

“WHEN WILL IT ALL END, I WONDER?”

## Stephen Henry Baker

A personal account of his story during World War II,  
through his diaries, photographs and the memories of  
his daughters, Stephanie Williams and Lyn Channing

With James Ryan & Iain Watkins

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# INTRODUCTION

Our father, Stephen Henry Baker, was a humble man. Funny, intelligent and industrious, with family and friendship at the centre of his world. We always thought he was special - he was our dad after all - but it wasn't until much later in our lives that we realised quite how extraordinary his life had been. In fact, so extraordinary we felt compelled to tell his story.

Dad was born in the St Werburgh's area of Bristol on 15 September 1909, close to the centre of the city. He had two sisters, Mary and Joyce, and a brother, Graham James, known as Jimmer. They lived on Glenfrome Road and we have vague recollections as children of visiting our grandparents at their house. Spending Christmas with our grandparents and holidaying with aunts, uncles and cousins are our most vivid memories. We were, and continue to be, a close family.

Dad was a keen photographer and during our childhood we were able to look at many of the photos he'd taken during his time serving in The British Forces in North Africa and Europe. As children, we knew little of the context or the stories behind the often small black and white images. Dad rarely talked about this period of his life and back then we didn't know that, contrary to military orders, he had kept diaries detailing his experiences during the Second World War. Soldiers were under instruction not to write of their movements or experiences as it may give the enemy vital information in the event of capture. Nevertheless, dad managed to secretly write each day on topics from food and days-off, to the heat of battle and capturing enemy pilots. We were also unaware he had passed his diaries to Shirley, our older sister.

Shirley was born in 1934 and had lived through the war. She sadly developed dementia later in her life and passed dad's diaries onto us. Unfortunately, by this time, it was too late to ask anyone close to the events about the incredible stories we were reading. Shirley had become forgetful and mum and dad had passed away some years earlier. Whilst the diaries make for extraordinary reading in isolation, we wish we would have known about them earlier so we could have talked to dad, mum and Shirley about their memories.

Many of the diary entries were written on pieces of scrap paper or in small notebooks. In later life, we realised dad had rewritten some of the entries, word-for-word, over a period of several years. Stephanie and her husband Peter would take dad on holiday to Spain as he loved travelling abroad, especially flying in an airliner rather than a military plane. During the evening he would say, “I’m going to write my diary now and then I’ll turn in.” At the time, we thought he was writing about his day at the beach or the lovely meal we’d had that night. Instead, he was painstakingly rewriting his war memoirs, reliving landing on the beaches in France and recalling sand-covered meals of bully beef and tinned herring.

Sadly, we know little about dad’s early life, but we are aware the interests he developed during his teenage years would shape his life. He was a boy scout, enjoyed fishing and loved boats. He would sit for hours on the banks of the River Frome near his home, or elsewhere in the beautiful countryside around Bristol. As you read through his diaries and learn about his life after the war, you will hear these early hobbies were a constant throughout his life. We’re sure the life experiences, practical skills and resourcefulness learnt in scouting also helped prepare him, in some small way at least, for life in The Forces.

Upon leaving Mina Road Senior Boys School, dad was encouraged by his parents to learn a trade. Our grandfather, Albert Stephen Baker, was an inspector on the trams and buses in Bristol. His father, our great-grandfather, owned Baker’s Ices, a well-known ice cream business in the area – first as a mobile cart and later as a shop. Dad took a different path and completed an apprenticeship as a coppersmith. We’re not sure where he served his apprenticeship, but this is likely to be where dad first started to develop both his creative and technical skills.

Scouting had sparked an interest in serving his country that led to dad joining the Royal Artillery Territorial Army (TA), now known as the Army Reserve, just one week before his seventeenth birthday. Interestingly, his love of boats meant he was planning to sign-up to the Navy, but a good friend convinced dad to join him in signing-up for the TA. He didn’t really need too much persuasion, as he already had an interest in the army, and promptly signed-up for the TA.

Whilst dad's apprenticeship offered him a trade and employment, he loved being a member of the TA – it was his passion. He enlisted to the 66th South Midland Field Brigade of the Royal Artillery Territorial Army. The Brigade was formed shortly after the end of World War I, with a headquarters on Whiteladies Road in Clifton, Bristol, and just a short walk from the beautiful Clifton Suspension Bridge which overlooks the city. When dad joined the Brigade, it was a horse-mounted unit and remained so until 1934 when petrol-driven trucks replaced horsepower. Dad trained to be a Gunner – later an anti-aircraft gunner – and, as well as learning his role and supporting the British Army in their duties, the TA also presented dad with a wonderful social life. He played for the football team, attended the annual camps from 1927 until 1939 and made lifelong friendships. He was in the TA for thirteen years, until the outbreak of World War II meant life would forever change for all the men in the reserve.

In the early stages of the conflict, dad remained in Bristol with the same Brigade but under the new name of the 76 Heavy Anti-Aircraft (AA) Regiment 236 Battery. It later changed name again to the County of Gloucester Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment. There were three batteries, 236<sup>th</sup>, 237<sup>th</sup> and 238<sup>th</sup>, and each battery had eight guns. Dad helped protect the docks at Portbury, the area around Ham Green, and Purdown, on the outskirts of Bristol – a target for heavy German raids during the Bristol Blitz from November 1940 through to April 1941.

We requested dad's army records a few years back and when the file arrived, we found further information and recollections from his service as a gunner during the Bristol Blitz. He had written about some of the battles over Bristol and one entry, from 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1940, captures the extraordinary effort from the young men in the battery:

*"Another heavy night raid. Several gun sites attacked and casualties (a direct hit on a gun at Purdown's sister site at Brickfields). During this raid, 6,000 heavy shells were fired into the air! Each weighed 28lbs and all this had to come down as shell splinters. Nearly 100 tonnes all on Bristol! At Purdown, the guns were nearly red hot! Water was poured over them at every opportunity. The gunners handled 500 cwts of boxed ammunition – 25 tonnes! All this, once the ready-for-use rounds had been fired, had to be manhandled from the magazines. The steel box containing two cartridges weighed 140lbs and to get all this into the gun pits required superhuman efforts. Cooks, batmen,*

*drivers, everyone helped. Even the clearing of the empty shell cases had to be seen to, all the while steel splinters, nose caps and bombs were coming down. No one took shelter, when a gun loader was too exhausted to load again, other gunners took his place. Remember, one 3.7" cartridge weighed over 40lbs, was over 4ft long and had to be slid into an open breech about shoulder high. During these raids, planes were shot down and some damaged, but the main result of the gunfire was to break up the raids and keep the number of planes to a height where accurate bombing was impossible. The number of bombs jettisoned outside the target area testified to the effect the gunfire had on the enemy."*

Dad occasionally talked about the legend of 'Purdown Percy' – an anti-aircraft "super-gun" positioned high above Bristol in the hills overlooking what is now the M32 motorway. In reality, he told us, there were four much smaller guns that could fire almost simultaneously. The volume of four high velocity guns firing simultaneously, combined with Purdown's elevated position above Bristol, gave the impression of a much larger weapon. He recalled Bristolians would say, "There goes Percy" when the guns were fired in unison. Dad was delighted to obtain a photograph of all four guns firing at the same time – apparently the only existing photograph of them in action together.

Dad married our mother, Phyllis (nee Fudge) on 25 June 1932 at Eastville Park church and his close friend, Dudley Lucchesi, was his best man. Mum and dad lived in a flat in Fishponds during the first year of their marriage. They welcomed their first child, our older sister Shirley, into the world in 1934 and moved to a much larger house on Stapleton Road, Eastville, not far from where dad grew up in St Werburgh's. Initially, they planned to buy the house with some neighbours who lived in a flat nearby, but the neighbours pulled out at the last minute. This created a problem financially, but a solution was soon found. As it was a generous villa-style property, with large rooms and plenty of space, mum's parents and two brothers moved in with mum and dad. They continued to live on Stapleton Road throughout our childhood and teenage years.

Shirley was five at the start of the Second World War and could remember aspects of her early childhood with great clarity. She wasn't evacuated and spent the entire war at home

with mum. Shirley told us stories of watching planes fly over the house and on one occasion, their neighbour's house was bombed. The house was just four doors away and three people were killed. Dad was at the gun site in the centre of Bristol on top of the Co-op building in Broad Quay and one of his jobs was to plot where he thought the bombs were dropping. He saw an explosion just to the north of the city centre, looked in horror at the map, turned to his commander and said, "I think a bomb has just dropped on my house!" He rushed home in a state of panic but thankfully found mum and Shirley safe but incredibly shaken.

Shirley would also talk about the US Army being camped nearby in Eastville Park and she said it was fascinating to visit the park to see the soldiers. Children would call out to the uniformed men in their trucks, "Got any gum, chum?" and the soldiers would throw chewing gum to the locals. It was a real treat during rationing and chewing gum was a new thing to children in Bristol.

One neighbour recalled a German aircraft flying low over Eastville Park and actually seeing the pilot waving to get children out of the way. Some onlookers fell to the floor to escape but one young girl sadly kept running and was hit by the enemy fire. We remember mum always used to say to us at night "good night, god bless", and we read that this started during the war as families didn't know if they would make it through the night. It was all incredibly real, raw and close to home.

The 76<sup>th</sup> Gloucester Heavy Ant-Aircraft Regiment 238 battery ceased to operate in Bristol, exchanging with the 236 battery, and received notice of overseas posting. After a spell at various training camps, dad was posted to North Africa as a Rear Gunner in June 1941.

Getting called-up and being posted overseas was hard enough for all the brave young men, but the sadness conveyed through the early entries in dad's diary was unmistakable. It was probably all the more painful as he was leaving behind a wife and young daughter in Bristol.

When dad was called-up, the first thing he did was to dig out an air-raid shelter in the back garden. He excavated the turf, placed a metal half-cylindrical cover over the top and then covered it again in soil. Many of the neighbours were laughing at him, saying the war would soon be over. Of course, when the war didn't end immediately and Bristol was under attack,

the mocking turned quickly to requests to come into the shelter. Dad was doing all he could to protect his wife and daughter from the airborne threat as he knew he wouldn't be at home to look after them. It was in his nature to be overwhelmingly positive and hide the uncertainty of what lay ahead behind a smile or a jokey quip. That was his way of protecting mum and Shirley but he, like the millions he fought alongside, knew in his heart that he may never return home to see them again.

When we first read his diary, we were amazed. The detail was astonishing, he writes in such a vivid style, you can almost picture the scenes clearly in your mind. We were so proud, and it was incredible to read what he had gone through as a young man. You see, if he ever talked about the war, he would always reference stories like the legend of "Purdown Percy" or humorous tales of places he'd visited. He would always make light of the situation. We know now the reality was harrowing. It was in dad's nature to err on the lighter side of life and this is sometimes reflected in the diaries. He used humour to protect his family from the true horrors of the battle, and probably to protect himself too. Nevertheless, the fear, misery and suffering are evident throughout. It may sound strange, but in some sections, we feel it's what he hasn't written that is often more distressing. It prompts your imagination to run away with you. Reading dad's memories placed the photos we had sat and studied as children into unmistakable context. The stories brought colour and vibrancy to the stark black and white images.

The accounts of dad's close relationships were particularly emotional, and we still wonder what happened to friends like Dudley Davis who was captured and became a prisoner of war. One of the most incredible aspects of the diaries was how dad managed to detach himself from the heat of battle on his days away from the frontline. The relatively 'normal' activities of a pleasant meal, a day's boating or a trip to the cinema provided huge contrast to their lives in the trenches. A "day-off" was a welcome treat but all the while it was in the knowledge that soon, all too soon, they would return to the death and destruction of combat.

We've come to realise that a diary entry of "fairly quiet" or "nothing much happened today" probably meant anything but that and were almost certainly relative expressions in the context of the most extraordinary circumstances.



Similarly to dad, mum rarely talked about the war. Understandably, she was probably still traumatised at the memory of the uncertainty and waiting to be told the worst possible news. She knew dad had to do his duty; she also had to remain strong and maintain a home for Shirley in times of rationing and hardship. Whilst this book is primarily about dad's story, we want to ensure we acknowledge and remember what those left behind went through during those dreadful years. For dad and his pals, the letters sent from home were one of life's few pleasures at the time. He frequently talks about waiting for letters, receiving post or writing home in his memoirs. Hearing from loved ones meant everything when family, and life back in Bristol consumed his first thoughts when waking in the morning and his last at night.

We have known about dad's World War II diaries for a number of years and we've always wanted to share his story. Dad's handwriting wasn't always the easiest to decipher so a few years back we typed out his diary entries word-for-word.

Now we've decided to add a little more context and tell you about the man behind the stories.

It is also important to recognise that 2019 marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War II and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landings. Perhaps more appropriately, next year we will commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The timing just feels right but most of all, we believe our Dad deserves to have his incredible story recounted. The diaries give first-hand accounts of the sights, sounds and smells of his time in battle in North Africa and Western Europe. It's a story of unquestionable bravery and extraordinary sacrifice from a generation of young men. The diary covers the period from 1941-1944 and each entry has been copied without alteration to ensure we have maintained its authenticity. We have also included a selection of photographs – many of which were taken by dad – to further bring the words to life.

We hope you find his story as compelling and inspirational as we do.

Stephanie Williams and Lyn Channing

(Stephen Henry Baker's youngest daughters)

## "Do you miss me much?": March 1941-December 1941

*A note from Stephanie and Lyn:*

*The diary entries you are about to read have been copied from original tattered notes written by our father, Stephen Henry Baker, on the stated dates. They cover the period from March 1941 to June 1944 and offer a first-hand insight to life during World War II.*

### Friday 23 May 1941

Telegram this morning whilst still in bed - recall! Well it was very sad, and I rushed away from home feeling very, very unhappy. Arrived at Woolwich to find that the emergency had passed, and it was a false alarm.

### 24 May 1941

Still at the depot feeling low - had a few drinks but not many, went to the cinema.

### 25 May

Went to Richmond, one of the few places I have not been disappointed in, green trees, lovely river scenery. Stayed at Exiles Club, went to a party and missed last train - stayed at Richmond.

### 26 May

Still no news of move, went for route march and later to cinema.

### 27 May

No change. Have seen all the pictures here - had mushrooms on toast at "Super Cinema".

### 28 May

Rumours at last, last minute packing.

### 29th May

Still waiting for order to go.

### 30 May

Went to the pictures at Leigh Green.

### Saturday 31 May 1941

Went to the pictures at Eltham, received a lovely dressing gown from Phyllis. Went to bed after eating hot dogs with Paddy Ryan.

### 1st June 1941

After a day-long wait, we moved off in coaches to the station. A long and tiresome journey all through England and into Scotland. Went on board the "Orbita" in the morning.

### 2nd June

Fixed up cabin with Alec Bonyage and took stock.

### 3rd June

The washing water is salty and makes washing difficult. Shaving is a torment, but we will get used to it.

### 4th June

Put to sea, we were protected by a mighty force of famous fighting ships. Saw my homeland slipping by and stayed on deck until dark.

### 5th June

Wind rising, ship rising and falling with long easy motion. Food not very good on board.

### 6th June

High wind, high seas, not feeling too good, not seasick but not far from it! My bath water was swishing about.

### 7th June

Still rough, still eating, had concert in evening, very good.

### 8th 9th 10th June

At sea and steaming south. Saw flying fish for the first time today.

### 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, June

At sea and getting warmer. Spend a lot of time on deck playing tennis or watching other ships in convoy.

### 15th June

First sight of Africa; green mountains rising into mists, evil looking, steaming swamps, low-verandaed houses. The troops threw pennies to natives who dived to retrieve them. Saw the Southern Cross stars last night.

### 16th June

Caught a large catfish, thought it was a shark at first - gave it to a native.

### 17th June

Terrific monsoon storm, troops stripped and bathed in rain. Nights very hot, just lie on bed and sweat.

### 18th June

Natives doing a roaring trade, even monkeys on sale. Very, very hot.

### 19th June

Goodbye to western Africa - all in high spirits - had another concert in the evening.

### 20th June 1941

Feel browned off. A storm brewing but it is a little cooler, thank heavens!

### 21st June

At sea - stormy. High wind.

### 22nd June

No land in sight, choppy sea.

### 23rd June

Thoughts of home. Had submarine warning and spent part of the night on deck with life-jacket on feeling very unhappy.

### 24th June

Still steaming south.

### 25th June 1941

Inoculated again, not too bad.

### 26th June

Oer! What a sea! The ships are pitching, and their props are coming out of the water.

### 27th - 28th June

Not sea sick but \*\*\*\* near it.

### 29th June

Sea abating after a very uncomfortable time. Saw several albatrosses, wingspan 15 feet.

### 30th June

Nice day, feel fine, wrote letters home.

### 1st July 1941

Saw land looming in distance, it came closer and closer. Yes! it is Table Mountain and with its tablecloth on. A whale came near this morning, but I only saw the vapour.

### 2nd July

Had a few drinks with ADD must do something - must have had too much!!

### 3rd July

Early this morning land was again sighted, and we guessed we were putting in at Durban. The shoreline rapidly came clearly into view and it seemed wonderful to see the beautiful buildings standing up like sky-scrapers - excitement was intense. We landed late in afternoon and the townspeople of Durban treated us like heroes, free rides on buses etc. and hundreds of cars waiting to take Tommies out riding. Went to country club and had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell at their hotel.

### 4th July

Left the boat for Clairwood racecourse to camp for few days. Nice place, good food.

### 5th July

Went for an evening stroll and was taken for motor ride to Isipingo - a nice seaside resort. Mr Turbie was the host and I met a very rich friend of his. Had tea with them.

### 6th July

Spent the day in camp and went into Durban at night. Saw a signpost which intrigued me - it read "To Zululand".

### 7th July

Mr. Mitchell offered to take Paddy and me to the beauty spot today and in company of Mr. and Mrs. and daughters we went. Out of Durban towards Zululand. Saw Zulu Kraal, went to the "Valley of the Thousand Hills", it was very nice. Bananas growing, sugar, sweet spuds and monkeys. Had tea at a roadside cafe that was very English and reminded me of home and so back to Ocean View Hotel to have dinner with the host and hostess once more.

### 8th July

Walk over the country, took snap eating sugarcane - most amusing. All the troops tell stories of how well they are treated. Into town in evening and to pictures after a very nice meal.

### 9th July

Went early into town, bought a few things back to camp and visited racecourse.

### 10th July

Was tired so stayed in camp, wrote to Phyllis. Very mild weather - am serenaded by huge grasshoppers, there are also other insect sounds I cannot identify. I forgot to mention on the 7th about the animal "King". On the other side of the Kloof near Petermarytheng there is an old man who tends wounded birds and animals until they are again fit to fly or walk away. The patients are brought in by native children who regard him as a saint. He had a small deer in a cage waiting for a damaged paw to mend. A flock of birds like herons are flying round and are wheeling and swooping low over the camp. At the racecourse there is a beautiful collection of plants, some bushes are flowerless but possess lovely leaves - others are all blooms. Animals are rare but snakes abound. We leave on the morrow and my feelings are mixed.

### 11th July 1941

Went on board this morning and said farewell to Durban. Tall buildings slipping past, crowds cheering and shouting "good luck", "come back again". Fussy tugs pull us into mid-stream and toot goodbye. The larger ships answer in a most sedate manner and glide away. We slow down offshore and a ladder is lowered for the pilot who descends into the plunging pilot boat, off with the ropes and our last link is severed. Goodbye Durban, thousands of lonely soldiers bear happy memories of your welcome.

### 12th - 22nd July 1941

From warm weather into tropical heat, up through the Red Sea (it ought to be Red Hot Sea!) and here we are at Suez, sink of the world. We landed at Tewfife and by rail to Cairo over a bleak desert. Not a blade of grass to be seen.

