

My War Years

By Victor Winter

War has been declared, as I had already passed my medical, I was called up straight away I had to go to Exeter, Topsham Barracks on the 16th October 1939.

I had to travel to Didcot, change train to go to Exeter via Bristol, it took me until about 3 in the afternoon. 85 of us were called up that day.

Topsham was the barracks of the 16th field regiment Royal Artillery.

The main regiment had left for France, what was left were a squad that was going to train the intake.

Well to start with we were formed up into squads for training and marching – what a laugh we had, it's funny but I did not know that everybody could not “march”, I thought it was an easy thing to do but some of them could not do it at all, and to see them trying was a real laugh, I got it right in the end but not straight away.

As this was an artillery regiment, we had to be sorted out to be trained to do the different jobs which formed the regiment, as I had already had my driving licence, I was to be trained on the lorry that towed the guns. When the regiment moved out to go to France it took the gun lorries with them, so all we had to train with was 4 old 4.5 howitzer guns and 2 old Albion lorries. However, when the government ordered the confiscation of vehicles from local firms, we got a mixed bag of cars and lorries to drive.

There were only 10 of us drivers, we had to divide the cars and lorries between us, and look after them, I had a Vauxhall saloon and a 3-ton Leyland lorry.

It was with a lorry, gun and limber on tow behind that I had to pass my test. This all came to 60 feet long, I thought how do I get it round corners. It was then that I remembered the sergeant major giving me some tips when we were out practising in the city one day and now this was the test.

The officer taking the test was from another regiment and he just sat by the side of you, he gave me my instructions they were: -

“We have driven to the south side of Exeter city, I want you to drive back to Topsham barracks via the river bridge then Main Street to the Topsham cross road in the city then proceed back to the barracks, I shall not do or say anything more for the rest of the test until you get back to the barracks”.

This was it, off I went at about 20mph till I got to the river and as you get over the bridge you come to the main street in the city, it was here I slowed down as much as I could and tried to remember what it was the sergeant major has said about getting a long vehicle around a sharp bend. He had said you measure your load in your mind add 30ft, take that distance from the corner and move across to the other side of the road, hit the pavement and come straight back to the near side, then drive as deep as possible into the cross road and all should be well. All was well until the gun wheels did not clear a sign post, luckily it only bent it and off I went back to the barracks.

I parked the gun and lorry and was dismissed for tea. The officer just went, he said nothing.

When I got back to my hut the rest of the lads were already in and were comparing tests, it appeared I was the only one to have been tested in the city, all the others were tested in the country and I felt sure I had failed because I hit the signpost. We were all about to go out for the evening when the sergeant major came and stopped us going. He said we were going on a night drive to get some practice in. He said we had to take with us some darts and some money to buy the beer. At the pub over our beer, he gave us all our army licence. He was one of the best instructors I met in the army.

The sergeant major was a good all-round mechanic and he offered to anyone that wanted a chance to learn about car engines and the maintenance of them in the evenings, I took him up on it. When I came out of the army, I was able to do all my own car repairs.

Well, we were at the end of our training and we were being grouped up to be sent to other units who were below strength, most of them went to France. About 12 of us mostly drivers were sent a few miles down the road to Oakhampton, to the artillery firing range, we had to open it and clean things up. Brand new guns the new 12 PDR were being sent from the factory to be tested by our unit, then to be handed over to regiments who came in to practice and to move off with them. There was a lot of overseas regiments came in for about a month's practice and then they moved out with the guns.

Oakhampton firing range was about 2 miles from the town and a thousand ft above sea level, it was just miles of open moors.

There was in all about 50 of us, officers and other ranks, we made up the depot battery and looked after the camp in general, we tested the guns before the new regiments took them to practice on the range with live ammo. We had track vehicle to drive out on the range, we used to go out early to set the targets up for the regiments to shoot at, I used to tow a moving target on a long cable, it was attached so that there was no way that the towing vehicle could be hit by mistake. The track vehicles were fun to drive, no steering wheel just two tiller bars to steer with and a 6 cylinder, rolls Royce engine, it would pull anything, it had magneto ignition, no battery.

The visiting regiments used to stay 2 weeks and then a new one would come in, so it went on all the summer of 1941.

It was at Oakhampton that I was in an accident, there were about 30 of us in a lorry going back to camp about 10:30 at night, the driver took a double bend too fast and the lorry tipped over and rolled about 4 times into a garden, no one got hurt but we were all shocked a bit.

After this I was taken off driving and was put in the officer's mess serving the drinks from the bar as I had been in service before the war and was used to serving.

1941 the summer had been hot and sunny which made things on the range easy to work and except for a few air raids things were quiet, but we had plenty to do.

Then came Dunkirk, all our troops were being got out of France, our CO had the job of getting anyone who could drive into trucks, into a convoy to the ports then pick up and take the men to special camps. We went all over the coast picking them up, this lasted for about a week until all had been put in camps or hospitals for treatment.

