

My father – William Freeman Eveleigh, known as Bill – was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire in 1920, the son of a young, unmarried mother, and a philandering older, married man.

His childhood was a confused one as his birth mother, Winifred, could not keep him, and so Bill was 'adopted' by his birth father also called William and his wife Elizabeth, who were childless.

The family was poor, and Bill didn't attend school much. He officially left at 14, working in various unskilled and probably poorly paid jobs to supplement the family's income.

During the 1930s with the rise in Germany of the Nazi Party and its leader Adolf Hitler it became increasingly apparent that a second war was almost inevitable, and in 1937, at the age of just 16 years and 7 months, Bill decided to join the Territorial Army – precisely why is unclear. Being a part-time soldier gave him a little extra money and fulfilled a sense of adventure that was part of his character his whole life.

Bill enlisted in the 6th (Duke of Connaught's Own) Battalion, of the Hampshire Regiment, and he signed up for 4 years, was given the army service number of 5498732, and joined as a private soldier in the infantry. In 1938 the battalion converted from infantry to artillery and became the 59th (Duke of Connaught's Hampshire) Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery (TA). Just before the outbreak of war in 1939, Gunner Bill and his comrades were "Called out for actual military service", which means that along with many thousands of other part-time soldiers, Bill was going to war.

From September 1939 until March 1942 Bill served on the Home Front and his unit was an integral part of the defence of these islands against possible Nazi invasion. All the while they were being trained and equipped for whatever role the future progress of the war may demand of them.

In the early months of 1942, the most significant fighting on land was in North Africa, and so it was that Bill and his unit were part of the Allied build up by General Montgomery for what Monty hoped would be a decisive battle to turn the tide in North Africa and drive the Italians and Germans away from threatening the Suez Canal and the Middle Eastern oil fields.

In March now Bombardier Bill was posted to the 84th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, which was part of 10th Armoured Division. A few months later on his 22nd birthday, 13th June 1942, Bill found himself off the west coast of Africa heading for either Egypt or more likely they thought India. In the event they landed in Egypt on 5th July.

Again they trained and re-equipped for the coming battle, and acclimatised to a very alien environment, and in October Bill was part of what became known as the second Battle of El Alamein, forcing the Axis troops to retreat west along the North African coast. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was later to recognise the success of the British Eighth Army, calling the Battle of El Alamein the "end of the beginning" and saying "Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat."

By January 1943, Bill left 84th Anti-Tank Regiment and joined 105th, which was attached as XIII Corps troops. This latest move came with promotion to Lance Sergeant and the new unit was

part of a strategic reserve that would be deployed to troubleshoot blocked advances, enemy breakthroughs, and the like.

For most of January to May 1943, Bill and the rest of 105th Anti-Tank Regiment were held in reserve and spent the time coming back up to strength in men and equipment. On 1st April he was promoted again to acting Sergeant, which meant that Bill was the Gun Number 1 and therefore in command of his crew.

On 20th June, 105th Anti-Tank Regiment was finally on the move, first from Beni-Yusef in Egypt to Tobruk in Libya, and then 4 days later on to the port of Tripoli, a short distance from the Tunisian border.

Bill's next stop was across the Mediterranean Sea to Sicily. Ten days after the first troops invaded the island, Bill and his unit landed at the port of Syracuse on the south-eastern coast and immediately moved inland. They fought at various places across the island in the brief campaign, but very little in their primary role because of the lack of Axis tanks. It was 5 days after the initial landing on the toe of Italy that elements of 105th sailed across from Messina to Reggio Calabria.

Bill was in Italy from September 1943 until the end of the war, and he fought from Reggio in the far south to Ferrara in the north via Bari, Foggia, Termoli, Capua, Cassino town, Rimini, Forli, Ravenna, Faenza, and Argenta. He was in Italy when Rome was liberated in June 1944 and when Venice was recaptured in April 1945. During that time Bill was promoted to Sergeant then Troop Sergeant and his unit was re-equipped with the latest M10 self-propelled tank destroyers.

They were deployed as a strategic reserve for most of that time and saw action on both the east and west coasts in support of British and American troops respectively. From March 1945 when 105th ceased to exist he was posted to 64th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, which was attached to 78th Infantry (Battle-Axe) Division.