### 23rd July

Base camp Almalya Heliopolis, just on desert fringe. Went into Cairo by very fast rail car, not impressed by my first view of this great city.

#### 24th July

We were told today that we would stay until sent for by battery needing replacement officers!  
What a dump!

#### 25th July

Had to do duty this morning, it's very hot and I am drinking much lemonade.

#### 26th July

Went into town and had view of the Nile, why blue? It's a dirty brown. Some very smart buildings.

#### 27th July

Phew! It's hot, the sweat just pours out of us new boys fresh from the leafy lanes of Britain!  
The days pass alright, but I feel lonely at night.

#### 28th July

Hot wind, Khamsin, this hot wind is like the blast that rushes out of the oven when the door is opened to see if a cake is done.

#### 29th July

The wind is still blowing making the sand rise in great columns known as dust devils. Went to an open-air picture show. The streets are crowded with soldiers all looking a little disappointed.

#### 30th July

Hurrah! Am off with Dudley [Davis] - both posted to the same battery - we go tomorrow to some place that sounds familiar - Aboukir.



### 31st July

When the time came to leave for the station, Dudley was drinking in the Mess and it was one hell of a job getting him away. What fun catching the train; we had to hire an army of natives to carry our many pieces of luggage and we were dumped on a train - the wrong one! We had to find the right one and drive our retinue to it. Halfway our train caught fire and being without "communication cords" the driver was informed by natives shouting through windows. We arrived at last and piled out onto the station. Dudley got a message to the new Battery and we went off to cabaret and ate. We also drank and when, dusty and dishevelled, we met the Battery Commander, he said "You must need a drink!"

### 1st August 1941

New war station at Fort El Burg Aboukir, the sea is on both sides of the camp and it looks good. Raid at night!

### 2nd August

I seem to have struck lucky with my new site. Officers George Fairweather, Bill Bebbington, and we swim each day and the water is warm. The village of Aboukir is a few hundred yards away and it looks good from the distance, complete with minarets. It was in this bay that Nelson won the Battle of the Nile.

### 3rd August

Raid tonight, but after the "blitz" in England it seems quite mild.

### 4th August

Went to the local native cemetery today. There is a little mosque there and inside it the local saint sits embalmed. He can be seen by climbing up the outer wall. All round the room are little ship models, this is the local way of pleasing the gods. The mayor told me to be careful not to upset the natives.

### 5th August

Went into the village - it stinks! Much roads, tumbledown houses and a shiny ARP fire engine.

### 6th August

Feel a little depressed, I suppose it is the reaction setting in, swam in The Med.

### 7th August

A large batch of mail arrived for troops but none for me, it seems ages since I left home and feel very much out of touch.

### 8th August

A bit cooler, a big inspection. I arranged to go fishing or swimming with Dudley but went to Alex instead. A very nice city with modern shops and nice cinemas. A raid warning sounded during our return and as is the custom, all traffic stopped!

### 9th August

Wrote home today, had swim.

### 10th August

Went to church service and rather enjoyed it. It brought back memories.

### 11th August

Feel a bit queer, it is quite usual to have dysentery in a mild form called "Gippy Tummy" and I think I have it coming.

### 12th August

The "back door trot" - not funny!

### 13th August

No better, am staying in bed.

### 14th August

Got up and had walk around bay. An old man was fishing with a cast net and was doing well. Met an officer in the local boat club and had tea.

15th August

Up early, feel groggy, went to bed early.

16th August

Feel very ill, in bed still and still 'running'.

17th August

The service came floating in this morning and so did Dudley to see me.

18th August

Feel easier, position consolidated - must get up tomorrow.

19th August

Started routine but nearly collapsed and was taken to hospital!

20th August

Very much under the weather!

21st August

Still poorly am being well looked after.

22nd August

Feel better and would like to be up.

23rd August

Still in bed, the staff are very kind.

24th August

Much better - sat up and wrote letter.

25th August

Up for two hours, feel weak.

26th August

Half day up, met a fellow from Tobruk.

27th August

Left hospital. Feel much weaker than I imagined, in fact I wanted to go to bed on arrival back at the gun site!

28th August

A slight relapse. Might have to go back to hospital! Sent snaps home.

29th August

Not eating, not caring much. Feel very weak and low spirited, still in bed.

30th August

Feel better, good! But very weak.

31st August

Still improving, raids at night but not too bad!

1st September 1941

Had cable from Phyllis, first one! Good!

2nd September

Went to Alex to a cinema show, made me very tired and was glad to reach site.

### 3rd September

Much better, bought Bovril to build my strength up. I have not felt so weak for years.

### 4th September

Wrote again, no mail.

### 5th September

Had a look over Fort El Burg, it is near our site, still in good order and well built, old Turkish, French, English.

### 6th September

Took party to Aboukir shooting range - quite a busy interesting day.

### 7th September

Am working hard again now, am much happier.

### 8th September - Phyllis's birthday

Still no mail, it will come one day!

### 9th September

Had the day off. Met Mac and Dudley and had a drink. It went to my head owing to illness. Arrived back on site with a cactus plant.

### 10th September

Tried to write but could get no inspiration.

### 11th September

It is getting cooler in the mornings and evenings now. "Winter" must be approaching.

### 12th September

Wrote home, received letter from Phyllis and Pa - feel very happy about it.

### 13th September

There are rumours afoot, we are moving - I wonder where?

### 14th September

We received marching orders. Had lunch at private house in Alex. It was served Turkish style - corn on the cob, stuffed vegetables, chicken, mangoes. Very kwayyis! (good).

### 15th September

Road to Transit Camp Amirya. Saw the Salt Lake Mariut, a vast pool of pink water with salt edged banks.

### 16th September

Just sand and stones and tents.

### 17th September

There are rumours of Tobruk! We all feel very excited.

### 18th September

Last minute packing and sorting out of kit. I have heard about this place, dive-bombing, shelling - cool!

### 19th September

We are waiting for final orders and would like to be gone.

### 20th September

Everyone knows where we are going and treat us as though we were going to our doom!

### 21st September

We move at dawn tomorrow. Sent spare kit to Cooks, goodbye to that for a while.

### 22nd September

In the cold grey dawn, we went on board destroyers; silent and thoughtful but not depressed. I had breakfast on board, herrings warmed up. It was fun when we started but the motion of the ship, and the herrings I was foolish enough to eat, upset me. There was a W.C. handy to the wardroom and I shared this with a Captain of the East Yorks. who was in the same case as myself. He went in and I came out, five hundred miles we travelled, and I vomited nearly all the way. 100 miles from our destination we were bombed but with no damage to our speedy ships. I was not really caring about bombs anyway. At about ten in the evening the motion of the ship eased, and someone told me we were in harbour. Oh, what joy! I staggered off the Jaguar and set foot on the soil of Tobruk. It was a quiet night and we "en bussed" without incident and drove out to our gun sites. We seemed to drive for ages and with others I was afraid we were going right into the enemy's open arms, but we stopped at last and crept into holes in the ground which were to be our homes. I slept!

### 23rd September

A batman brought me some very salty tea this morning, they say we shall soon get used to it. I was anxious to go outside the dugout and see the surroundings and to answer a call of nature. This was done by sitting on a soap box and feeling rather self-conscious. From this position I look round, I was disappointed, we were in a large, brown, hot saucer, hills to our South and the sea North. I sat and looked at the crashed plane that spoke of former battles, suddenly there was a whistle and the earth under the escarpment spouted up, I was startled and hurriedly finished my business and sought the dugout. The battery we relieved were anxious to be away. They said, "don't stand about in groups of more than two, be careful with the water ration, when the Stukas come, fire with everything you have. Goodbye and good luck!" Well they deserved a rest and I saw one of their men was pointing out the cemetery where the casualties were buried. They went off waving to us and perhaps thinking of their boys who would not be going out with them.

### 24th September

Well! it seems to be the Jerry's practice to fire shells over just about breakfast time. I have discovered that he is not firing at me personally and I feel a little happier. The guns are buried right down to ground level and none of the "bivvies" are above the sand. So far things have been fairly quiet, and we still have to break the silence!

### 25th September

The most unpopular gun over the way is "Bardia Bill". He fires big stuff into the town, usually at dawn and dusk. Settling in quite well, fairly quiet.

### 26th September

Walk round with Jerry Mitson. We found thousands of rounds of Italian ammunition, old bayonets etc. and haversacks. The food is very good, but the water is scarce and vile. Trained a little.

### 27th September

Still not used to life here yet, old timers are called "Desert Rats" and no wonder.

### 28th September

Had a marvellous swim. It was warm and the beach was very nice. Returning to the site, a sandstorm started blowing and I was thick with dust before getting back.

### 29th September

Time is flying, we have plenty to do, though there is little to see.

### 30th September

Last day of September, thought of home and felt lonely.

### 1st October 1941

A brand-new month, I wonder what will happen in it? This is the nearest we have been to the Hun and we still can't believe he is just over the hill. Anyway, there is little happening.

### 2nd October

Well we fired to our hearts content. First time we have seen enemy planes so close for a long time.



### 3rd October

Swam again. The water is as clear as crystal. It's great fun diving to the bottom and looking around, it reminds me of books I have read.

### 4th October

Fairly quiet day but what a night! It was terrific.

### 5th October

It is the custom to take two guns out to forward positions at dusk each night and it was my turn tonight. We got the guns in action and put our beds down under the stars.

### 6th October

Early this morning we went back to the day position, feeling very tired. Evening - there is fighting going on at the perimeter. The guns are throbbing and the machine guns chattering, the dust trickles down the dugout wall through the vibration. I feel like some actor in "Journeys End".

### 7th October

More raids; when a plane comes over, everyone fires for it is bound to be hostile. There are no friendly planes in the area!

### 8th October

The Stukas dive-bombed the field guns this morning - we did some good shooting. The bomb bursts were tremendous, and a great black pall hung over the place for some time, someone thought we were being attacked and put up a protective barrage over us. This frightened us more than the bombing!

### 9th October

We wondered if the Stukas would come again, they did! It was the field guns again.

### 10th October

Saw a mirage with my own eyes. It looked like blue water and even through glasses looked real.

### 11th October

A link with home, swallows! They rested here on their way to better climes. The ride to the bathing beach is awful! The "road" is a mere track and is paved with rocks the size of a football. There are great ridges too and one gets thrown from side to side. This evening, I had some mail! Good! The guns have been having a duel all day long and this evening Bardia Bill dropped a few much too close for comfort but nothing worse than smoke hit us.

### 12th October

Had the afternoon off and went for a walk towards the perimeter. It was a quiet day, and nothing happened. It was just open desert plain leading to low hills which were in enemy hands. I could see the enemy OPs quite easily. As I write, Bardia Bill is shelling, the gun flash and bang can be heard or seen rather followed by the whine of the heavy shell, nearer and nearer it roars and then, CRRUMP! and trickles of sand run down the dugout walls. In this dugout alone, I feel the distance from home very keenly. Raids at night and a continuous thunder of gunfire.

### 13th October

Woke this morning to find the dugout filled with what I first took to be smoke but was in fact fine sand being blown in through the doorway. It was a sandstorm, a real picture storm. It doesn't show at the pictures how the sand gets in hair, eyes, bed, clothes, tea, food, in fact everywhere. On the screen too the storm lasts two minutes but here it goes on all day, leaving everyone gasping and worn out. As I write this, two men come to the doorway and shout "Hey mate, where is No.10?" When they recognise my voice, they say, "sorry sir, we are lost" and stumble away in the storm. Two men are missing, they have been away since 1000 hrs, they only had to walk 50 yards but lost themselves. Later - The men have returned during the evening lull. They have been away in the storm for 7 hours and are exhausted. The tea tonight was a farce - I had to let my cup settle for some time and then drink the top layer. The food was OK - straight from tins!

#### 14th October

During the night the storm eased off, but I was awakened by heavy shells. They were not meant for us, so off to sleep again. Breakfast - Fried peas and bacon. Shaved in half a cupful of water and then poured remains on sponge. This my only "bath" had to last all day.

Whilst walking on the 12th, I found the ruins of a house. The tide of battle had passed and had left a mere heap of stones, but the garden was still there. No grass, but green cactus, and a few wildflowers. There were also remains of fig trees. At dusk our guns were taken to the night positions and moved out business-like in a swirl of dust.

#### 15th October

Went off on M/C to visit the other half of the Battery who are on the northern side of Tobruk Harbour. The road was bad, and I regretted the start. I was nearly shaken to pieces. Found them a little subdued. They had a direct hit last night and lost some gunners. Spent the evening miserably alone in the dugout.

#### 16th October

Fairly quiet. Light gunfire from front. Went off in evening with two guns and spent the night in the desert. Back in the morning.

#### 17th October

Sandstorm today - but not too bad. Stood outside in the evening and watched enemy guns firing.

#### 18th October

Went into Tobruk to scrounge timber. Reached the town itself and went into the yard. Suddenly, a whistle smote my ear and out of the corner of my eye I saw the Aussie soldier near the gate running. Without knowing why, I ran too! Just blindly and then as the shell passed and burst away from our party, I felt ashamed of fear. Was just laughing about it when another came closer and I measured my length - sorted things out and withdrew my party to safer areas. Saw a wrecked Italian children's school, near tiny wrecked desks lay little wooden rifles.

### 19th October

Went out with guns and had a busy night.

### 20th October

Saw a spider that measured three inches across, it had a beak just like a bird. Heard a noise under my pillow and on looking found a mouse! Lunch – sandcakes (a mixture known only to the cooks!), cheese and biscuits, and salty tea.

### 21st October

Stukas attacked the field guns today, great bomb bursts and clouds of dust. Walked over to the nearby cemetery. Quite a number of graves, no flowers, not a blade of grass, many of the graves were surmounted by hand-made crosses and all were well kept. Another Stuka raid whilst walking and took cover. After the raid, I found my shelter was a pile of abandoned bombs!

### 22nd October

For a change, it is quiet, it seems wrong to have no noise here.

### 23rd October

Plenty of action! Heard that our mail both ways had been lost, poor lads lost with it too. A plane dived out of the sun at us and I grabbed my machine gun. It jammed just as he pressed his trips, the bullets missed us, and he sheared off when the guns got going. My knees were weak after it was over.

### 24th October

Night's sleep last night for a change, only machine gunning. Swam again and walked back to the site. Had another brush with diving target and again gun failed. Dusk attack.

### 25th October

Getting colder nights, we have been issued with jerkins.

### 26th October

Quarrel with Dudley - it must be frayed nerves, but we settled differences. More Stukas - had a good crack at them.

### 27th October

High wind and sandstorm. Retired to the dugout and sealed the entrance with a blanket. Did this stop sand? Did it Hell! Dust had penetrated everything; a fine layer covers my bed. My nose is blocked, and I have to keep digging a kind of cement out of my eye corners. Outside, it is sheer torment. The wind rages, hot and withering, the rushing sand beats on exposed parts with stinging force. A few steps in any direction and it is almost certain that one gets lost. Blast it!

### 28th October

Last night the storm eased, and the opposing gunmen let fly! All night the guns fired and all morning. All sorts of rumours are flying about. "We are being relieved". The Navy is attacking from the sea. We went out too but by morning all was quiet.

### 29th October

Out in the desert again and back feeling very tired.

### 30th October

Dust storm again. It is dusk now and the enemy are shelling the ridge behind my dugout. I keep popping my head out to see the shells bursting and now and again "our side" replies. I am wondering if one will hit this flimsy roof.

### 31st October

Stukas attacked early this morning and there was heavy shelling. Fairly quiet night.

### 1st November 1941

A new month. We have lost all count of time or dates. It's a good job I keep these notes.

### 2nd November

Sausages this morning so it must be Sunday. Dust storm again and went to BHQ. Back very late and a good night's sleep.

### 3rd November

Very noisy day. The ridge near us is being shelled very heartily. A whine and a bang and a load of sand, no one seems to take any notice. The Padre came and held a service in the open air. Over his shoulder I could see the bursting shells. It didn't stop the service. Dugout making is interesting. The boys wait until a bomb blows a crater and then they dig it square, get a few sticks and a scrap of canvas and there you are.

### 4th November

Good night. Sandstorm this morning. The weather is cooler now 94o in shade. The men wear coats and jerkins in morning.

### 5th November

Red sky at dawn. We were out with section and the storm caught us out. It was midday before we got back covered with dust and "whacked". The sunset was glorious and was well worth seeing. Great masses of cloud tinged with red and gold, and in the darkening South the early evening gun flashes flickered. Two shells came our way, close enough to make me "scrunch" myself up a bit. It is Guy Fawkes night and around the perimeter defences the Very lights [coloured signal flares] are going up. The boys are in fine form.

### 6th November

Fairly quiet day. Intermittent firing in front. At night the Polish Brigade opened up on our right flank, it was terrific. I heard later that they used up a month's supply of ammo in one night. It was worth watching.

### 7th November

More sandstorms - getting me down.

### 8th November

Still sandstorms - it's even kept Jerry away.

### 9th November

Stukas today and Jerry planes played hide and seek with us, using the low cloud to creep in. Out with section and slept under the stars. Was awakened by biggest barrage yet. The whole perimeter was lit by flashes and the air throbbed like the inside of a drum. The Jerries must have their heads down, for nothing is coming back this way.

### 10th November

Up at four this morning and back with guns to day site. Lovely sun, no wind. Jerries over all day. We were out and firing at them almost continuously. They must be getting nervous.

### 11th November

Another hectic day and in the evening field batteries came in near us. We were firing nearly all night and drowned the field pieces with our louder crack. The tanks are stirring and there must be a "do" on.

### 12th November

The tanks went through us during the night. Heavy raids all day. Stukas were busy at the field guns. Less shelling. Tonight, I saw the best sunset I have ever seen. There were a few clouds about and as the sun disappeared below the escarpment, they were tinged with first yellow and then with all shades of red from pale pink to deep crimson. As a contrast the sky was blue and ranged from deep blue to ultramarine and almost green.

### 13th November

Heavy bombardment tonight to drive off tanks that attempted to break through.

### 14th November

Up early this morning in the cold dawn, back to day site and breakfast. Went out on a motorcycle towards the front line. Drove on until nerve failed me and then came back. Very uneventful.

### 15th November

A few reinforcements reached us today and they arrived during a shelling. The boys laughed to see them duck on hearing the whistle, but I have not forgotten my experience when the town was shelled. Very heavy shelling in this sector.

### 16th November

Another sandstorm. Fairly quiet.

### 17th November

Went to BHQ this afternoon and had tea. Left at night when it was pitch dark, the wind was blowing sand and I walked with my eyes closed for a moment or two and when I opened them, I realised I had gone off my bearing. The night was very dark, and my compass was not set, and it was in vain that I retraced my steps. It only made things worse. I decided to restart, reset compass at a guess and having done so off I went again. It was no use, from the rocky nature of the ground, it was obvious that something was wrong. I stumbled over a wire and decided to follow it to its source - it led me back to a chink of light - a dugout and on shouting out my unit number, I was greeted by a member of BHQ! I was at my starting point! Needless to say, I made sure that my course was set before setting out once again for the gun site.

### 18th November

A most unusual change in the weather - it rained during the night. The desert changed into wet brown and there were numerous pools. The pools dried quickly in the midday sun. We are due for several months of rainy weather here we have been told.

### 19th November

Out with guns and the nights are cold. Slept in trousers and shirt and jersey, ready for night alarms. It was raining when we were due to move and had to dress lying on my back, managed to get back without getting too wet. Had a "do" this afternoon. During a dust storm, two or three JU5Ls mistook our pitch for their aerodrome and tried to land. They were given a hot reception and two were destroyed. The stuff from the other guns plastered us.



### 20th November

All night long the guns thundered and during the night, several heavies burst near enough to make me pop my head under the blankets. There is a lot of activity and we believe the "push" has started. At midday, 3 very heavy shells landed near us and we were well "bracketed". A lot more burst beyond us and we were forced to withdraw one of our parties. Heavy raid at night.

