw the scuttled ships from the Vichy French Navy, and then once more into a very cold and muddy transit camp. At ten' o clock in the evening we eventually boarded the train for Dieppe - it was the 24th January. The train had very hard slatted seats, we had no sleep and eventually arrived at Dieppe at 10.30 in the morning of the 26th. Into transit camp for the day and we boarded the ferry at 10' o clock the next morning. The Captain warned everyone to wear their life jackets and to keep awake, the Channel had not yet been cleared of mines. I wrote on the 27th.. good crossing but still no sleep.

On arrival at Newhaven very early on Sunday morning I was pulled out by customs for a kit bag check, the fella asked me how long I had been overseas, when I told him he said "on your way son". We then boarded a train which took us non-stop to West Kirby in Lancashire, the length of England on a wet Sunday, we knew we were nearly home.

On arrival at West Kirby the lorry driver told me to climb into the passenger seat next to him, I was so tired I had to be pushed up, then into a large hanger at 7 'o clock in the evening. A flight Sergeant said "Are you lot here to be kitted out for overseas?" you can imagine the comments.

After a medical inspection (F.F.I) we were allocated to billets and without exception everyone slept until four o'clock the next afternoon. On the 29th we all boarded the troop train bound for St Pancras, I decided to leave the train at Northampton and take the bus to Bedford and then onto Biggleswade .

I don't think I've ever felt so lonely in my life as I did after i left that troop train, I was completely alone for the first time in almost six long years. However, I eventually boarded the Hitchin bus at Biggleswade, and then for the first time I knew i was home in Bedfordshire, I listened to the Langford

accent, "Yew ome then boy?" ... Yes I was home.

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