All training came to a halt and we were sent down on the coast with our camp guns to take up a position in case the Germans had followed our troops back.

After about 2 weeks we went back to camp to start our training again.

The government was trying to sort out what regiments had got back from France, but most regiments had been hit and only a few troops from each had returned, the regiments had to be brought up to strength so they went through all our papers which told them what you did before you were called up, and I had worked for six months on the railway so I was taken from the Royal Artillery to the Royal Engineers (Railway division). I had to report to the railway engineers camp at Longmore in the Liss Forest Hampshire. The whole camp was railway, everything that made a railway was there.

The army ran a train from the camp to Liss station every hour, this was part of the training program.

One has to remember that after Dunkirk some units did not exist, and they all had to be reformed in some way or another, we were pushed around until they got it right. One thing they never forget was to give us square bashing and long-distance country marches.

We did a lot of our training in Liss forest and every now and again a mini sand whirlwind would get up and cover you with sand, when you got back to camp you had to strip off and shake the sand out of your clothes and your kit.

I had been sent into Railway Engineers movement control regiment, southern command which was at Salisbury Wilts, Wilton camp, I was there for two days and sent onto Winchester RTO at Winchester station.

This office had only just been opened up. It was a large shed in the station front yard.

We had a major in charge a sergeant, and 4 of us – George, Derrick, Les and I. We had a large area of track to cover, we had Basingstoke to Brockenhurst on the London line, Winchester to Alton, all the Meon valley, Petersfield to Fratton, Southampton and Romsey to Andover.

We had to know all the station yards, what wagons for military goods could be stored and personnel could be kept at each station. As camps were built up all over the south stores were sent to the various regiments in the area and it was our job to see that these stores were collected and taken to the proper places. One thing that was always to be unloaded was coal.

Just about all spare buildings and ground was taken over by the military and all these camps came under our control.

While I was at Winchester the government had decided to send stores and equipment to Russia, another chap from another office and I, were sent to have a medical check to see if we could stand up to the Russian weather and cold, but I failed the medical and was sent back to Winchester. I failed because I was unable to sweat properly.

I was taken off the operation list, they said I was OK as long as I was kept in this country and not sent abroad.

Also, while based at Winchester I was sent on a small arms course this they called a refresher course this was at Leeds. I went off to London, then from Kings cross to Leeds. I got up to Leeds about 3pm we were met and taken by truck to a place called Aberford a small village out in the wilds of Yorkshire. The first evening we were put in various squads for training given huts, and told this was to be our hut for the rest of the course. We were going to be on the course for 3 weeks and we were told to pair up and stay paired up for the rest of the course. I was looking around for someone about my size when I was gripped by the collar and dumped on a bed, when I looked around this chap said don't look for anyone else, you're with me.

Everyone laughed because I was only 5ft 1, and this chap was 6ft 7, for most things it turned out ok, his name was Tim M from Cornwall.

We also went out on the Yorkshire Moors on a 3-day scheme of mock fighting it was terrible 3ft of snow and we were walking around in it. We were all issued with blank ammunition for the exercise and when we got back to camp, we had to hand in all the rounds we had not used. Well - my mate, was a bit mad and instead of handing in his spare blanks he tossed them into the fire in the middle of the hut, it blew up in all directions and set the hut on fire, we had to be found another hut.

The rest of the course went off without too much trouble from TM, until the last few days when we were being trained in throwing hand grenades, TM decided to drop his in the pit instead of throwing it, we all made a fast exit.

The training over we all went back to our regiments and none of us bothered to keep in touch.

Back at Winchester things are getting busy, extra camps and troops coming in, it soon became obvious that there was going to be a build up in the area, I was out most days taking regiments to camps that had been put up temporarily for a short stay.

The Americans had now joined us, we had two sergeants at our office and we had to show them around the district so that they knew where to go, we all had a turn at taking them around, they had a jeep to move about in. They were both nice chaps and we all got on well. They were also able to get us cheap fags.

Things were getting a bit over crowded as new camps and more troops were coming in, we knew that it was a build up for the invasion, but no one knew where it would start from.

In June all the camps and roads all around the area were full up, with no more space left. Then came the word go, we had to get all the troops, lorries and tanks loaded onto the landing craft, it took 2 days and nights to get things going.

Overnight everything had gone, everywhere was empty and silent.

Now came the job of supplying the forces, "Pluto" was put together to get the petrol over to France, at the same time the Mulberry Harbour was being towed over so that the lorries and tanks could be unloaded. Until this was set up train loads of food were unloaded and taken to airfields in the forest and then flown over to France.

We also had two ambulance trains in the area, they were sent into the docks to meet the boats which were bringing the wounded back from France.

As the bridgehead got deeper in France and with the Mulberry harbour now in full use supplies were being sent direct to the front line and we had less to do, I for one was transferred to a depot near Basingstoke and I was there when the war was declared over.