### 21st November

The battle is on! All night the guns roared. The sky was lit as far as the eyes could see with white gun flashes and the duller glow of bursting shells. By morning, I had held my breath a dozen times, but mostly I have been a very interested spectator. Owing to dusty sand, the shell bursts are greatly magnified. During the night our latrine was the target. The news sounds good, but the firing is as intense as ever. Feel a bit seedy, a chill I think.

### 22nd November

Not as noisy today. A little shelling - few raids here but plenty near.

### 23rd November

Feel fit this morning. Streams of prisoners coming in. Ambulances crawling over cratered roads going dead slow. Much shooting at planes, no news of battle.

### 24th November

More prisoners! More shelling! More bombing! More crawling ambulances! We wince with each lurch in sympathy with the wounded lads inside. We shelled Axis motor transport on Trigh Cappuzzo and did very well. Corporal Roberts of the Queens Dragoons came in; he was badly shaken, his section was cut up, the "Jocks" went in and carried out their objective with heavy losses. Each time a man was hit he stuck his rifle into the ground, put his helmet on top and lay down. The first aid parties were able to find the men by means of this "drill". Heavy shooting for us at night. Up early, very tired.

#### 24th November

Early in the afternoon, I heard the noise of many planes and the alarm sounded. A flight of Stukas were returning from a raid on the field guns. They were escorted by 110s. Suddenly our boys appeared and sailed right into them, the Jerries tumbled out of the sky one after the other. I saw a Kitty Hawk get on the tail of a 110 and drive it right into the sea. I saw five go down, all enemy planes, good show! Bombed and shelled at night.

#### 25th November

Shot at ground targets again and did very well. Saw another dog fight but did not see the result. Later a plane circled round to land, it looked in trouble, it came in fast with wheels still up. We held our breath as the plane belly landed and careered across the desert. The prop hit the deck with a bang and the plane went up on its nose, plunged a few dozen yards and came to a standstill. The pilot clambered out, walked a few steps and collapsed. Help was soon given and that was that. Still shelling.

#### 27th November

It rained this morning and I was able to use my "Mac". I brought it from Bristol, and this is the first time I have used it to keep me dry. Sky full of planes. A flight of our planes went over and flying in formation with them was a 109! I wonder who discovered the error first!

#### 28th November

It rained again during night and our night shelters were just wet slimy pools. The mixture of rain and sand produced a sticky sort of porridge and the guns took some moving. We were tired and miserable when we returned to the site. Found a full-size football whilst walking to BHQ.

#### 29th November

A lot of action. We hit one JW88. The "road" seems to be open at last. Saw strings of captured guns and columns of prisoners. A N.Z. unit came in after a rough time and asked for ammunition, though they were tired and hungry. It appears that they lost a lot of their men and equipment at Sidi Rezegh. The withered gorse has been refreshed by the rainfall and now boasts a green sprinkling of leaves. Was surprised to find we were shelled during night by heavy guns.

### 30th November

Fairly quiet day. Bombs and shelling at night and I was once thinking it was all over. Cold bright day and I feel seedy. Was badly shaken when no less than 20 bombs dropped on our site during night raid!

### 1st December 1941

I am suffering from ringworms. Was watching shells bursting when suddenly one came wheeeeeeee! right over us and another just short - we took cover! Made us a bit nervous.

### 2nd December

Very heavy shelling. It appears that the Jerries have closed the "gap" and are launching a counter-offensive. The troops who were to march into our relief triumphantly, came in as a shattered remnant. The guns are quite close for my bed shakes when they are fired. Shells dropped near a party of POWs and didn't they scatter.

### 3rd December

Lay in bed this morning and felt the enemy guns shake the whole place. Heavy raids and we fired like blazes. Saw our planes dropping bombs and machine-gunning Jerries and Ities. Very good.

### 4th December

Very cold this morning. Awoke to the sounds of renewed battle. Another plane shot down near us this morning. We were raided thirty-one times during the day alone. Very tiring.

### 5th December

A little quieter, but a busy night, It rained again. We were up at 5 o'clock to find it raining hard. I folded my bedding and wrapped it in a ground sheet whilst still in my bivvy – a very awkward feat.

### 6th December

Still lots of noise and shelling. We can't form any opinion of the battle for the news is not reliable and no one knows anything. Another plane crashed near our site today. Very heavy raiding during the night. Dudley firing Vickers and I fired the Bren. The sky was filled with tracers and bursting shells, all round us, people fired rifles and some came very close!

### 7th December

Very busy day. Raids and shelling. During one raid, one No1 shouted to command post "One of my gunners has his arm off". I had noticed spurts of dust all round us kicked up by flying fragments and bullets but I thought we were all missed. The poor lad walked out of the gun pit, I left him to others and went to the rest of the wounded. Poor little Rogers was down in the sand gasping his life away, another man was writhing in a corner. Rogers died. The bombs could be seen quite plainly leaving the planes during these afternoon raids.

### 8th December

Raid after raid, all day long we have been in action, we had a terrific scrap - stones and sandbags flying through the air, dust and sand rising, spurts of flame and diving planes. Heard the Japs have started. Another night of raiding.

### 9th December

Feel very tired and worn out after long periods of action. Still more dive bombers and more to come. The dry shrubs here are beginning to show little sprouts of green. Small leaves too are shooting up between the stones, it looks quite odd to see leaves here.

### 10th December

Rain and sand!! At night raids!!

### 11th December

The shelling has stopped. The guns responsible were captured and today I saw one of them, our lorries towed them in! The sky was black with our planes today, a grand sight for us. Troops were rushing by asking "Where is the war?"

### 12th December

Fairly quiet. Raid at BHQ. Two bombs nearly wiped me out. I was badly shaken.

### 13th December

Nothing much to report. Waiting anxiously for mail. Plenty of movement. Went into Tobruk, town not changed much. One plane brought down last night, one hit tonight. I had a few moments of intense fear, but it passed. Several minutes of fierce action. Had good evening at BHQ.

### 14 December

Sausages were expected but did not turn up - great outcry! The missing bangers turned up for our evening meal. Another plane brought down tonight.

### 15th December

Dust storm today, one of the new arrivals was very shaken. Bit quieter today, shelling has eased off – what a relief after gunfire day and night. No more flares over the front line, no rattle of MG fire as a patrol does its stuff, hope it lasts! Our life is no easier.

### 16th December

Nice day, plenty of action, Mail arrived today. Saw a terrific plane crash. It, diving out of the sky, attracted our attention, then a great flash and cloud of smoke. Rushed to the scene but just fragments. British too! Ship attacked offshore saw it limping away on fire. Heavy raid at night.

### 17th December

Another plane down, it no longer has much effect. Days fairly quiet but nights frightening.

### 18th December

Went to El Adem today – a very interesting trip. Saw where our shelling came from, the gun pits were empty but evidence of occupation. There were many crashed German planes on and around the air strip. Also, Stukas that will not fly again. I saw positive results of our shelling and bombing, wrecked airfield buildings. Was sobered up a bit when several British crashed planes bore silent testimony to determined raids on the enemy. I picked up a charred envelope, inside was a girl's picture. Some of the letter was still legible, it read, "Do you miss me much?" I put it down and walked away saddened. Saw a plane come into land; it touched down alright, then with a sickening plunge, crashed with a tearing flash, then silence.

### 19th December

More crashes today, more enemy raids. Saw a tiny kangaroo rat with a long tail ending in a white tuft. Dudley drew his pistol and shot down the animal's burrow. I took a poor view because the deflecting bullet came very near me. I hope it got away! Very noisy night!

### 20th December

Seemed very quiet today. Mail arrived in afternoon.

### 21st December

More mail, quite a lot in fact.

### 22nd December

Very heavy raid last night but quieter by day. Went for a walk by the shore and through a wadi, saw wagtail near a puddle left by rain. More rain this afternoon, very light! More mail dated 1.12.41.

### 23rd December

Dawn start for Derna, road fairly good but monotonous. Saw wandering Arabs - Bedouins? Wanted to trade eggs for tobacco or tea, we had neither and eggs were whisked away to someone lucky enough to have the required commodities. Truck broke down 28 kilometres from anywhere and had to turn back. Unfortunately, the engine packed up completely. Found an ex-Italian light truck that would not start either. Had a lift back to the gun site and towed both trucks back. Saw a wandering tribe with their donkeys and camels.

### Wednesday 24th December 1941

Christmas Eve. Cheese for breakfast! Bully beef and biscuits for dinner! Bully for evening meal.

### Thursday 25th December - Christmas 1941

Scenery - desert, a bit browner than usual because of recent rain. A few hardy plants are trying to look green - some plants look as though they might flower, they have produced a stalk with seeds on top. Breakfast - one and a half tinned sausages, "soya links". Christmas Dinner - tinned herring, tea, bully beef! In spite of hard food, the boys were cheerful. I am afraid someone mixed my drinks.

#### 26th December - Boxing Day 1941

Moved today and what a day! It has been the worst day I have ever known, and that's saying something. The gun position is a rocky plateau, sand has been driving over in great clouds all day, disconsolate gunners have been arriving and working in driving sand and choking dust. The cooks struggled hard to do something with the bloody bully - and I mean it - they produced hot tea anyway. I wonder if the people at home have spared a thought for these boys to whom Christmas is just another day?

I expect so, I know someone thought of me.

#### 27th December

Not much left of old year. Just to show how fickle the weather can be, it rained today. Heavy rain this pm and feel very tired. Saw a burst in the sky that looked like a plane going up.

#### 28th December

Fairly quiet day - quite warm - view from present position good. The food is bully and bully but we try not to grumble. The burst in the sky last night was a plane.

#### 29th December

Had a ramble over a few wadis (ravines) today. At the bottom of one, saw grass for the first time for months, also a few bushes with the most beautiful leaves.

#### Tuesday, 30th December

Spent the day looking at the innards of the Italian bus we acquired, the "bitch" we call it. The cylinder head gasket is burned out! Don't suppose we can get a replacement. Had fresh meat today and an orange!

#### Wednesday 31st December

Last day of 1941. What a year it has been. At the beginning of the year, a new officer driven around Somerset; Spring, then Woolwich and loneliness. A long cruise and then heat. Egypt with Cairo and Alexandria, Aboukir and then Libya. Tobruk and all the trimmings! And now 1942, will it be home again? Saw the old year out as in the old custom. I did it in style firing tracer shots into the air from my Jerry rifle. The air was full of tracer and Very flares.

## **“I wonder if he lived.”: January 1942-June 1942**

### Thursday 1st January 1942

New Year's Day, went to bed this morning! Made a resolution not to make any resolutions. We had Christmas cake and pudding yesterday. This rich fare was too much and today feel bilious. Damn!

### Friday, 2nd January

It has rained a lot today. At night we had a pretty brisk attack. The usual quota of bombs fell near. I took a picture of the guns firing. Later at night was alarmed to hear water trickling into dugout, this rose to a roar and we went outside in trousers and a shirt to try and stop the flow. I tired of the game and turned in. ADD persevered - to no avail. Later it rained again and when I awoke it was to find the bed awash! Every time I turned, my behind splashed in muddy liquid. What a life!

### Saturday 3rd January

Cold today. The gun position is still waterlogged. We had a hit-and-run raid today. Our captured Iti truck will not start even after I spent a day on it. Took picture of nearby shell bursts.

### Sunday 4th January

Very mild for a change, was entertained at BHQ.

### Monday 5th January 1942

Just like a summer's day! Light raids. Climbed escarpment and had a fine view of Tobruk harbour. We have had a fireplace built in our dugout by our Bombadier builder, we are the envy of all visitors. Heavy raid at night during which one of our guns burst, the premature blew about five feet of the muzzle off.

### Tuesday 6th January

We got the SPA truck started at last. Fairly quiet (This means air raids are not directed at us!) Cold again. Mail arrived.



### Wednesday 7th January

What a blow, we had to return the SPA to the captured vehicle dump, so that's the end of that.

### Thursday 8th January

Lucky again, more mail. We had a football match. Walked to cemetery and took photo of Rogers' grave. I remember seeing row on row of open graves when we first buried Rogers. It seemed they were expecting some unfortunates. Now, after the recent push, they are all filled, and more dug and filled. Several bodies lay awaiting burial, covered with army blankets, some with their feet in their grey army socks gave me a sad feeling.

### Friday 9th January 1942

Fairly quiet. Tonight, I did a journey on motorbike after dark, blast bikes. I could not see track and got lost six times. The track was large loose stones and craters. I suppose it was good for the old liver.

### Saturday 10th January 1942

Had letter from Major Harvey. A shocking sandstorm blew up today. A heavy wooden table blown over by high wind, the sun was overshadowed. We kept our heads covered all day. One slight bonus, all guns and equipment have their canvas covers fitted and firing is impossible for both us and enemy. No planes can take off. After a sandstorm it's all hands to off canvas and clean out gun breeches and dust off ammunition.

### Sunday 11th January 1942

Just like old times, sausages! And not so welcome - another sandstorm.

### Monday 12th January 1942

Off early this morning on trip to Bardia, 150 kilometres, saw two German trucks that had been mined. Eight more Jerries will not see the Fatherland again. Saw dead camels, they had been used by the enemy to walk over the ground ahead in order to spring mines etc. I also saw camels wandering aimlessly about. The survivors, I suppose. When we reach Bardia, so recently recaptured, we had quite a day. We chose the ex-German hospital to sleep in, it was a bit gruesome, bloody uniforms etc. but we found the kitchen more or less intact, so we were able to cook our rations, such as they were. During the night I was continually awakened by a door banging. I had not slept in a building for six months and it felt strange. We moved on

after breakfast. We went right through the area of recent heavy fighting, German tanks and heavy guns and masses of battlefield debris with the usual temporary graves.

#### Tuesday 13th January

Back to gun position today, the countryside we travelled through was very monotonous, it all seems the same, the road more or less runs along or near the coast and seems to be endless. One of our gunners made me a short-wave radio from a crashed plane's radio, I heard the BBC news on it.

#### 14th January

Fairly quiet now. The battle has moved on, so all activity is airborne. Watched a fierce air battle.

#### 15th January

Getting milder now. Feel fed up and far from home. I suppose it's a reaction after weeks, no months, of heavy raids, shelling etc. Stormy night.

#### 16th January

Still stormy. Sand everywhere in eyes, mouths, ears and hair. It even gets in food and when we drink tea, we have to leave the last few mouthfuls because of the sand in it. Heavy raid last night. I saw about thirty bombs burst, some of them very close.

Saw a nasty sight this morning, one of our gunners had both hands blown off. I dressed his wounds, awkward job. Got him away to casualty clearing and went to have midday meal, it was lumps of bully swimming in greasy liquid! I settled for a few biscuits. Raids this afternoon. More mail. Days seem to drag.

#### 17th January

The mildest day yet. We shall soon be in shorts again. Food improving.

#### 18th January

Saw an old friend today, Laurence, passing through. The dust storms seem to be in a pattern. Reasonable morning then in afternoon wind rises and with it the dusty sand. The wind dies away at dusk.

### 19th January

Found a motorbike lying near my dugout. I guessed that the rider, becoming lost in the sandstorm, had left it there and gone for shelter. I rode it away for it was a captured machine and we help ourselves to such things. I was instructing a fitter to carry out a few repairs on it when up came a very worried DR! He had left his bike to find his way and returned to find it gone. So my bike was gone too! Had to go to the other side of Tobruk to collect ammo. On the way back heard a thumping noise, the truck driver looked at me and we both thought the truck was breaking down. Suddenly, a hundred yards away saw a string of bursting bombs, we realised we were in tricky position and stopped and took cover under the truck. Saw another stick of bombs and at same time remembered the load in the truck. Belted to side of road and sheltered behind a 40-gallon drum which was filled with rubble. Dust, stones, bomb splinters, explosions, bullets flying around like angry hornets. Then quiet.

We climbed back in truck, both badly shaken and started slowly on our way. A good job we did go slowly! A delayed action bomb went off in front of us, the smoke and dust made an enormous cloud - quite awe-inspiring - with the dull red flames shooting through the burst. My driver laughed and joked all the way back to our guns, we both did, it's the usual reaction to a lucky escape.

### 20th January

During a trip today we were descending a rather steep escarpment track when I spotted a route which looked better, I told the driver to take the road, he was driving yesterday's 4-ton Matador and the brakes could have been better. The track wound down and down, suddenly I saw a spot where a bomb had destroyed the causeway. There was a sheer drop one side and a steep bank the other. I shouted to the driver, but he had seen the danger and had braked. The lumbering monster reached the broken path and with a sickening lunge and lurch crossed the danger spot. The driver looked at me, grinned and said, "Almost as exciting as yesterday, sir". My answering grin was a sickly one.

### 21st January

Still sandstorming. The news states that this is the worst weather for ten years, I can quite believe it.

### 22nd January

Fairly quiet today, I met the new Battery Commander. This is the fourth since I arrived to this Regiment. Saw by my bank chit that Major Harvey had heard from me.

### 23rd January

Went for a walk across desert near our gun position. Nearing our destination, my companion, Lt Lister, stopped and said - "Listen!" There was no mistaking machine gun fire and we appeared to be the target! The whistling bullets kicked up spurts of sand all around us, buzzing like angry bees. The firing stopped for a moment then another burst, we ran like mad for the cover of some nearby rocks. What a nasty feeling.

### Saturday 24th January

Had tooth out today in Tobruk Hospital and three stoppings. In the evening had dinner at BHQ in order to meet, officially, new B. Commander.

### Sunday 25th January

Fairly quiet today - nice day. News a bit worrying, front line not holding well.

### Monday 26th January

Most amazing sandstorm I have ever known. At times the sky was blotted out with a brown pall. Visibility about one yard. This makes over eight days of continual storms.

### Tuesday 27th January

A day of heavy gales! As the day wore on the wind increased and the sandstorm was incredible. We thought we were used to these storms but each one seems worse than previously. This morning was struck on head and knocked out. Was carried into my dugout by worried gunners. Came round in a few minutes and took my position again. I expect am still suffering from effects of motorbike accident during training in North Yorkshire.

### Wednesday 28th January

Busy day, many raids in spite of storms. Raids continued during night.

### Thursday 29th January

Found a radiator for captured truck. Hope it will be running again soon.

### 30th January

Got the truck going well. Things are happening all around us but getting tired of writing about raids. Seems so routine, crashing guns, bursting shells, periods of boredom with periods of noise and fear.

### 31st January

Not much to write about. Usual night raid. Feel a bit fed up.

### 1st February 1942

A brand-new month, I don't seem to be writing much lately. The moon last night was the brightest I have ever seen; it was possible to see for miles.

### 2nd February

News still a bit gloomy. Quiet here.

### 3rd February

Moving gun positions today, don't much care for this rather exposed place. Hard rocky surface means more danger from splinters etc. Had to dispose of captured truck, easy - pushed it over cliff.

### 4th February

How the days go, how uncertain things are, news from other fronts bad, three days of gales!

### 5th February

Just another day.

### 6th February

During a raid tonight, a plane machine gunned nearby, and I saw the tracers hitting the rocks and bouncing in all directions.

### 7th February

Went inland today, passed the place where a German raid destroyed a huge stores dump, trucks still burning, some with fresh graves alongside, bullet holes in truck doors told their own story.

### 8th February 1942

Quite warm today, soon be wearing shorts again. Not many raids today. The enemy airfields have been pushed back a bit.

### 9th February

This morning Watson's batman rushed into dugout shouting "We are being Stuka'd". Being Englishmen both Watson and self rushed out to see the cause of alarm just in time to see the eggs fall. They were well away, and we were annoyed with the batman for his panic, but I remember digging him out of a collapsed dugout some time ago, so I suppose he is a bit nervous. We are so used to air raids now that we instinctively tell whether we are the target or not, when we are not, it's easy to feel brave.