The war in Italy ended in May 1945 and Bill and his unit were swiftly sent to Austria to become part of the Army of Occupation at Klagenfurt.

On 6th July 1945, Bill and his regiment participated in the 78th Infantry Division's Ceremonial Parade in the nearby town of Spittal-an-der-Drau. The Divisional History page 231 states, "On July 6 a Divisional Ceremonial Victory Parade was held at Spittal. The large area formed by the Drau Valley in the surrounding hills made a wonderful setting... 64 Anti-Tank Regiment had their self-propelled guns on parade."

It was not until 3rd March 1946 that Sergeant William Eveleigh of 64th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, 78th Infantry Division finally returned to the UK, and during the next few months he prepared to be demobbed. He was finally released one day after his 26th birthday on 14th June 1946, but he was still not really out of the army. He was classified Class "Z" (T) Royal Army Reserve and remained eligible for recall until the age of 45. He was subsequently discharged from reserve liability on 30th June 1959, which was 3 years after I was born.

78th Infantry Division was disbanded in August 1946, and 64th Anti-Tank Regiment suffered a similar fate in 1947.

On the Notification of Impending release form in his service record it states:

Military conduct: Exemplary

Testimonial: Sgt Eveleigh has always proved himself to be hardworking & honest; he has held the responsible position of Troop Sgt & could always be relied on to carry out his duties efficiently. He is always cheerful & smart – Capt. DG Creasey – 10th January 1946, 64 A/Tk Regt RA, Last serving with 2 (BR) CRU.

In recognition of his service he received the obligatory demob suit, which it is said he altered (Bill was always very particular about his appearance!), and the following decorations: 1939-45 Star, Defence medal, Italy Star, Africa Star with 8th Army clasp, Efficiency Medal (Territorial), War Medal 1939/45.

At the tender age of 26, having spent his youth and the best part of a decade in the Army on a part-time and full-time basis, Bill now faced a new battle – to come to terms with what he had experienced and reintegrate into civilian life.

In terms of people to talk to about his experiences, Bill was still estranged from his father, who had served in the First World War, so he was not around. It is possible that Bill may have spoken to his adoptive father Frank who had also served in the First World War, and Bill may, for a while at least, have stayed in contact with some of the comrades he had served with. However, he was quite a private man, and very proud, and it is more than likely that he did not really talk to anyone at this time.

Later, Bill must have talked a little at least to his wife, my mother Gladys, but he did not talk to my brother and I much about his wartime experiences and when he did it was mostly very light, anecdotal stuff. What we do know is that Bill's war was not without trauma.

It is easy to think that the Second World War was not as personal as the First, especially when fighting in an armoured vehicle. After all the enemy were mostly at "arm's length" and it is unlikely that Bill was involved in the sort of hand-to-hand combat that many Tommies in France and Flanders had experienced in the First World War. But the few bad memories he did share with us demonstrate that all war is "dirty", and he must have had many traumatic, upsetting, and troubling experiences during his time in the army.

It is possible I suppose that while waiting to be demobbed he may have had some counselling (the army probably called it debriefing), but I suspect that is unlikely. And while he seemed to have come through unscathed physically apart from a few bouts of illness, he must surely have been affected mentally and emotionally. Did he suffer nightmares and flashbacks, and did he experience feelings of isolation, irritability, and survivor guilt? All classic PTSD symptoms.

After the war he met and married my mum Gladys, and first my brother and then I was born. To us, as children growing up, he was just Dad. Not terribly demonstrative but fun and family loving. He enjoyed a pint or three or a glass of whisky, loved all sport, was very hardworking, was a very keen gardener, and he could decorate for England!

Towards the end of his life he suffered quite a bit of ill health and eventually passed away in the year 2000. To me Dad showed no adverse effects of the awful experiences he must have had

during the war. I think he was proud to have “done his bit”, but he was not like a lot of ex-military men who seem to lament the day they left. What few “souvenirs” he had were kept locked away, and he only once to my knowledge went to a reunion. That was, I think, an Eighth Army “do” at The Royal Albert Hall in London probably in the 1960s, where he and his friend Charlie pinched some large painted boards with Eighth Army emblems on, and I remember them kicking around the house for years. In the end Dad probably built something with them!

Read the full story in “From Lili Marlene to D-Day Dodger” on Amazon.