### 10th February

Things must be getting desperate. We have had orders to do rifle practice. More raids.

### 11th February

Started to dig out an Italian gun. Heavy raid at night. During day raid saw a large bomb leave plane, hit the ground, bounce into air and burst, luckily far enough away.

### 12th February

Had another go at the Italian heavy gun. Started off in order, wheel came off due to rocky road, left it where it was and returned to battery for lunch. Just as lunch finished, the alarm went, Jerry came over in droves. The sky was alive with aircraft and the black bursts of flak with streams of Bofors tracers.

I am always nervous about what goes up must come down and feel the danger of a hit by a stray shot is very real. However, we brought two planes down. After the excitement, had another go at getting the Iti gun back. This time we did it.

### 13th February

A little chilly this morning. We all waited tensely for another attack. It came. Another roaring circus of planes, bombs, shells and whistling bullets and then another raid is over. These attacks cause great activity after the show is over. Ammunition to be restocked around guns, empties to be cleared. Gun barrels cleaned out and numbers of rounds fired entered in gun history sheets.

### 14th February

What we call a quiet day. Alarm caused "take post" to be ordered at least twenty times but no targets in range to us.

### 15th February 1942

More of the usual. During one raid several enemy planes came out of the sun (a method often used) but this time one of the more daring ones came right in at almost ground level! Very frightening.

### 16th February

Heavy attacks again. During an evening raid one plane dropped a beauty near. I heard a gunner say, "look there is a hand grenade coming". The silvery object came closer and closer, bigger and bigger. We watched petrified but it curved over us and burst far enough away.

### 17th February

Mail today.

### 18th February

Had to collect some transport and in doing so completely lost myself. Once you leave your own unit it all looks the same, dusty and rocky!

### 19th February

Hit a plane in mid-air! I rushed into dug out to get my camera, fell over and fell headlong on the floor. The two batmen thinking I was taking cover from something nasty, were terrified.

### 20<sup>th</sup> February

More rain today. Was invited to a meal at 13 HQ, idea is to give us officers at the sharp end a little rest. It helps, cigars, food and drink!

### 21<sup>st</sup> February

Heavy and concentrated raid by Stukas, how I hate and fear these planes. They dive so low and seem to be aiming at one personally. Thank goodness they don't stay long. Rained at night.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> February

The seventh day is the Sabbath and thou shalt keep it Holy! I wish the Huns would live up to the scriptures! We have been attacked from dawn to dusk, Stukas and JU88s. We did some good shooting against the Stukas and several were hit. After one raid, one of our light guns 20 mm was accidentally fired, the shell burst on the sandbags and just after I saw a gunner being carried out. I went over and to my relief he was only shocked.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> February

In and out to fire at raiders all day, one big difference there were plenty of our fighters about and they scored many successes. I saw several shot down into sea and one Stuka came into land not far from us, the pilot complained that he was shot at while forced landing. To people being attacked, if the enemy plane is still in the air it's a target! At night I fired at a plane and moments later searchlights picked up a plane falling on its side into the sea.

### 24<sup>th</sup> February

Woke up this morn with a layer of sand over my bed, another sandstorm! All day the storm raged, sand everywhere, eyes, ears, mouth, in the food and in the tea. A D.R. of mine who was sent with a message in the morning failed to return and against all protests, I set out on foot in search – in vain. He returned in the evening having been round and round in the desert in ever widening circles.

### 25<sup>th</sup> February

What a difference in the weather. Calm and sunny, just like a summer's day at home. Quiet, due to sand having to be cleared from guns and equipment; this applies to both sides and is the only good thing to thank the sandstorm for.



### 26<sup>th</sup> February

Eric went on leave, lucky blighter. Blasted sandstorm again and this time it did not stop Jerry from attacking. Mild by day, cold at night.

### 27<sup>th</sup> February

Mixture as before, raids seem to be increasing, a bad sign?

### 28<sup>th</sup> February

Saw a plane, one of ours, staggering home with a large hole in the fuselage. Even as we watched, pieces were tearing off and the plane started to fall. I feared I was about to see a tragedy I had seen so often, but no – a parachute appeared like a puff of white smoke and one more pilot was safe.

### Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> March 1942

Today we heard a low flying plane near us, too dusty to see it so stood by to engage it but were told by GOR it was one of ours lost, it landed safely quite close and we were able to feed the pilot and looked after him until the mist cleared and he took off for his home base.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> March

Moved gun position today, had to do it in stages in case of attack. Just settling in when low attacks in quick succession, very frightening!

### 3<sup>rd</sup> March

Dull dry, quiet for a change.

### 4<sup>th</sup> March

Had letter from Mother. Rained all day, not the usual heavy sudden squall, but honest to goodness rain. Still quiet. Tonight saw a glow from a huge fire, it lit up rain clouds. No idea what it was.

### 5<sup>th</sup> March

Just another day. Towards evening rained again, poured all night, our dug outs are not rainproof and during night roof leaked badly. Selected a dry corner but woke up in morning wet through.

### 6<sup>th</sup> March

Spent day drying out and as all quiet, drove to El Adem. Not long ago we could see German planes taking off from this airfield, they would then fly off into sun and attack us so that sun was in our eyes! We could hear planes diving but could not see them until last moment. Now this field is in our hands but still they come.

### 7<sup>th</sup> March

Nice sunny day, heavy raid on nearby harbour, all hell let loose! The bombers hit barges and these blazed furiously and threatened shipping. Naval launches pushed the flaming boats away, brave men! Later saw some burnt corpses in water.

### 8<sup>th</sup> March

Heavy raids today, I engaged low attackers with Vickers machine gun and fired one whole belt straight off. I saw the bombs leaving the planes, little silver dots, growing bigger and bigger, God! I was scared – then crash, what a relief no hits on us. No rest at night.

### 9<sup>th</sup> March

Only light raids today. Met an officer who had served in Bristol. Nice chat about home town.

### 10<sup>th</sup> March

Lovely day, very quiet. Went on sightseeing drive this evening, the Germans seem to have been driven well back. We are no longer in shellfire range, almost peaceful. We only have to cope with air attacks.

### 11<sup>th</sup> March

Still a lull. This gives our nerves time to settle down, continuous action is very wearing; it's not too bad when we are firing because we feel we are hitting back but waiting for an attack is nerve wracking.

### 12<sup>th</sup> March

This evening went for walk near harbour. We found a cave just vacated by a Jewish unit. This unit was ordered back, this is usually a sign that an enemy attack is expected. Had sinking feeling, what next? The fellows I was with threw a belt of machine gun ammunition on a fire where the troops had been burning unwanted gear. Sounded like a battle we had to dodge out of the way of whizzing bullets.

### 13<sup>th</sup> March

With a young officer just out, I went for a long walk taking lunch with us. The way we went along seashore, led through a huge wadi (valley) it was filled with beautiful flowers dropped as seeds by migrating birds and watered by recent rain. Saw a snake and a pair of falcons. Some of the flower patches we passed through were huge carpets of colour and the scent almost overpowering. Returned in evening very tired.

### 14<sup>th</sup> March

Much milder again today. Reasonably quiet, reasonably!

### 15<sup>th</sup> March

What a Sunday. Stukas again today, but weren't they upset. I saw an oil bomb hit the ground – wham! – what a blast.

### 16<sup>th</sup> March

More raids, not too bad though.

### 17<sup>th</sup> March

Visited another gun position today. Fairly quiet day. Walked back in cool of evening, nice cool sea breeze.

### 18<sup>th</sup> March

During a raid today a bullet whizzed by very close to me. After the action I found it in a sandbag right alongside where I had been standing.

### 19<sup>th</sup> March

Nice sunny day. Not much to write about, even the raids seem routine.

### 20<sup>th</sup> March

Plenty of action today. Sky full of enemy planes but nothing dropped near us. Received a visit from Sikh and Punjabi Officers, had very interesting talk. They said they did not envy our job. I don't expect I would like theirs – infantry.

### 21<sup>st</sup> March

Fairly quiet day. In evening saw two bombers struggling to get to our line, they were badly damaged and both crash-landed close to us. I keep a truck handy for picking up downed airmen and rescued them. Unfortunately, only the pilot was on one and only the pilot and air gunner on the other, the rest had bailed out over enemy positions. We fed them and we had interesting evening.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> March

Went out to rescue another downed airman and drove right into bomb crater, quite a shake-up.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> March

Again today another plane came in and belly landed near us. This time a heavy bomber, there were holes and gashes all over the fuselage and wings, the aircrew were safe and I did my rescue stunt again and we entertained them until the RAF collected them. Livens up things a little.

### 24<sup>th</sup> March

The most awful day, a gale with sand and dust. After a few hours I flopped out on my bed and stayed there until midnight when I just had strength to get in properly!

### 25<sup>th</sup> March

Celebrated better day with a hectic noisy action.

### 26<sup>th</sup> March

During a raid today, several Stukas picked us out as their target and dived straight for us. I must have been mad. I took a picture of them diving!

### 27<sup>th</sup> March

Heavy raids on harbour, a hospital ship, clearly marked was deliberately attacked, we were horrified and cheered when we saw all bombs miss.

### 28<sup>th</sup> March

Fairly quiet – fairly. This means we were not the target during the day's nastiness.

### 29<sup>th</sup> March

My leave is due but cannot go until Mac returns.

### 30<sup>th</sup> March

No sign of Mac yet – as I write he turned up. I shall be off tomorrow. Mac tells me leave convoys and later the trains are favourite targets for the enemy.

### 31<sup>st</sup> March

What a nice feeling. Away on first stage of long trip on leave. Went to Bardia and on to Fort Capuzzo. Slept "hard" (on ground) first night. Away at 6am then ex-trained in goods trucks for a long and boring drive over the Libyan and Egyptian desert. Over the wire frontier, not very impressed.

### 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1942

Still journeying and still in desert. Changed into decent carriages thank goodness. Stopped at midnight to change again in a wayside halt. Arrived Alexandria 5am very travel weary.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> April

We had to find our own rooms and had been given list of recommended hotels and managed to book a room at the Hotel Metropole, though tired, Dudley and self went to cinema and early to bed.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> April

Out shopping quite early. It was marvellous being able to walk along a busy street once more. People, buses, trams, most of the people are civilians but plenty of service types to be seen. Went to another cinema. The hotel is quite comfortable, but the other residents are Egyptians and other races and ignore us completely. We don't mind for we go out in morning and feed in the Officers Club or one of the other places set aside for those on leave, we don't go back to hotel until late at night.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> April

Met Mr Boa of the Eastern Telegraph Co. (We met him in Woolwich). He was kind enough to invite us to dinner and had first class meal followed by entertainment.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> April

Decided to go to Aboukir to visit whoever had taken over our old gunsite. They treated us like heroes and were fascinated by our stories of desert fighting. Left in an alcoholic daze. Awakened by heavy air raid which shook the hotel. Not amusing.

#### 7<sup>th</sup> April

Cinema again. In the evening returned the compliment to Andrew Boa. A drink before dinner, a nice meal then a show for which we had already booked seats. Then we drank and talked until midnight and then feeling hungry again, went to the Anglo Hellenic Club, drank some more and had another dinner. The string band were just going home but we pressed them to stay and though we were the only patrons, they played charming Russian airs most charmingly. The leader was Russian, so we all had vodka! Phew! It nearly had me. We asked for a favourite tune and they said they had just played it! I got to the hotel alright.

#### 8<sup>th</sup> April

Bought several books today. Went to railway to check train times. Time had changed and we had another day and night to spend. A bit depressed at thought of returning up the desert.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> April

Off very early. First part in proper railway carriages, then transferred to army trucks. Off away from civilisation and into desert. No roads, way marked by 50-gallon oil drums every 500 – 1000 yards or so. Dudley lost his kit due to the bumpy ride tossing his pack through gap in

cover and truck side. He blamed me for I was nearest. I felt bad about it for he lost his best shoes, torch, rail tickets, pipe and camera and other items. He barely spoke to me for rest of journey!

#### 10<sup>th</sup> April

Spent weary night at Mersa Matruk. This part of journey once again in goods railway trucks.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> April

At end of railway had to spend night at tented transit camp. Whilst eating evening meal, raid warning went, all the officers at the table stayed put, I was nervous but followed their example. Suddenly, there was a scream of a near one dropping. We all went under the table!

#### 12<sup>th</sup> April

All day long trucking over the rolling desert. We passed the scene of many of the recent battles. Sidi Rezegh, El Gobi, El Adem and so back to our station, the most famous spot of all.

#### 13<sup>th</sup> April

Back to old routine. Dudley got over his anger and he went off to GOR quite his normal self. Mac has found an old boat and wants me to help get it ready for launching. Good idea.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> April

Worked on the rowing boat today, weather fine and warm and no raids.

#### 15<sup>th</sup> April

Dudley tells me he lost even more than he realised at first. All his snaps since he left home, books, a bottle of whiskey and other irreplaceable oddments, he tells me he would rather not have gone on leave!

#### 16<sup>th</sup> April

After a struggle to get the boat to the beach we launched it and let it submerge to swell the dry planks.

#### 17<sup>th</sup> April

Not feeling too good, after leave blues and the effects of the Khamsin (sandstorms). This makes the atmosphere like an opened oven. In the coolest spot to be found the thermometer read 95F.

#### 18<sup>th</sup> April

Went to bathing beach and had swim – refreshing but rather rough. Didn't stay in long.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> April

Raid today just to wake us up. Had good shoot, felt we did very well! More raids later, warm weather.

#### 20<sup>th</sup> April

Ominous rumours and some units seem to be moving back. Went forward and saw a tank hit with HE shell, a bit too close for me so went back a bit. The enemy seems to be closing in once again but news is they are being held?

#### 21<sup>st</sup> April

Another airman down near us, he told us that airmen avoid our area for fear of being shot down by our guns. I told him it's not us! But the navy who shoot first and identify afterwards. Very warm. Brisk raid at night. Had long walk with Mac who seems to be getting very nervous.

#### 22<sup>nd</sup> April

Raids getting more frequent, indicating enemy occupying closer airfields. Air of uncertainty about.

#### 23<sup>rd</sup> April

Most awful day today. After a day of hot wind and sandstorms the weather improved – but only for an hour or so for the wind blew afresh from another quarter. The sand could be seen approaching from afar. It was like a huge black wall stretching as far as one could see. Then it hit us with a roar – hot wind and sand.



#### 24<sup>th</sup> April

Storm passes, had row in boat – a bit of a fiasco. The boat had been damaged in recent storm and we finished by swimming alongside and pushing boat ashore. It was nice swimming anyway.

#### 25<sup>th</sup> April

Heavy raids today, when will it end? Stukas came over and dived on us out of clouds. They seemed on top of us before we could engage, the bombs were seen quite plainly. During the action one of our gunners badly wounded, as I saw him carried off, I realised he had just returned after a long hospital stay. Nasty close raid at night, bombs so close we were showered with debris. Mac getting very nervous out here we call it being “bomb happy”!

#### 26<sup>th</sup> April

Took the boat out again, everyone thinks we are slightly mad, but I realise it takes Mac’s mind off the strain of continuous action. The boating was a disaster again. The wind was fresh and the rudder was missing, we were driven ashore half a dozen times, willing hands pushed us out again and we made the cove where we tied up. We were covered in tar (from repairs) and used a lot of petrol to clean off.

#### 27<sup>th</sup> April

Went visiting other troop of our battery. Very quiet for a change, not much of interest.

#### 28<sup>th</sup> April

During a raid today, a piece of shrapnel hit a gunner standing next to me, it required four stitches. We are always expecting this to happen for unders and overs from others shooting at attacking planes come whistling by us all the time. We have had several hit, but this was worse than usual.

#### 29<sup>th</sup> April

Medium sandstorm today, just a few ineffective raids.

#### 30<sup>th</sup> April

Khamsin! The worst yet. We always say after a sandstorm that it “was the worst yet” but they seem to increase in intensity. Quietened off in the evening so Mac and I went off for swim. In

later evening went across to Dudley and had dinner with him. He said he would much rather be on the gunsite than in the GOR building.

#### Friday 1<sup>st</sup> May 1942

Very peaceful today. Quite warm without being hot. Food today – breakfast: two sausages (soya) bread, marg. and a little marmalade. Lunch: Salmon, beef cubes, peas and tinned fruit. Dinner: roast fresh meat, baked and boiled potatoes, peas and tinned fruit. What a change now the siege is lifted. Feel rather poorly.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> May

Have a nasty chill. Feel very miserable. Thank goodness all quiet; the calm before the storm!

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> May

Had to stay in bed all day. Doc had a look at me and said I should live.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> May

Bit better. Started eating again.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> May

Able to take a little walk this morning. At about four in afternoon I received a very pleasant surprise – a visit from my old padre – the one we had at Gordano. He has recently arrived from England. How nice of him to look me up. Major Harvey had given him my Regiment number.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> May

Very little to write about. We are not supposed to keep a diary and that is why I am careful not to go into great detail, result boring repetition. I was near a wadi today and heard an insect chirping loudly on the far side, I climbed down and across, and it stopped and restarted on the other side. I gave up.

#### 7<sup>th</sup> May

Had visit from naval officer this morning. He was very impressed and told us it was his first trip ashore since joining, he was from a home shore establishment. Invited Mac and self

aboard this afternoon. We went and were met by the destroyer's motor launch. Piped aboard and entertained by the Commander etc. When time to leave, I fell back into wardroom and apologised to Commander, but he said he took it as a compliment to the Navy's hospitality! As we were leaving, heavy raid enabled us to see our guns in action from an unusual standpoint.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> May

Mac has spent the day in making a mousetrap out of celluloid and by 9 o'clock had caught 4 in it. He is too soft hearted and either lets them go or gets a gunner to drown them.

#### 10<sup>th</sup> May

Mac did even better in mousetrapping, caught 10! We had fish today. Saw some engineers tossing fused lengths of gelignite into the sea and up came stunned fish to surface. I was presented with a supply.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> May

Fairly quiet, the weather has improved of late.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> May

Still fairly quiet, this means hit and run raids, not pressed home.

#### 13<sup>th</sup> May

Swam today, it was lovely. In the evening we, Mac and I, went fishing with hand grenades, I tossed one in but very few fish came up, so we walked to a quieter cove. Mac had never thrown a grenade before and was very nervous. I walked a discreet distance away and Mac started his throw. The grenades spring action made Mac jump and he threw the thing away wildly. It landed at my feet, did I run! Luckily, it rolled off the edge into the water then BANG! We laughed later but it could have been curtains for me.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> May

Our boat is smashed, very sad – never mind, we will try again. Had a few drinks with Hallet of the CD.

### 15<sup>th</sup> May

Took a party rifle shooting. Met Corporal Roberts, he told me that one of his scout car crew was killed, it was the lad from Bedminster, we had a chat about Bristol where we met last.

### 16<sup>th</sup> May

Fairly quiet, rumours abound. Seems to be a flow of vehicles going the wrong way (away from enemy).

### 17<sup>th</sup> May

Still quiet. Night raid. Cold. A normal day. A cup of tea brought in by batman then dawn stand-to. Everything then checked, empties from night's firing cleared from guns, fresh ammunition brought up and unboxed. (Two to a box weighing about 1.5 cwts.). Gun boxes cleaned out and relined up with instruments; when all ready, breakfast. After breakfast gun crews line up near guns and are inspected, each section officer checks his men, guns ammunition and instruments. Then fatigues arranged, rations collected, water collected, sick parade held and sent off to Doc. Then lunch, after lunch work parties sent off for various tasks. Guns and instruments cleaned and checked. Then tea, all this is done between alarms when we have to take post and wait often for long periods for an attack which does not come. I've written this to describe what it's like on a quiet day. We have had as many as thirty attacks night or day and sometimes night and day.

### 18<sup>th</sup> May

Took a party rifle shooting again today. Quite cold.

### 19<sup>th</sup> May

Quiet day, had a football match. All the while a retreat seems to be developing. Rumble of German guns getting nearer.

### 20<sup>th</sup> May

Gunfire getting closer and seems to be now on two sides, cold and windy. All feeling very nervous.

### 21<sup>st</sup> May

Not so cold. Obvious signs of battle getting nearer, soon be in range of enemy guns.

#### 22<sup>nd</sup> May

Bathing in sea, not bad, party at BHQ in evening, everyone trying to forget forthcoming storm.

#### 23<sup>rd</sup> May

Heavy action this morning, two heavy planes – ours – came down near us, we sent the usual rescue party out, no use, both crews killed.

#### 24<sup>th</sup> May

Swam again, battle being fought near El Adem, we went there recently! Troops still falling back – many field ambulances.

#### Monday 25<sup>th</sup> May 1942

Raids all night. Very heavy up-firing all night, very tired, gunmen hardly leave guns. Enemy guns seem to be all round us!

#### 26<sup>th</sup> May

Battle now really on; guns thundering all day, heard that enemy attacks driven back from El Adem.

#### 27<sup>th</sup> May

Shot down another plane, couldn't miss, the sky was full of them.

#### 28<sup>th</sup> May

All our troops issued with extra rifle ammunition, to be carried at all times.

#### 29<sup>th</sup> May

Went forward to El Adem and saw results of previous days fighting. Burnt out tanks and damaged equipment of all sorts, ours and theirs. Was told that enemy regrouping for further attacks, reinforcements were coming up but there seems not much between them and us!

### 30<sup>th</sup> May

Lull in gunfire, as I write heavy shelling starts, battle evidently restarted.

### 31<sup>st</sup> May

Gunfire and shelling getting closer giving us a very depressed feeling.

### Monday 1<sup>st</sup> June 1942

All day long gunfire, the by-word here is – “seems to be getting closer”.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> June

Still rumble of gunfire, we are now getting used to it. Casualties now streaming in.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> June

Went down to harbour and was invited on board naval minesweeper trawler. Her commander was quite a character. He invited the pair of us to a drink of “Stuka Juice”. We tried a glass! He said that after a glass of it, no one cared how close the bombs dropped. He pointed out how thin the hull plating was and in fact he was having a bath on board when a bomb splinter came through the ship’s side and through the bath letting the water out! We did not stay long!

### 4<sup>th</sup> June

Germans now definitely closer! Life goes on in much the same way.

### 5<sup>th</sup> June

The main topic here now is the coming battle on our doorstep! So close now that the dugouts are shaking causing rivulets of dust to trickle down. At night we watch the gun flashes round the horizon.

### 6<sup>th</sup> June

All officers called to meeting, we were told to expect heavy push on or before the 13<sup>th</sup> (it would be!). We have to be prepared for parachute attacks. Feeling rather subdued.

### 7<sup>th</sup> June

No change. Our side evidently putting up a good resistance. The fighting seems to surge near and then fall back somewhat.

### 8<sup>th</sup> June

We had a most awful night – heavy raids, planes came over dropping flares, we were lit up like daylight, bombs, cannon shells, bullets, but still we are here. Mac very reluctant to come out of dugout. I'm frightened but there are only two of us with these four guns and the gunners near us in command post watch us closely, so try to set a good example.

### 9<sup>th</sup> June

A lull today, gives us time to sort ourselves out, sad to see streams of ambulances crawling past.

### 10<sup>th</sup> June

Another plane downed. A few rounds, racing engines, a flash and cloud of dust and another Jerry bites the dust.

### 11<sup>th</sup> June

The fighting surges near again – bombers and fighters fill the sky – columns of smoke and dust rising here and there, and gunfire is booming all around.

### 12<sup>th</sup> June

During a day raid we saw a Spitfire staggering back from beat up over enemy lines. Suddenly two Italian Macchi 202s came roaring up behind. We held our breath and fire for we might hit friendly plane. The Spitfire saw its opponents, whipped round and shot one Macchi down, the other broke away and we shot that one down. It came crashing down in flames. Seconds before it hit, the pilot bailed out. We did not think he could live but we went over to see. A few medics got there before us and under a shelter made from his own parachute lay the terribly injured pilot. Enemy or no, we felt sorry for him and he was bearing his wounds bravely. I wonder if he lived.

### 13<sup>th</sup> June

It's the dreaded 13<sup>th</sup> and the code word indicating imminent attack has not come through, everyone with his rifle and ammunition at all times, even when sat on 'desert roses' (latrine boxes).

### 14<sup>th</sup> June

Rumours are flying round, and everyone is in a state of nervous excitement.

### 15<sup>th</sup> June

Just offshore and out of range, a convoy was steaming by. A strong force of enemy bombers attacked, the destroyers with the convoy and the cargo ships put up a brave fight, the largest ship was hit repeatedly and burning, dropped out of line, blazing furiously, the skipper tried to make for shore but lost way. From the harbour a fleet of small launches and trawlers put out to the rescue, brave men all of them. Meanwhile, the convoy was on its way still under very heavy attack.

### 16<sup>th</sup> June

Now under very heavy shell fire. The code word has come through, we call the troops together and told them we were expecting attack by tanks, land forces, airborne troops and by sea. Extra ammo drawn, extra lookouts posted, all vehicles filled in case of movement order. We are surrounded.

### 17<sup>th</sup> June

Dudley, who is only a mile away, rang me early this morning and told me Germans were already in his building and they had been ordered to surrender to them. I could hardly credit this; my batman was captured as well, it was still dark and our battery was ordered to move out, fighting was going on all around us but we came out of action and were told that one track east was just open and could only be held for a short while. It was very scary – all hell was let loose. We got away by a hairsbreadth. It was still dark when we drove through a line of tanks and infantry holding the way open, we were the last away. We left behind several officers and men, a very sad experience.

### 18<sup>th</sup> June

Drove madly for hours. I drove part of the time. Fell asleep at the wheel, weeks of strain and continual action had taken their toll. Halted at last, the Colonel called the officers together



and told us that it was considered that our guns and equipment were so worn that they would not be able to stand up to another siege and newer and better equipped units were to take our place. We all felt we could have done better than anyone, worn out or no. We were near the sea, so all swam, it's the only way to get clean.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> June

We are in action again, we all feel a bit depressed, we didn't like the retreat – not one bit! Troops have been streaming back all day and night, it seems the line has been broken again.

#### 20<sup>th</sup> June

Very hot here, we have scrounged small tents and we put these over our slit trenches, the sand is soft and only a direct hit can damage us. At night a plane came machine-gunning down through the position. It came closer and for good measure, it gave a good bombing, no casualties.

#### 21<sup>st</sup> June

Once again, gunfire, shells bursting closer, yes, we're ordered back.

#### 22<sup>nd</sup> June

Part of a great retreating army. Some troops who have obviously been ordered to hold the Germans jeer as we pass through their lines. We don't blame them, though it grates a bit after all we have been through. Bet they won't do better!

#### 23<sup>rd</sup> June

Dug in quickly here! At night I was sleeping in my little bivvy tent when I heard a plane – very close. Yes it was gunning, streams of tracer came closer and closer, I thought it was the end but with a mighty roar the dark shape passed over leaving me shaking with fright.

#### 24<sup>th</sup> June

Rumours thick and fast, fighting troops streaming past, always a bad sign, all day long weary lads go back, and we know we won't be here long now. Enemy guns hammering away and shell bursts getting closer, just like a gathering storm.

### 25<sup>th</sup> June

Dug right in today, we have journeyed right across the Libyan desert, digging holes all the way, our boys are tired out but still game.

### 26<sup>th</sup> June

Orders to move came during darkness last night. There is something very frightening about an order to move during night, at daybreak during a halt, Lt. Bebbington had a near one, a bomb came so close it took his hat off as it passed him! It did not explode, and Bill 'B' did not wait to pick up his cap!

### 27<sup>th</sup> June

Reached what seemed to be a quiet spot and dug in once again. Told we would have to stay and defend 8<sup>th</sup> Army HQ. Went to nearby dump to collect sandbags and we were refused because we did not have right indent forms.

### 28<sup>th</sup> June

All the troops at the vast supply dump moved out leaving trucks, guns, food, petrol and acres of other stores to the enemy. Our lads went back to dump to get any items of interest, there were a number of huts containing rations etc and entering one hut, our lads found German soldiers also helping themselves. They looked at each other, then continued scrounging, neither side keen on starting anything, all this not a quarter of a mile from our position. Suddenly, an armoured scout car of the KDGs came up and told us that we were surrounded again and suggested we make a run for it. We left in a great hurry and leaving a lot of our gear behind, shot through!!

### 29<sup>th</sup> June

Very, very tired, started to dig in again, very warm.

### 30<sup>th</sup> June

Last day of the month, what a month! Since the 17<sup>th</sup> when I last spoke to Dudley, we have been moving back, halting, going into action, moving back again for hundreds of weary miles.

## **“Battle about to commence!”: July 1942-December 1942**

### Wednesday, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1942

Dug in again, there are signs that a line is to be held here, guns dug in all around, new anti-tank guns come up, tanks seen more in evidence. The RAF are bombing the positions we have just left.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> July

Curses, we have been pulled out of the line and moving back. After a long drive we have reached the edge of cultivation, natives are to be seen and as we approached a small town we wondered what our reception would be but they crowded the streets and as our guns rolled by, they cheered and clapped – we felt quite pleased.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> July

Halted and all of us just went to sleep under the trucks, all worn out and completely exhausted. Mid-morning, a General Officer congratulated us on our performance and told everyone would have three days of complete rest, no duties, nothing but food and rest. At 4 o'clock that same afternoon, we were ordered back again to take up positions near the Nile! So much for our rest!

### 4<sup>th</sup> July

New position again, now part of “Delta Force” which is supposed to hold Egypt if the Germans break through again.

### 5<sup>th</sup> July

Not bad on Nile bank, mosquitos spoil the comforts but cannot dig in thank goodness, just sandbag.

### 6<sup>th</sup> July

Another move, this time to a most awful spot, biting flies, rats, mice and every kind of pest you can think of, not to mention horrid smells!

### 7<sup>th</sup> July

Moved again! Back to Nile bank. Met the Chief of local village Hassein Ismail. I had coffee and he fed me sweet watermelon!

### 8<sup>th</sup> July

The countryside near here is flat and intersected by irrigation ditches, drains and canals, varying in size from English-type ditches to the Mahmoudi canal, a large waterway much used by dhows and similar craft. The roadways are not paved save the main road and are used by camels, donkeys and women, these last seem to carry the heaviest loads.

### 9<sup>th</sup> July

Must have been a market day near for families passed by, the women carrying great sacks and bundles and the men just riding donkeys. I saw one woman carrying a wooden plough on her head and again her husband riding on his donkey!

### 10<sup>th</sup> July

Went to the nearby town Tanta and went to cinema. The population almost entirely Egyptian unlike in the main cities Cairo and Alexandria where there are a mixture of races – Greek, Italian etc. The locals are quite friendly and do not pester us as much as the City types do. The picture was “They Made Her A Spy”, English with Arabic subtitles. The supporting picture was Egyptian, and I am afraid we laughed in the wrong places!

### 11<sup>th</sup> July

Getting used to this quiet life. Very hot, mosquitoes, flies, frogs, lizards and so on but it's better than cowering in a slit trench!

### 12<sup>th</sup> July

This evening the Chief of the local village sent his retinue along to invite one or more of us to a meal. I did not go but ‘Carrie’ a replacement officer went and said it was quite amusing.

### 13<sup>th</sup> July

The “retinue” (about 6 native servants) brought us a present of fish this morning and it was quite good. About midday another visit was paid by the locals and we mentioned we would like a goose or a duck and one was promised on the morrow.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> July

No poultry had arrived by mealtime and we had given up hope for it, then Fletcher, my new batman, came in and said "Excuse me sir, there is a procession outside" and when we went out (now enjoying the luxury of tents!) we saw a sight. First came the village headman, or 'Omada' then a string of servants all carrying portions of a huge meal – this was in response to our request for a goose!

#### 15<sup>th</sup> July

Still very quiet, life here is becoming boring. It must be a reaction after the intense nervous strain we have had during the past months. The line must be holding where we passed through recently, no more retreating troops but a steady flow back.

#### 16<sup>th</sup> July

Moved again, oh well we don't really mind. One gunner I heard saying "Join the Navy and see the World! Join the Army and dig the bloody thing up!"

#### 17<sup>th</sup> July

We are now near a very wide canal, there are branches of it used to irrigate the fields and on its placid waters sail large graceful dhows. The waters of the canal are used by the locals to bathe in, wash their clothes, throw in their rubbish including dead cows, donkeys, camels and dogs. We have been warned not to bathe in it and if we fall in accidentally, we have to report sick.

#### 18<sup>th</sup> July

This evening after a day of settling in a new position, Carrie and self went to the Sporting Club at Kafr el Zaiyat. We met several interesting people, mostly businessmen and so forth. A nice evening.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> July

Just another day.

### 20<sup>th</sup> July

Up early this morning. When I looked at the local scenery, it reminded me of England, but closer inspection gives a different impression. Still, there are green trees and cultivated plots but no fields.

### 21<sup>st</sup> July

This morning, a deputation came from the village of Dalqumun. All very friendly but I think we understood less of the Omada's conversation than he understood of ours.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> July

Off early this morning for a trip to Alexandria, not a very interesting journey, all the same scenery relieved only by the graceful sailing dhows which alone of the 'Eastern' sights have not failed to disappoint me. It was market day and again women, donkeys and camels carried the farm produce while the men rode in style. Alex was much the same as when I spent my leave here. Pictures and eating claimed most of my attention. Lunch at the "Petit Coin de France" was very good. Prawn mayonnaise, roast wild duck and trimmings, all well washed down. The return journey was during darkness and was a feat of endurance on the driver's part.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> July

Back to "work" this morning. It appeared the provincial Governor had asked to see one of our officers and I was ordered to attend. The guard on the Palace gate presented arms and I was conducted to the great man's presence. He made a mild protest at the price we were paying for local eggs and commented that it would cause inflated prices locally. It appears we were paying four times the true price. He invited me to coffee. The local Magistrate was there, and we had a very interesting talk. Later went to Tanta and noticed on the railway embankment the corpse of a water buffalo rotting in the sun. Yesterday two dead donkeys spoiled the view. I am beginning to recognise dead donkey smell so many are cast away.

### 24<sup>th</sup> July

Very quiet day, just routine drill etc.

### 25<sup>th</sup> July

Nothing to report, went to cinema at Tanta again. Could not read subtitles or understand speech!

### 26<sup>th</sup> July

Feeling a little worn out, had a trip into the interior of Egypt this afternoon. Not much different from the rest of this nearby countryside.

### 27<sup>th</sup> July

No mail since leaving Tobruk. Very hot, just routine work.

### 28<sup>th</sup> July

Weather warm and humid, several down with malaria. I have had a scratch on my neck turn septic. Very sore.

### 29<sup>th</sup> July

Went to Tanta to cinema once again then went to Sporting Club for supper. Omelette, tomatoes etc.

### 30<sup>th</sup> July

Mainly M.T. work today. The women in the nearby villages cover their faces when we appear. Seems queer to us.

### 31<sup>st</sup> July

Heard today I have to be prepared to go away on a course shortly. I won't mind! Anything for a change.

### Saturday, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1942

Well, well! Off to Cairo today. Hurried to railway station and just caught the train. Goodbye to Kafr el Zayat, hope battery has moved before I return to duty. Arrived at Cairo's main station and met an officer going on same course. He told me transport was being sent to collect us. He proved to be a good companion. Exactly a year ago, I was in this same station with Dudley!

### 2<sup>nd</sup> August

The course proved to be on all aspects of motor transport. The first day was for settling in. Learned that course was to last a month. Spent most of the day sightseeing (and drinking!) in Cairo, just 10 miles from where the course is held.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> August

Started classes this morning – hours 08.30 to 1300 – 1700 to 1900 hrs. Half day Thursday and Saturday, whole day off Sunday.

### 4<sup>th</sup> August

A lot of classwork and note taking to start with. Wrote home in evening.

### 5<sup>th</sup> August

Quite enjoyable today, food very good, stayed in this evening.

### 6<sup>th</sup> August

Went to Cairo this afternoon, very warm. Went to Groppi's and finally taxi to Mary's Club, cabaret etc. Back rather late in alcoholic haze.

### 7<sup>th</sup> August

Driving and instruction on tracked vehicles including driving Bren carriers over difficult course, very enjoyable.

### 8<sup>th</sup> August

Great fun today. Took vehicles to Cairo and staged accidents during which we had to direct traffic, make a written report, take names of witnesses etc. After lunch went to bank in Heliopolis then Sporting Club and a fine meal at Groppi's.

### 9<sup>th</sup> August

Ian Galloway, the fellow I met on the way here has a relation in Cairo and invited me to go to visit them with him. We were picked up by car and went first to Gezira Sporting Club, a very select place. Our hosts were Major and Mrs Wallace who then invited us to their flat where



they provided a first-class meal. We also met Mr and Mrs Pine there and they also invited us to dinner.

#### 10<sup>th</sup> August

Visit to Heliopolis Swimming Club this afternoon. Cinema in evening with Cyril Sherwood a friend of Ian's.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> August

Busy on course all day, too tired to go out in evening.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> August

Tired after day's coursework bed early in evening.

#### 13<sup>th</sup> August

Went to Gezira Club this afternoon, met Mrs Wallace and her daughter Eleanor and had tea with them. Spent the rest of the day with them and left late for camp. Had to taxi to station to catch train.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> August

Cyril went back to his unit today. A nice fellow, I was very pleased to have met him.

#### 15<sup>th</sup> August

We were going to see Pyramids today, but being lazy went to cinema instead, then Groppis for supper. What a life, compared with a few weeks ago, this is more like a holiday, good food, nice people, bright lights and a choice of entertainment.

#### 16<sup>th</sup> August

Major Wallace took us both to the Agricultural Museum today, what a splendid place, the gold room was full of ancient treasures. When it was suggested we visit this place, I was not keen, but I am glad we went. The place is closed for the duration (of the war) but Major Wallace knew the Director! After, we went to Ian's aunt for lunch, it was a gorgeous meal and one that I shall remember for a long time. After lunch, talked on various subjects then dinner with the Wallaces. A most enjoyable day.

### 17<sup>th</sup> August

A dull day after the enjoyable time yesterday, still the course is easy and enjoyable.

### 18<sup>th</sup> August

Nothing to report.

### 19<sup>th</sup> August

Swimming at the Gezira and tea later. Went to cinema and saw Jekyll and Hyde with Spencer Tracey. After the flick, went to Mrs Orr's had supper then 'home'.

### 20<sup>th</sup> August

Just work today then evening getting notes up together for inspection, no social life today.

### 21<sup>st</sup> August

Another working day.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> August

At last I have been to the Pyramids! I thought they were worth seeing but like a lot of other famous sights there is a feeling of anti-climax when you eventually get to them. We also had a close look at the Sphinx, again the many pictures of these monuments seem better than the actual items. Treated myself to a special haircut today, real beauty treatment. Went to Diana cinema and saw "So Ends Our Night". An air raid sounded while returning and all came to a standstill until midnight.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> August

Went to Heliopolis Hotel and had drinks, it was very pretty there, all the tables were out on the balcony and each one had a little shaded table lamp, the scene was very continental and peaceful.

### 24<sup>th</sup> August

Workday, getting towards end of course, not looking forward to return to soldiering. Rumours of an impending battle. Oh well, this easy interlude could not last.

### 25<sup>th</sup> August

To Cairo to cashier with Ian, very warm, had giant ice cream and soda at Groppis!

### 26<sup>th</sup> August

To Cairo again, this time to buy Ian a cap! His was rather battered and Mrs Wallace, his aunt, told him to try and get one like mine!

### 27<sup>th</sup> August

Confined to Barracks today, there is a lot of troop movement.

### 28<sup>th</sup> August

Still in! There is a battle on, at night we can hear the rumble of gunfire, they say it is about 60 miles away!

### 29<sup>th</sup> August

Finished course today, I did quite well! Able to go out again and we went to Gezira for a swim. Later cinema and the Wallace's. We were led into dining room and there, much to Ian's surprise, was a beautiful birthday cake – it was his birthday and they really put on a spread! It was a nice thought of his Aunt and Uncle and Ian was delighted. Back to camp, a little sadly – tomorrow brings the end of our stay here.

### 30<sup>th</sup> August

Off to Alexandria. I looked out of the train as we passed Kafr el Zayat and remembered my wish not to return there again. But it might be somewhere worse next destination. Had tea on the train, quite good. Late when the train arrived at Alex. Said goodbye to Ian and then went to Army Movements to see where I had to go. Was directed to BHQ where I spent what was left of the night. Had raid while I was there!

### 31<sup>st</sup> August

Went out to gun position this morning. While away, new guns, trucks and all equipment has been issued. They were glad to see me back, have been shorthanded. This place is between Alexandria and front line. Close to the sea and nice beach for swimming.

### Tuesday, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1942

Tried the swimming, quite good, there is an old dock here used by Lord Nelson and it makes nice deep water for diving.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> September

Oh dear, was in action last night against air raiders, not too bad.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> September

Settling down to well-known routine. Fairly quiet.

### 4<sup>th</sup> September

Took my first shoot since returning, others had gone off, so I was in sole charge. All went well, we drove off lone raider!

### 5<sup>th</sup> September

Much cooler here than Cairo, the battle sounds nearer here but we are well out of range of shelling, they must be holding the Germans for there is no sign of any units coming back, there is a steady flow forward.

### 6<sup>th</sup> September

Swam again today, could see the fish swimming in front of us and jumping, where did I see this before, I remember, Sollum!

### 7<sup>th</sup> September

Given afternoon off, went into Alexandria and went to cinema, saw "Lady Eve". In evening went to BHQ, from there in a party to Casino Chatley, from there to Union Club, from there

in CO's car to BHQ. Stayed at BHQ morning of 8<sup>th</sup> then headache and all back to gun position where I didn't want any food for rest of day.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> September

Had an 'Ensa' show, the star turn was "Alice Delysia" who proved to be very good, though older than I had imagined.

#### 10<sup>th</sup> September

Swimming again, routine work polishing up drill, lectures etc. Days are quiet but get a few night raids.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> September

In by myself all day and all night too, we are short-handed again and when one officer goes off for any reason, the other is left in sole charge. A bit lonely.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> September

Had afternoon off so went to town. Loose end so went to cinema, it was Pinocchio! Last time I saw it was with Dudley and now he is a POW!

#### 13<sup>th</sup> September

Swim in afternoon, holding the fort alone in the afternoon. We are short of officers, Dudley POW, Mac posted away.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> September

Quiet morning, had to attend lecture in afternoon. Had lunch at BHQ and high tea, pictures in evening "The Falcon Returns".

#### 15<sup>th</sup> September

My birthday, no one here knows but was delighted when a telegram arrived from Phyllis. Swam and fished in afternoon. Two of our officers from other Troop have gone on secret mission; supposed to be hush hush but everyone knows, when and where!

16<sup>th</sup> September

Still very quiet, Bill Bebbington is safe, he was not required on mission.

17<sup>th</sup> September

Nothing to write about, the mission seems to have gone badly wrong – Bill Barlow missing.

18<sup>th</sup> September

Saw some German 88s firing today, the shell bursts seemed quite small really, but it was fairly distant and not easy to judge.

19<sup>th</sup> September

Saw Andrew Boa today. He was pleased to see me, we last met in London. I was “A bit short” and he lent me two pounds!

20<sup>th</sup> September

Hear from Ian Galloway, he is in hospital, too bad!

21<sup>st</sup> September

Had more swimming today, highly amused by the fishes.

22<sup>nd</sup> September

Did shopping in Alexandria, this pleasant town is only a few miles away and any spare time I have, is only three quarters of an hour ride and we are in civilisation. Sent home some stockings and leather goods, bought a nice photo album.

23<sup>rd</sup> September

Had to go to 73<sup>rd</sup> Reg. today, had a busy time. We seem to be getting prepared for something.

### 24<sup>th</sup> September

Swimming, drilling but no excitement. Heard that Bill Barlow has got back safely from mission which failed with heavy losses.

### 25<sup>th</sup> September

German fighters over today. We fired at them but none down.

### 26<sup>th</sup> September

Nothing of note to write about.

### 27<sup>th</sup> September

Same as yesterday. Can't grumble, we get time off gunsite and the food is very good at the moment, eggs, fish, fruit, the meat is not very special.

### 28<sup>th</sup> September

Still nothing much happening.

### 29<sup>th</sup> September

Went to Sidi Bishr swimming today. Swam out to island and got stung by sea anemones. Arrived on shore covered in red patches all over my body! Smarted too!

### 30<sup>th</sup> September

Visited Ian Galloway who is now recovering at his HQ. They invited me to stay to dinner, left at 10 p.m. - very good entertainment.

### Friday 1<sup>st</sup> October 1942

A few new extra trucks arrived, and I checked and listed them. Another slight brush with 109s.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> October

What will happen this month? All day long, the army is going towards the front, they jeer at us as they pass our guns and shout “come and join us”. Some of them are fresh troops out of England, our lads shout back “go and get your knees brown”.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> October

Swimming in Nelson’s harbour and watched a few fellows diving off the high quayside – tried it myself and nearly burst myself open!

### 4<sup>th</sup> October

Busy with transport today, we have been ordered to prepare to move. Got a sinking feeling in my stomach.

### 5<sup>th</sup> October

Had another go at high diving and did it right!

### 6<sup>th</sup> October

Not much of interest, the hardest thing to get used to is knowing we are destined to join a big battle and not knowing when.

### 7<sup>th</sup> October

Not a very interesting day, packing everything that we will not need in the desert.

### 8<sup>th</sup> October

Swam with Regimental Doctor today, we went to Sidi Bishr. Water seems colder.

### 9<sup>th</sup> October

Very quiet. A few reconnaissance planes over but they are too high to engage.



#### 10<sup>th</sup> October

Aerial activity increasing – a sure sign of coming conflict.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> October

Swam again then had pleasant drive along Alex parade which is miles long and palm tree lined.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> October

Met an officer of the French Foreign Legion. He came from Norway.

#### 13<sup>th</sup> October

Went to other troop with all the gunners we could spare and saw a concert party run by a Mrs Barker. It was very good.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> October

We had a visit from a party of Greek officers, we entertained them, and they were good company.

#### 15<sup>th</sup> October

Had visit to Army vehicle repair workshop. To my surprise, most of work was being done by girls. They even did electrical parts, dismantling, correcting and reassembling. Very interesting.

#### 16<sup>th</sup> October

Rained today but quiet day. Still awaiting orders

#### 17<sup>th</sup> October

Went to Alexandria and dined at BHQ. They have no information. Went to cinema and saw "Hold Back the Dawn". Very good.

#### 18<sup>th</sup> October

Most terrific storm. A small shipwreck nearby and kegs of Cypriot wine washed ashore. A lot of drunken Egyptians about here.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> October

One of our trucks killed a native this afternoon. The driver was badly shaken. Soon the widow and family approached, and I had to deal with them. I got in touch with the local police and an inspector came along and told me that money would soon settle matters. I rang BHQ for instructions and was ordered to use my judgement. The inspector questioned the widow and said £8 would satisfy. I paid and off they went quite happily.

#### 20<sup>th</sup> October

Very cold – for us anyway, a big push coming and now we know we will be in it.

#### 21<sup>st</sup> October

Went to town to buy trunk for my kit. Was asked £10 for it. No sale!

#### 22<sup>nd</sup> October

Bought a large suitcase, £2.10.0d. I was asked £4.10.0d. but haggled.

#### 23<sup>rd</sup> October

Very quiet. The calm before the storm?

#### 24<sup>th</sup> October

Shot at 109 but again no luck.

#### 25<sup>th</sup> October

Went to pictures. “They died With Their Boots On”! Hope this is not prophetic.

### 26<sup>th</sup> October

Orders to stand by, all lined up and ready to roll. Sent my kit to a holding store. Rabone and Paterson. This is the second time kits have been stored. Some of the kits stored last time were not reclaimed. They are sold by auction and the proceeds credited to relatives.

### 27<sup>th</sup> October

We're off! As we passed, people gave us a friendly wave and troops still static looked envious. We drove all day and, in the evening, slept in the open. Before turning in, we went to shore and watched beautiful sunset. Picked figs from roadside trees.

### 28<sup>th</sup> October

On all day and in afternoon arrived at El Alamein. We all felt a little nervous. We were between the railway station and the sea. Just in front of us the field guns were firing, and bombs were falling near railway. Our guns were placed just forward of station. In the late afternoon we were ordered to move forward 2000 yards! Dug in and settled down. I slept in slit trench but was soon awakened by a stream of tracer bullets. Very uncomfortable. Was bombed and to add to our misery the bombs had screaming sirens attached.

### 29<sup>th</sup> October

Battle about to commence! Have never seen such a concentration! When I was at school, we used to read a poem about a recruiting drum. The only lines I could remember were:

"What if in the coming battle

Midst whistling shot and bursting bomb

With my brothers falling round me

Should my heart grow cold and numb

But the drum answered – Come!"

Couldn't remember any more but little did I know when reading this at school I would be in a great battle! A bit of luck, was sent back to Alex to collect a transport spare. Very odd, war in the morning, in the evening peace!

**A note from Stephanie and Lyn:**

**We were intrigued to read the full version of the poem referenced in dad's diary entry dated 29<sup>th</sup> October 1942:**

*The Reveille (Bret Harte – 1839-1902)*

*Hark! I hear the tramp of thousands  
And of armed men the hum;  
Lo! a nation's hosts have gathered  
Round the quick alarming drum, -  
Saying, 'Come,  
Freemen, come!  
Ere your heritage be wasted,' said the quick alarming drum.*

*Let me of my heart take counsel:  
War is not of life the sum;  
Who shall stay and reap the harvest  
When the autumn days shall come?  
But the drum  
Echoed, 'Come!  
Death shall reap the braver harvest,' said the solemn-sounding drum.*

*'But when won the coming battle,  
What of profit springs therefrom?  
What if conquest, subjugation,  
Even greater ills become?  
But the drum  
Answered 'Come!  
You must do the sum to prove it,' said the Yankee-answering drum.*

*'What if, mid cannons thunder,  
Whistling shot and bursting bomb,  
When my brothers fall around me,  
Should my heart grow cold and numb?'  
But the drum  
Answered, 'Come!  
Better there in death united, than in life a recreant, - Come!'*

*Thus, they answered, - hoping, fearing,  
Some in faith, and doubting some,  
Till a trumpet-voice proclaiming,  
Said, 'My chosen people, come!'  
Then the drum  
Lo! was dumb.  
For the great heart of the nation, throbbing, answered, "Lord, we come!"*

### 30<sup>th</sup> October

Got halfway back by dark and had to stop. The battle started and the horizon was lit by flashes and the thunder of guns was continuous.

### 31<sup>st</sup> October

Battle raging furiously. Our ears are drumming.

### Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1942

Still hammering away. We moved even further forward and fired at enemy positions. The field gun observers did our spotting and they were pleased with our efforts. Battle seems to have moved inland somewhat and as it seemed fairly quiet, walked toward infantry positions. There was a notice by the roadside saying "Do you know where you are?" We passed it and came to another notice, it had little crosses on it, it read "If going much further, please take one." It would have been foolish to linger so made off back.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> November

Shot at Messerschmitt 109, hit it and pilot bailed out and landed in the forward POW cage and was a very surprised German. This makes the third we have downed in the last few days! Battle is still raging. There is much movement of tanks and lorries, infantry and the usual flow of ambulances. The spot we are in is quite flat, sandy with no green stuff of any sort. Behind and to the left is El Alamein Station. To our right, a few yards of flat desert, then sand dunes, then the beautiful blue of the Med. About half a mile to the front is a slight rise and it name Tel el Eisa (Hill of Jesus). This rise has changed hands several times. At the moment it's in ours. This evening, forward and left, a terrific tank battle took place. It raged for about two hours, it was very difficult to see much because of dust and battle smoke, but the tracers could be seen shooting up into the air after bouncing off their targets. Shot through the dust and smoke – huge flares and jet black smoke showed where a tank had been hit. We are forward right near the field guns and we are not very popular because the size of our guns draws shell fire. Also, the crack of our high velocity guns, shooting over the heads of the nearby troops is not appreciated.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> November

A bren carrier was driving near our position when, with a loud bang, it blew up – a mine! I saw a fellow stop his truck, lift out the wounded man and carry him out of the minefield. The enemy is definitely falling back here and there. The news is mixed.

## 4<sup>th</sup> November

This afternoon, the Colonel came and mentioned that there was a German 88 mm which was giving a lot of trouble and he had been ordered to capture it or destroy it. He asked for volunteers – 1 officer and 10 men. He already had the Adjutant and an officer of 200 Bty. with him. I volunteered and set out in a Jeep with the men following. Off down the road we went, past the signs, past the infantry, who protested that we were mad to go any further and anyway it would bring down enemy shell fire. We left the Jeep in a hollow and walked on, widely separated to minimise casualties. Suddenly, a shell whistled over and burst on our right. It was away from us but we took cover. There was only one slight ridge between us and the gun so, leaving the rest of the party, the Colonel and I crawled forward. Over the crest and we were in sight of the gun. The first thing I saw was a collection of dead bodies, mostly German but also fine young Australians. There was the gun and round it dead crew. All around the gun were wrecked tanks, British and enemy, death and desolation. It was obviously the scene of the tank battle I had witnessed, many of the tanks had been knocked out by the dreaded 88. What a waste of brave men. We had no time to linger for we were heavily shelled, and the Colonel ordered a retirement! It's a nasty feeling knowing you are the target.

### 5<sup>th</sup> November

The rumour is that we are advancing. The infantry have cleared the area around the German 88 and once again we have been ordered to destroy it, capture it or at least report if it is undamaged. Off we went again, the infantry were still in position and complained again when we passed them, there was no shelling. The corpses were still there, loudly proclaiming the need for burial. The Australian dead had been buried. The smell of death was awful and flies were everywhere. I examined the gun and found it had been put out of action by an armour piercing shell, probably by one of the tanks. It was not worth salvaging, so we returned, thankfully, to our own lines.

### 6<sup>th</sup> November

Last night, everyone was celebrating the 5<sup>th</sup>. Someone was letting off rockets and others were shooting them down with machine gun fire! This went on until Jerry hit a petrol tanker and provided a display not to our liking. The advance is now really on. Troops, tanks and guns streaming forward. Some, impatient to get on, left the road and marked tracks, only to get blown up by mines. Back the other way come the prisoners, some in their own trucks driven by their own drivers. It is noticeable that these POWs are mostly Italian.

### 7<sup>th</sup> November

We feel left behind. Having taken part in this battle, we feel we should also be advancing. We are ready to move, awaiting orders. We passed the time taking swimming parties to the nearby beach. Saw one of our planes shot down into sea, looked for a survivor but saw nothing. Four hours later, he came ashore in his little dinghy, cursing flashes!

### 8<sup>th</sup> November

Orders to move, came out of action and on the road forward by early morning 9<sup>th</sup>, passed the front-line wire, passing wrecked tanks, guns and many, many fresh graves. We were in ex enemy territory within half an hour of starting and it seemed strange to read German and Italian notices of all sorts. On we went through the night, passing more wrecked trucks and tanks with the dead still round them. Still pockets of the enemy being cleared out.

### 10<sup>th</sup> November

Reached Mersa Matruk and went into action near the harbour. In the morning, met Cyril Sherwood of 261 Bty.

### 11<sup>th</sup> November

Moved to the airfield and dug in. Found a ruined house, made a roof with a tarpaulin and used it as Officers Mess! Had a good scrounge and found table and chairs.

### 12<sup>th</sup> November

There are plenty of abandoned guns etc. round here, but stores have been burned! Found a battery of 3-7 British guns which have been used by the enemy!

### 13<sup>th</sup> November

Settling down, cleaning and checking gun site and general routine.

### 14<sup>th</sup> November

Went sea bathing and cut my foot badly! Was dressed by a doctor who was nearby.

### 15<sup>th</sup> November

Yesterday, while out on a recce, in a Jeep driven by Captain Merryweather, a truck blew up in front of us. We got out and to our horror, found we had driven onto an uncleared minefield! I said to Captain Merryweather, "back off and if we use the tracks we made on the way in, we should get off safely." He backed slowly while I walked backwards giving him instructions, when, horror! I saw where the tracks had actually gone over a mine – we avoided this and got off safely.

### 16<sup>th</sup> November

We feel we ought to be moving on again, it's gone quiet.

### 17<sup>th</sup> November

What a downpour we had, all the gun pits flooded and everything was soaked and in the midst of all this, the order to move came. It was for early morning start the next day.



### 18<sup>th</sup> November

Away at dawn, no breakfast, just tea. Drove all day and on into night. Arrived at Halfaya Pass (Hellfire Pass) at midnight and slept soundly. This is where we were lucky to get away from during the retreat.

### 19<sup>th</sup> November

Off at dawn, up the Sollum Pass and on to Capuzzo. Here we breakfasted and went on to Gambut, the road was very familiar now and we got up at midnight, hungry, but too tired to care.

### 20<sup>th</sup> November

In action and ready to stay a while. The transports tyres were getting worn so, an ammunition truck was emptied and with a party and a day's rations, I set off to take tyres and possibly wheels off abandoned enemy vehicles. Spent the day doing this and returned to gun position with a good load. The battery had moved on! There was a pile of ammunition and a message stuck on a stick giving the next position. We had to throw away the tyres, load the ammo. And drive like hell up the coast road, no water, no food! The gunners with me were very unhappy and worried but we pressed on and by luck met up with main body when they stopped for night!

### 21<sup>st</sup> November

Drove on in morning past Bardia and got to Tobruk at midnight, a gun and tractor came off road at almost exactly the spot where the same thing happened when we were trying to escape! Passed through Tobruk in brilliant moonlight, recognised every feature. A raid started just then and it seemed like old times! During a halt, two of my men wandered into a building. There were trigger-happy guards on it and they fired at my men, I went forward firing my tommy gun, luckily, a few shouts identified both parties and no one was hit! On all night! And in the morning reached Martuba. Tired, cold and hungry. We thought we would be staying here but no, filled up with petrol and water then on again.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> November

By now the country had changed from flat desert into hilly scrubland, with here and there green bushes and as the day wore on, we reached the Libyan Agricultural Zone. Here the scenery was magnificent, just like Scotland but a tragedy had been enacted here. Italians had farmed here and as our troops cleared the enemy out, the Bedouin came down from the hills, murdered the farmers and their families and burned down the farmhouses.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> November

We started climbing into hilly country, reminded us of the Quantocks. On and on, up and up, trees, sheep, goats and ploughed land, on until we reached the Barce Pass where we slept for the night. In the morning we descended the very steep winding slope for several miles. We got down without mishap though the road was blown up in several places. On through Barce town and through another pass – Tocra this time and now the sea was in sight. Once again, the road had been blown up by the retreating enemy, but hard work and luck saw us through. Into Tocra itself. The white flag here was up on the tallest building and the population, native and Italian, looked very dazed. On we went and at last reached Benghazi, our ambition had been realised. We are here ahead of all but a few light forces. Passed wrecked and upturned enemy trucks, still with the unburied bodies. We went into action on a position which had just been taken from the enemy. Settling in, we found buildings with chairs and tables and so on, left by the previous owners. There are thousands of rounds of ammunition, all prepared for destruction, but they had no time to set the fuses!

### 24<sup>th</sup> November

Well, we are well off! Tables, every man had a bed, there is a kitchen range for the cooks and in a nearby stores the army found sides of fresh beef which is being issued quickly before it goes off. We also found seven sacks of flour. I went on the scrounge and found a little engine for generating electricity.

### 25<sup>th</sup> November

We are to be harbour defence and we don't mind a bit. It's the best site so far and feel we could do with a rest. A ship in the harbour is burning and we expect raids. I had another look around and found several engine driven pumps. Took one to battery to pump water out of well. Looking at it closely, I saw by a label on it that it was consigned to "Commander Royal Engineers"! So took it back to the relief of the man in charge who had just had them delivered. I explained that we thought they had been abandoned!

### 26<sup>th</sup> November

Out on the road to Tripoli this morning and ME109 hit a truck in front of me, did not hit more, though the column was quite large. Saw a lot of Jerry guns, and abandoned bombs, shells and other equipment.

### 27<sup>th</sup> November

Settling in and making all comfortable, we soon have a hot water arrangement for baths. (left by Italians). A plane came over and when we fired at it, it dropped its bombs and pushed off. They landed quite near, shook us up a bit, it's not over yet.

### 28<sup>th</sup> November

Found some rocket flares, the parachute on these is silk, so fired one against a wall, the rocket came back at me and burst near me giving a nasty fright.

### 29<sup>th</sup> November

My little dog had been having fits and Sgt. Walters put a gun in my hands and said, "you shoot it!" I shot three times and the poor animal was not finished, we had to use a rifle finally. Got choked off by Eric!

### 30<sup>th</sup> November

Went to Benina, Benghazi's airfield. Nice ride but many dead animals by roadside. Picked a bunch of beautiful flowers from the Duke of Aosta's garden.

### 1<sup>st</sup> December 1942

Went to our Left Troop who are nearer sea. Had swim, December and it was like a summer's day.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> December

Had another hot bath, the geyser is great fun, fired by wood! But it certainly gets hot! Fairly quiet.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> December

Nice mild day, a few alarms. Night raid. Was awakened by the crashing of bombs. Eric going out to take charge and cried out "Steve, we are on fire", but it was only a bunch of flares. I went back to bed, only to be shaken by our first salvo, the plaster started to fall, and the building commenced shaking in a most alarming manner. We were the target but shot down two of the attacking planes, JU 88s.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> December

Paid a visit to Bir Cyrene, there is a grotto there that must have been part of a rich man's estate – now deserted, stone seats and ornamental arbours, stone fish tanks and animal pens, all empty and silent. Here I found a Luftwaffe store. All manner of aircraft parts and tools left behind in Jerry's mad rush.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> December

Had to stand-to four times last night, felt very tired in morning. It was, thankfully, a quiet day.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> December

It was Eric's turn to have a very disturbed night. We had a church service, a lovely setting – framed in palm trees, blue sky and white buildings. In between, glimpses of the blue Mediterranean Sea. Visited Cyril Sherwood in afternoon. Had pleasant time.

#### 7<sup>th</sup> December

Raid tonight, many alarms but little excitement.

#### 8<sup>th</sup> December

Visited Benghazi Cathedral, it is not too badly damaged, a Padre stood in the background looking slightly resentful, it all seemed very sad.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> December

Went out today and visited a deserted POW camp, it was very large and recently evacuated. There were many signs of our men who had been kept there, the register of prisoners was still there, and I looked through it to see if I could trace any of our captured Regiment but saw none. What I did see, and it made me very angry, was sacks of mail that had not been passed on.

#### 10<sup>th</sup> December

Found a nice spring bed, now sleeping in comfort, all the lads have beds now.

### 11<sup>th</sup> December

We have flour now, but the cooks complained they had no stove, so off we went to an Italian barracks to find one, it must have been brand new.

### 12<sup>th</sup> December

Terry (Mac's replacement officer) returned today. Terry is very likeable but never seems sober. The troop commander had many rows with Terry for drinking all the spirit rations issued to us! We have to keep the hard stuff locked in a steel box. We had a daylight shoot but results unknown.

### 13<sup>th</sup> December

Fairly quiet day but we had a very noisy do last night.

### 14<sup>th</sup> December

The native population are now returning, and they seem quite decent types.

### 15<sup>th</sup> December

Was talking to the M.T. Sgt. this morning when the alarm went, we went on talking when a gun fired and everyone in range joined in. A JU 88 came in and dropped its bombs very hastily. It was hit and brought down.

### 16<sup>th</sup> December

Another heavy raid this evening. I had the satisfaction of firing at two illuminated planes and shot both down!

### 17<sup>th</sup> December

Went fishing this afternoon, tried in the nearby pool at first and then went to the sea. Had to cross a marsh and it took an hour on foot. It was a waste of time as regards fishing but it made a change.

### 18<sup>th</sup> December

Was invited to BHQ for dinner, went to Benina to see our team beaten by the RAF at soccer. Returned and went to the dinner. It was very good and we had liquid refreshments too. We had just finished eating when the guns opened up and I saw the action as a spectator. Two planes were illuminated, and they were given a plastering.

### 19<sup>th</sup> December

Scotty visited us this morning, this is the first time we have met since leaving the troop ship. We had a nice chat and he said he would look me up again.

### 20<sup>th</sup> December

Another heavy raid last night and we shot down more planes.

### 21<sup>st</sup> December

Days seem fairly quiet, this is because the RAF drive off the daylight raiders but are not so effective at night. We went to the breakwater, fishing, the sea was a little rough and we had no sport, it was pleasant spending an afternoon by the sea.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> December

Out collecting ammunition from German dump. I saw hundreds of bombs that Jerry had left behind. There were thousands of rounds of British ammunition which were of use to us. Found an Italian motorbike and got it running.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> December

Getting ready for Christmas. Terry is going to fix up a tree and decorate the mess.

### 24<sup>th</sup> December

Christmas Eve. We, Terry and I, went to BHQ for dinner or rather, dine and wine. The drive home was quite hectic.

### 25<sup>th</sup> December

Christmas Day. Tea and mince pies brought round by the sergeants. In the morning went to the outposts and lunch was quite normal. Dinner was a huge success and I assisted by serving the lads. We did the first guard duties and had an officer's guard mounting, much to the troops delight. Bed quite late, all very happy.

### 26<sup>th</sup> December

Tried to set off some Italian demolition charges, they failed to go off. Perhaps just as well! Attended church service.

### 27<sup>th</sup> December

Went on board Naval MTB and found it very interesting. Terry returned at night very "shot" and we had a funny half hour getting him to bed.

### 28<sup>th</sup> December

We decided to fish from breakwater again and started off full of hope. The sea was running high and we had to be very careful passing gaps in the jetty. After an hour the sea got so rough we had to beat a hasty and damp retreat!

### 29<sup>th</sup> December

During a walk, I found several camphor trees and a eucalyptus bush. A very nice smell. Blew up a load of gelignite.

### 30<sup>th</sup> December

Very quiet day. Just routine.

### 31<sup>st</sup> December

Last day of 1942. Went to Benina and had tea with Bill B. Went on to Regina. Here we saw an old monastery or fortress perched on a rocky hill. Behind it the hills and plains of Cyrenaica stretched away as far as the eye could see. Felt a cold coming on in evening and went to bed early. Was awakened by the "waits" singing "Auld Lang Syne". This was followed by a fusillade of shots from all sorts of guns. Lay awake and thought of past year. The destroyer trip into Tobruk, the fighting there. The trip to Bardia. The shock when we were told that we were to suffer heavy attack. The gunners we lost. Gnr. Maudesly with his arm shot off. Gnr England

with both hands shattered. Poor young Rogers riddled with shell splinters. The nearby cemetery. So many thoughts went through my mind. The night we were told to get out of Tobruk if we could, the dash back leaving Dudley and others in enemy hands. The lines of grim men drawing extra ammunition for the retreat. The voice of Gnr Riley out of the gloom – “Excuse me, is this the real thing?” “Yes, it’s genuine Riley”. “Please hold my rifle while I have a baby!” The 600-mile retreat. The stops to go into action. Digging in then moving back again. The Battle of El Alamein and the long advance to Benghazi. And now what? What will 1943 bring?



## **“D-Day must come soon...”: January 1943-June 1944**

Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1943

A good start - ordered to bed by M.O. Feel rotten. A cold.

2<sup>nd</sup> January

Still in bed, very miserable but everyone is most kind and I get visitors.

3<sup>rd</sup> January

Still not well enough to get up. The weather is cold and wet, and it is blowing a full gale.

4<sup>th</sup> January

Raining pouring, terrific gale. The Padre came in to see me and sat on little stool on which my batman put my food etc. It collapsed and over went the Padre – feel much better!

5<sup>th</sup> January

Up for a short while today.

6<sup>th</sup> January

Great storm now on. Wrapped up well and went to seashore. Saw a sight I shall always remember. A large steamer was in difficulties and I saw the crew abandon ship! Great waves were tossing the ship like a cork and the spray was tossing a great deluge high into the air to come crashing down on the stricken vessel. Worse was about to happen, another steamer, having made the safety of the bay, dragged her anchors and the master was forced to put to sea. The vessel was lifted right out of the water, fore then aft. The wind spun her round like a toy on a pond, and, just as the open sea was reached, her engines broke down. Distress signals went up, but who could help? The wind taking charge, drove the steamer on to the sandy beach where she lay with waves breaking right over her. From where I watched all seemed lost, but I heard later that the crew were saved.

7<sup>th</sup> January

Storm subsiding today, fairly quiet.

#### 8<sup>th</sup> January

Went to Benina again to collect a truck, went on to El Abiar but the place was crowded.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> January

Nothing much to write about.

#### 10<sup>th</sup> January

Light hit and run raids, nothing like the old days in Tobruk.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> January

This afternoon Eric and I went off to look for a site suitable for rifle practice. Found one on the beach, walking down to sea edge I found a large sponge, looking around found several more washed up by storm.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> January

Stormy again. The weather seems to be keeping the enemy grounded.

#### 13<sup>th</sup> January

Went to seashore to see the stranded ship, she was on even keel and seemed to be floating on tide.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> January

Fairly quiet during day but a few raiders came over at night.

#### 15<sup>th</sup> January

After another quiet day but we had a fairly heavy raid at night. I went to one of the guns and helped the gunners. It was good being a gunner again, the flashing of a dimmed torch, the heavy round going home, the click of the breech closing then an almighty crack, a leaping gun ejecting the smoking spent cartridge, great flashes and near and distant thumps. Working of the guns makes one oblivious to the surrounding nastiness.

#### 16<sup>th</sup> January

The Padre came and had lunch with us, he spent the night and we had a chatty evening talking about green Britain. Thankfully, all was quiet.

#### 17<sup>th</sup> January

Visited the ship again today, alas! She is on her side and looks a total loss. What a pity, the crew fought hard to save her.

#### 18<sup>th</sup> January

Took a football team to RHQ and lost the match. Stayed to dinner. The food was good, the news I heard seems good, the job for us should be over soon? I wonder!

#### 19<sup>th</sup> January

Went to Left Troop for lunch; we had salmon, lobster, lettuce, radishes and young onions, what a difference in the food now! Returned to our gun position and had to give a lecture on motor transport. The weather is stormy again. I am reading Remarque's "Flotsam" – made me feel sad and depressed. Saw the film based on this story in Cairo 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1942 "So Ends Our Night".

#### 20<sup>th</sup> January

This morning, set out for Barce with driver, Sgt. Varnon, Bdr. Barker, to collect M.T. spares. An uneventful trip but quite enjoyable. Had lunch at the top of Barce hill. Two Senoussi came up and sold us mushrooms, they were cheerful souls and laughed when we did, they had no idea how much to charge us and were satisfied when we paid 15 piastres for a 7lb jam tin full and a 2 gallon can full, we also gave them a cup of tea. Nearer the gun position at Driana we exchanged a few spoonfuls of tea for 3 eggs from a native, who stood by us as we brewed up and he was also treated to a smoke. Found the Padre on site and he stayed the night, he brought his radio with him and we listened to news.

#### 21<sup>st</sup> January

Mushrooms for breakfast! We all ate too many. Had raid in evening.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> January

Fairly quiet today, nice weather.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> January

The Padre gave a very interesting and lively lecture on Abyssinia. All enjoyed his amusing style.

### 24<sup>th</sup> January

Very quiet again, the enemy are well back now.

### 25<sup>th</sup> January

Daylight attack on harbour, a petrol lighter was hit and sailors had to jump into burning petrol-covered water.

### 26<sup>th</sup> January

Alarms today but no action.

### 27<sup>th</sup> January

Went to RHQ for conference and from there to L Troop with Peter. Stayed chatting and started off in dark and soon ran off road!

### 28<sup>th</sup> January

Eric went off to BHQ leaving me as troop commander. Had swim at L.T. beach, not too cold.

### 29<sup>th</sup> January

Great change in weather – terrific hailstorm. Visited the Doc who is ill in bed. The Padre spent the night with us again. We had a good laugh at his short pyjamas.

### 30<sup>th</sup> January

Quiet again and weather very dull.

### 31<sup>st</sup> January

Last day of month – very quiet.

### Wednesday, 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1943

No raids today. Just routine work.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> February

Still no action.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> February

Nothing much to write about, we are busy of course, checking guns and all equipment. Drills and cleaning etc. There are also outlying pickets to check so even a quiet day is a busy one.

### 4<sup>th</sup> February

Played a game of basketball today, I enjoyed the exercise. No raids.

### 5<sup>th</sup> February

Feel very stiff after yesterday's game but feel very fit.

### 6<sup>th</sup> February

Had to deliver documents to BHQ and was pressed to stay to evening meal at 7.30, having already eaten at 5.30. I nearly burst! Home in dark, very tricky!

### 7<sup>th</sup> February

Sent home a packet of snaps, not much happening.

### 8<sup>th</sup> February

Went to Army concert and it was a very good effort.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> February

Very busy, rushing about all day, news a bit disquieting. The enemy are counter-attacking.

#### 10<sup>th</sup> February

Sort of standing by, waiting for orders to move. Weather wet and windy. There are flowers springing up all over our gun position.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> February

Very wet and stormy still. Went to BHQ and 'outlying picket'. Back at dusk.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> February

Saw the lads playing football, a good game, had raid in evening. Shot an 88 down early morning.

#### 13<sup>th</sup> February

Increased enemy activity. Shot another JU 88 down! During lull, went on board stranded steamer. They are now salvaging coal from her.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> February

Orders, "prepare to move" causing a lot of action. It seems we will have a long haul. It was our ambition to get to Benghazi but now we feel we should be closer to the enemy.

#### 15<sup>th</sup> February

Marching orders! We are off tomorrow. Final packing and getting guns out of action and on to road. Everyone in high spirits, we must be mad!

#### 16<sup>th</sup> February

Early breakfast and the column formed up, had a last look round and we were off. The town was soon left behind, and the desert started. By nightfall we had reached the battlefield of Agedabia where we lingered for the night. We were in the desert six miles from the sea.

### 17<sup>th</sup> February

Off early again and soon passed El Agheila, not many signs of the bitter fighting which has been the scene here. Up until now, no previous British push had passed this place, this was the first of the advances to penetrate this line. A drive of many miles and we passed a monument dubbed by troops "Marble Arch". This is a very imposing Monument to two Romans who were buried alive to mark the frontier between Libya and Tripolitania. The present monument was put up in modern times to replace the ancient ruined one.

### 18<sup>th</sup> February

Spent last night at Nufilia amidst myriads of desert flowers that scented the air. Drove through flowers the whole day long and passed Sirte in afternoon, camped at Wadi Hamet. Terry was late bringing his party in and I had to wait up to see them fed and bedded down.

### 19<sup>th</sup> February

Off at dawn again and soon reached the first settlements 'Gioda and Crispi both complete with Italians. On to Misurata, Garibaldi and Zliten where once more we rested for the night. All day we had been driving past homesteads, all of them occupied.

### 20<sup>th</sup> February

On to Homs where we saw Roman ruins, on into the desert and then farms again. Littoriana and Castelverde soon were passed and we stopped for lunch and from the map we saw we were nearly in the outskirts of Tripoli. A long all-day drive and I went forward to prepare for my troop. Reached Tripoli at dusk and picked a gun position west of harbour and almost on the beach. Slept in beach house and had quiet night.

### 21<sup>st</sup> February

Brought the troop in this morning and got the guns in action after a journey of 700 miles without serious accident. Soon in action against heavy raid and shot four planes down, two more fell to the RAF. What a start! Another shoot later. We are right on sea front and Italian fishermen made us a present off fish. Had bathe to wash off dust of travel. Another attack at night.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> February

Met the Italian fishers this morning and they seem friendly. Had another swim, and being very tired, went early to bed.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> February

We are in very good quarters, the men are in beach huts, 2 to each hut, the officers and sergeants live in a very nice beach house, 10 yards from the sea. Plenty of room and cooking facilities. This house belonged to "Marshal De Bono" and its name is "Dopo de Lavoro de Bono". On our left the beach curves away to a headland, to our left is a pier and then the outskirts of Tripoli. Offshore there is an island, but we know the enemy is not too far up the road and he won't leave us in peace very long! Had bathe and paddled about in a canoe found on beach, at night went to a cinema show for the forces – "Mrs Miniver". Went to bed and was soon asleep. Was awakened by the sound of guns firing and a plane diving – soon came the piercing sound of bombs falling, then, crump, Crump, CRUMP! It was most alarming and I said goodbye to myself! But it passed.

### 24<sup>th</sup> February

Had a look at the town, the seafront is very pleasant, there is an old castle and a fine cathedral.

### 25<sup>th</sup> February

Into sea again and paddled about. At night had another blitz and saw a plane go down in flames – one more man will not be back. We have now fired 40,000 rounds of heavy ammunition.

### 26<sup>th</sup> February

Today, I found a small cutter on the beach near here, launched it and had a grand time rowing around, the owner came down to the beach and was a bit worried at first but didn't mind when we told him that if we sank it, it would be close in shore! Had another raid at night and once again, I joined the gun's crew and fired the gun.

### 27<sup>th</sup> February

Sea too rough for boating or bathing, cold wind. The fishermen gave us more fish and had these fried for evening meal. Heavy attack at night, up until 0600 hrs very tired.

### 28<sup>th</sup> February

Fitted a sail to the boat but too windy to go out. Went to Tripoli Stadium to see England draw against Scotland. Raid early in evening, saw a plane burst into flames and plunge into sea.



### Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> March 1943

Fairly quiet during day but raids at night. Given more fish by Italian fishermen.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> March

The high seas have abated a bit so launched the boat with a Sgt. and two batmen. It was rougher than I thought, and the boat was hurled back ashore several times before we got afloat, then the rudder carried away! We lost control and the Sgt. was washed overboard by a huge wave and we all landed on the beach in a heap! In evening took a letter to BHQ. Walking back to gun position, heard and saw bombs, many troops killed and wounded. A very heavy raid on town and harbour.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> March

Had to go to RHQ, saw bomb damage and more of town. Put to sea in repaired boat and had better time – sail not too good! Raids early in evening, quiet rest of night.

### 4<sup>th</sup> March

Up early this morning to a false alarm, we don't get many! Went sailing again, this time out to sea past the barrier reef and saw a school of porpoise, I thought they were sharks at first. Sailed back in fine style. Went to town in evening, passed the bombed houses of the few nights ago raid and, by the horrid smell, bodies were still buried.

### 5<sup>th</sup> March

Day started fine but storm soon blew up and huge waves pounded up the beach, spray was breaking right over the offshore island. No raids last night.

### 6<sup>th</sup> March

Went to Battery soccer match at Tripoli Stadium. The ground had been let to an Italian team and they went off disgruntled. "Woe to the vanquished". Found a small boat on beach. Also found where Germans had used a Jewish cemetery as a gun position.

### 7<sup>th</sup> March

Nice day; raid last night but not a heavy one. Raid tonight and a light gun crew wiped out, not a heavy raid but the few bombs dropped made a direct hit.

### 8<sup>th</sup> March

Up early, had to report to RHQ where I had a nice fish lunch. Had fish for breakfast, also bacon and beans on toast. We have plenty of potatoes, greens and carrots, all veg being the dried variety! Another night raid.

### 9<sup>th</sup> March

Stormy again today. Many killed in raid. News is very cheery.

### 10<sup>th</sup> March

Took the Battery Commander for sail today and it was grand. The old boat fairly leapt along. Had lively raid in evening.

### 11<sup>th</sup> March

Fairly quiet day. Terry was out today so I had to stand by all day.

### 12<sup>th</sup> March

Fairly quiet today. No alarms save when a fisher boy, who was dynamiting fish, threw a charge with too short a fuse and nearly blew his hands off. The charge burst in the air just like a shell.

### 13<sup>th</sup> March

Went to Castel Benito today. There were masses of planes and guns all left by the retreating Axis. There was a great pile of bombs and two German planes in flying order. The way took us through lanes very much like the English countryside and it made us somewhat homesick!

### 14<sup>th</sup> March

Busy morning but was able to enjoy sail in afternoon. It was the best sail to date and we fairly sped along.

### 15<sup>th</sup> March

Went off to practise field gun exercises, it made a change. Again the countryside very much like home.

### 16<sup>th</sup> March

Pretty heavy raid this evening. Saw several planes in searchlight beams and three at least were shot down! Bombs and bits all round us, very hairy.

### 17<sup>th</sup> March

Went field gunning again today. Had good day but very tiring. Went to bed 8.30. The Italian owner of the boat brought a nice set of sails for us. These sails were designed for racing and looked very beautiful.

### 18<sup>th</sup> March

Very heavy raids all day, mainly on ships in harbour. During evening heard bombs and machine gunning quite close and rushed out in time to see JU88 machine gunning at us! Rushed back indoors! Later another raid and a shot down raider dropped right on an ammunition ship and caught fire. Later, after the raid, I went along to see it, ammunition of all sorts was exploding, and ships were clearing away out of danger zone. During the night, the ship blew up, sinking a destroyer that was trying to assist. The whole place shook like an earthquake and a large piece of ship-side landed near RHQ 3 miles away.

### 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> March

More field gun practice. Nice countryside but very tiring. Bought eggs from grinning native. Went home via Zawia all new, to us, country.

### 21<sup>st</sup> March

Sailing again, we rigged a shorter jib boom, but it made the boat unmanageable and we were lucky to get back to dry land again.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> March

Out with the guns again, it rained like blazes, but we had a good shoot.

### 23<sup>rd</sup> March

Very quiet for a change. Just routine drill etc.

### 24<sup>th</sup> March

Still not much action, weather is warming now.

### 25<sup>th</sup> March

Went sailing this afternoon and enjoyed fine sail in stiff breeze. Giuseppe has loaned me new sails for the boat, they are immense. We went out beyond the reef that lies about a mile offshore and, though it was smooth sailing when we started, it began to blow a bit harder than was comfortable. So I ran inshore a little – we made a good fast run in and I found it was possible to let the boat keel over until the deck was awash. The next tack took us a mile offshore. I was at the tiller and we simply bowled along. I became bolder and let her heel right over, my passengers (no sailors) were scared and I overdid it and capsized! The boat turned right over, and we all scrambled onto the keel. The shore was at least a mile away and Giuseppe said he would swim ashore for help. I thought he asked me to swim with him, but he soon left me behind. I was about half a mile from shore when I saw a boat put out to the rescue. To my horror, it passed me some distance away and went on to the overturned boat. I tried for the shore but was swept on past a headland and quite a way to swim. I began to tire and made for another headland and after being in the water for about four hours, I made it, exhausted, to the shallows where I lay letting the water lap over me. I thought someone might come to help me, but the shore was deserted. After a while I started along in the direction of the battery and after about a mile walk came up to one of our outlying light gun positions. They said I had been given up as lost! They had seen me, and a gunner swam out with a mile of telephone wire, but I was swept out of his reach. They gave me a drink and some clothes, rang my troop and I was welcomed back with the news that they had reported my loss to RHQ! They were so pleased to see me that my capsizing was forgotten.

### 26<sup>th</sup> March

Weather very mild, the boat was towed in. Had swim in afternoon. In evening I went out with fishermen to lay nets. They caught an octopus and I was shocked to see Carlos bite its eye out! Had fried octopus for tea and found it tasted like crabmeat.

### 27<sup>th</sup> March

Weather very sultry, feel hot and tired.

### 28<sup>th</sup> March

The news seems good, we are attacking the Mareth Line and meeting with success.

### 29<sup>th</sup> March

Busy morning. Swam in afternoon. Fired at enemy plane without visible result.

### 30<sup>th</sup> March

Much brighter today. Just routine.

### 31<sup>st</sup> March

Terry went off to Ben Gardane with armoured cars this morning he was highly delighted. Moving again nearer the action.

### April 1943 - June 1944

#### ***A note from Stephanie and Lyn:***

***Dad wrote almost daily for nearly two years but, at this point, his diary entries become infrequent and largely retrospective. The exact reasons for the change in style are unknown but are likely to have been due to a combination of factors; lengthy travel, periods of leave and training, tiredness, fear and ultimately intensity of battle. Nevertheless, dad's writing continues to make compelling reading:***

Had news that I had been selected to return to England with 20 "battle experienced gunners".

Then followed a long wait in transit camps and when the enemy finally surrendered, we went by train, over the Atlas Mountains to Algiers. Another transit camp, during which time I was wined and dined on the battleship King George V having met a Midshipman from Bristol in the Hotel Bristol!

Finally, went on board the liner "Christian Hughens" bound through the Med for home. Landed in Gourock Scotland November 1943.

Short leave, then ordered to report to new regiment training for beach landings! Out of the frying pan etc! We were attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Army. We were supposed to be battle hardened, but I was the only officer in the whole Regiment that had been in real action. I don't know what happened to the twenty troops I brought home with me; they were scattered I suppose.

Looking back at the last few years, I realise how lucky I have been. In action during the worst of the Bristol Blitzes, then posted overseas. In the desert was shot at, bombed, shelled and starved, hit slightly only once. Saw some of my comrades killed and more wounded. Lost my batman and the officer I met in Woolwich before leaving England. They and others of our unit were captured when Tobruk fell. The rest of the unit got out with Jerry's hot breath on our necks! A fighting retreat of over 700 miles then, after a refit, the battle of El Alamein, followed by an advance of nearly 1000 miles! Now in a brand-new regiment and am not really welcome. Most of the other officers are university types and tend to look down their noses at a rough, sunburned refugee from the desert! Time will tell!

Have started intense training and toughening up stunts! We go out (December) with no cover and have to stay out for days, sleeping under hedges or the trucks!

During a weekend leave, I had a tarpaulin sheet made in Old Market Street (Bristol) and use this to make a shelter! Am told that this is cheating but – what the hell! - I'm freezing.

The next stunt was a route march in full battle order from Croydon, where we are stationed, to the North Yorkshire Moors for firing practice.

The immediate fellow officers have accepted me more now and am settling down to what feels at the moment more like peace time soldiering. Red tape and spit and polish. We have church parades and proper guard mounting each evening with usual officer duties like troop or orderly officer.

The months are rolling by and now all our vehicles are waterproofed and can drive through water 15 ft. deep! Seems ominous!

We are now at Ramsgate and under movement orders. We are on a famous golf course and all leave cancelled. Had a talk by the Padre and afterwards heard a Gunner ask another what

the sermon was, and he replied – “The Padre said we all had one foot in the grave and the other on a bar of soap”.

The Major called all the officers together and said if anyone had not made a will, it would be a good idea to write one now. This is the second time for me! Had the same advice before the desert adventures!

We are all on thorns now. ‘D’ Day must come soon, and all suffer from a mixture of excitement and fear.

An advance party left last night, and we said goodbye to them. They were armed to the teeth. Back they came this morning, cancelled! But a landing on the French coast must be very near. The roads and open ground are filled with guns, tanks, trucks and masses of equipment.

Any spare time we get, we are off to town to our favourite bar! The Britannia, Ramsgate. It’s the only way to keep nerves at bay.

We’re off! Bound for the London docks where on route the people cheered us and showered us with soup, sandwiches and cakes. We spent the night in Wembley Stadium, then in morning loaded our guns, trucks, tractors, radar sets and ammunition into a ‘liberty ship’ and set sail for heaven knows where. Heard on the radio that beach landings have started and first troops ashore making beachhead.

We anchored offshore and waited for orders to land. We need a lot of room because our guns are very heavy and though mobile and capable of cross-country work, we are not suitable for first waves. Waited a couple of days cruising offshore, then alongside came tank landing craft [TLC]. One officer was placed in to take charge of vehicles, guns etc. In mine were loaded four guns and two radar units but only five tractors and trucks to pull them ashore. The captain of the tank landing craft was ordered to cast off. I tried to hold fast until another vehicle was loaded but was ordered to obey orders so off we went.

As we approached the shore, I saw a sandy beach and a ramp leading to a floating jetty in the surf, held steady by sailors up to their necks in the sea. The TLC drove up to the jetty and down came the ramp. We drove off and when clear of the TL craft, I asked the skipper to wait until I could come back with a truck to pull off the remaining radar unit. I saw the Naval beach master and asked if I could bring a truck back. His language scorched my ears and told me to

get off the 'B' beach. He relented a bit and gave me five minutes. I drove with the rest of my column off the beach and to a road inshore, unhooked a gun and backed all the way back to the beach. The beach master cursed me again, the sailors in the water cursed as I backed the heavy tractor down the ramp. As I neared the TLC the skipper shouted, "I have to back off, the tide is dropping!" Off he went with my radar unit. Off up the ramp I went, more curses from the beach party and back I went to where I had left my column, they were gone, leaving the solitary gun.

I was then cursed by the military police for blocking the road. I asked them where they had sent my column. They just told me to get the hell out of it. Here I was in the middle of one of the biggest battles in history and I had lost three guns, one radar unit and had left one on the tank LC. I was hoping to be hit and put out of my misery!

But driving up the road, relief! There was my column, it was the Regimental marshalling area. We moved out to our battle stations in an orchard, very close to the enemy where during the night all the rest of our unit met up with us, even the strayed radar unit.

That was my beach landing at Arromanches. I was so worried that even the next day I had no memory of anything that went on, save the beach ramp, the sailors in the water and the effort made to keep my column together. We were so close to the Germans that bombs from our planes dropped on their positions seemed almost aimed at us and many splinters and bomb fins fell on our position. We used our radar sets to pinpoint their mortar batteries and then plastered them with our HE.

I will start another notebook for what happens next, at the moment am very tired, hungry and very scared! We have already had casualties, but fresh troops are arriving and our planes are very busy overhead. Our guns have fired all day and night at quite a short range and dazed prisoners are coming in. When will it all end, I wonder?



# REFLECTIONS

But he never did start another notebook.

We think dad fully intended to write about his experiences after the D-Day landings, but the intensity of the action probably meant he didn't have time to record what was happening around him. It's also possible that he simply didn't have the inclination to reflect on the horrors he witnessed as he fought his way through France, Belgium and the Netherlands. We know from brief notes at the beginning of his diary that he journeyed through Caen, Villiers Bocage, Dieppe, Amiens, Dunkirk, Calais, Liege, Antwerp, Brussels, Nijmegen, Villingen, Scheldt, Arnhem, over the Rhine, Kleve, Xanten, Hamburg and finally back to Groningen. As we mentioned before, we wish we'd have known about dad's diary while he was still with us so we could have asked him about his memories. We have many unanswered questions.

When dad left North Africa to be posted to 109 City of London Regiment Royal Artillery, part of the Canadian Army, he couldn't have foreseen what lay ahead. He transitioned from the dust storms of North Africa to the desperate mud trenches of Western Europe. Around 150,000 allied troops landed in Normandy across the five beaches during the D-Day landings in June 1944. Dad landed at the beach in Arromanches that was code-named Sword Beach, the easternmost landing point for allied forces. Many of the British, US and Canadian troops, supported by forces from other allied nations, plus thousands of ships, landing craft and vehicles, were already ashore. There were around 4,500 allied casualties on D-Day alone as troops made gains through local villages and countryside, towards Nazi stronghold cities such as Caen. Dad was walking directly into the unknown but, like the soldiers he fought alongside, was fully conscious of his duty in the face of an unimaginable threats to his life. These young troops are often called brave or heroes, but neither word fully does them justice. There aren't words in existence to adequately describe the sacrifices they made and the horrors they faced during those dark days.

In dad's army files, it was noted he was of "exemplary" character and in one testimonial from 1940, his record states:

*“Very efficient, not afraid to take command. Will get the job through whatever the difficulty. Handles men well, gets the best out of them.”*

He was decorated on several occasions during his service. Dad was awarded the Territorial Army *Efficiency Medal* and received the *Africa Star* and the *France and Germany Star* for his time in battle in North Africa and Western Europe. It is clear from his files he was very highly regarded from the time he joined the TA but it appears his background and education may have held him back in achieving his full potential. Just before he moved to North Africa, one Brigadier noted, “This WO (Warrant Officer) is an excellent GPO (Gun Position Officer) in HAA (Heavy Anti-Aircraft)...except for his educational qualifications, he has all the attributes of an Officer.” It appears his talent was undeniable but sadly, in the eyes of some, the fact he didn’t attend a preferred school or possess a degree meant, meant his progress was stifled. Despite the Brigadier’s comments, thankfully dad’s attributes shone through and as you have read, he progressed to become an Officer. However, we wonder if educational preconceptions meant he was denied opportunities to climb to even higher levels. We shall never know. He became a War Substantive Lieutenant in 1942, after a brief emergency commission as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Royal Artillery and, after the war, dad was granted the honorary rank of Lieutenant in 1954.

Dad was discharged from the Royal Artillery on 10 October 1945, although he was officially released on 11 January 1946. He returned to mum and Shirley at the family home on Stapleton Road in Bristol. Thankfully their home had survived the intense bombardment of the Bristol Blitz and escaped without damage. Knowing dad as we do, we think he would’ve settled back into family life almost seamlessly. It may sound extremely presumptuous given his dreadful experiences, but we can say it with a level of confidence as he never dwelled on things.

Dad was cheerful, optimistic and pragmatic throughout his life and we’ve realised during this process of reflection, that we never saw him in a miserable mood. With the new perspective he gained during his time at war, we’ve no doubt his determination to look forward to each new day was something he valued to an even greater extent in peace time.

Shirley often told us of life in the immediate aftermath of the war and, whilst it couldn't really be described as normal, families desperately tried to find a new routine. For many of course, life would never be the same again. The centre of Bristol was still a bombsite and would remain that way for some years after. Equally rationing stayed in place until 1954.

Despite the continued challenges, mum and dad wanted to grow their family and Shirley had two younger sisters to play with and boss around when we arrived in the years that followed; Stephanie was born in 1948 and Lynda (Lyn) came along in 1952. The five of us continued to live on Stapleton Road with mum's parents, but our uncles had since married and moved out. Mum's dad, our grandad, fought in World War I and was the victim of a gas attack. We can remember him wheezing and coughing and he would always have cough sweets to hand. His condition gradually worsened, and he sadly passed away in 1958. Our Gran was a very strong woman and had five children. With grandad unable to work due to ill health after the war, life was extremely tough. We have very happy memories of playing card games like Whist and Rummy with her at our family home.

Dad started work at Bristol Motor Company during the years after the war. It was a striking building, based on Winterstoke Road in Bristol, just along the road from Ashton Gate Stadium, the home of Bristol City Football Club. It later became Lex Motor Company in the 1970s and subsequently a Mercedes-Benz showroom during the 1990s, before it was demolished to be replaced by storage units.

We remember going to Christmas parties with dad's work colleagues and he always seemed incredibly happy in his job. He loved repairing engines and bodywork, so in many ways, he was combining work with his hobby. Dad spent much of his spare time in the world of automobiles and he built close friendships through his love of engineering, and especially repairing cars. Ron Newell was an electronic engineer and dad focused on the engines, replacement parts, bodywork and welding. Another close friend, Norman Harris, owned the garage under *the thirteen arches*, just off Muller Road and Stapleton Road. It was called The Viaduct Garage and he had welding equipment in his workshop to repair cars. Norman often asked dad to help him out and he worked at the garage replacing engines or car parts. In return, he repaired family cars or allowed dad to work on cars in the workshop. In fact, when

we were older, one of our first cars was an old Austin A35 and dad completely rebuilt the engine! He was also good friends with Sid Wherlock, the upholsterer at Bristol Motor Company.

Dad's love of travelling continued and he adored exploring new places, both in the UK and abroad. We went on camping holidays in Devon, Cornwall and Scotland and stayed in Mrs Pender's bed and breakfast on the Isles of Scilly. In 1959, we went on a particularly memorable driving holiday in mainland Europe. Dad drove the whole family – nine of us in total – to France, Switzerland and Italy in a hired minibus. There were no package holidays back then and dad organised the whole trip. The Thomas Cook travel company offered an itinerary service, whereby they informed you of things like ferry times, campsites and suggested routes, but dad always had his map out and preferred to plan his own journey. The women stayed in one tent and the men had another, with a section in the middle for cooking meals. We were both still very young and didn't understand the significance of the trip at the time. It was likely to have been the first time dad had visited France since the end of the War. Whilst there were no obvious stops on the way linked to his experiences during wartime, we can only imagine what must have been going through his mind as he travelled through a country he helped to liberate. We travelled down through France and into Switzerland, stopping at a campsite in Lucerne, before our onward journey to Italy. Sadly, our Auntie Joyce was taken ill in Lucerne and, after a short spell in hospital, eventually had to fly home with Uncle Ken.

Ken was planning to share the driving with dad and Shirley's husband George, but with George reluctant to sit in the driver's seat, this meant dad had to drive the rest of the way to Italy, as well as the whole journey home! In his usual style, dad took it all in his stride and didn't complain once. His composure under pressure came to the fore when we were driving along a mountain path and had to turn back as it was blocked by snow! As we travelled down through the Alps into Italy, the freezing cold air turned to brilliant warm sunshine. It was a welcome change but unfortunately the windows of our minibus were broken and didn't wind down. Dad, as industrious as ever, took the door apart, and removed the window, so we had some fresh air on the way to our final destination of Venice. It was a huge adventure and we

think we were the only children in our class who had been abroad at the time. They are very special memories.

In later years, dad became the workshop foreman at Bristol Motor Company but decided to leave the business in 1961 to pursue a new career as a lecturer at Brunel Technical College, in Ashley Down, Bristol specialising in sheet metal work and technical drawings. However, a year after joining the college, dad had a heart attack. We can clearly remember the day he was taken ill. He thought he had indigestion. The doctor was called, and he was admitted to Frenchay hospital. He had always been healthy, so it was a shock to everyone. He had a clot and was in hospital for what seemed like weeks. This was in the days before stents were common practice, so the recovery period was longer. He was incredibly determined and would always complete his required daily exercise regime which contributed to him recovering remarkably well and there were no lasting effects, so he returned to Brunel Technical College.

He enjoyed his role as a lecturer and was a very good at it. He was well thought of by the students and Tony, the husband of our niece Debbie, is good friends with a number of ex-students who attended his lectures. They always spoke highly of dad and Tony often talks about this time in dad's life. He recalls dad was very well respected and renowned for being "firm but fair". He was also known as an excellent engineer who "knew his stuff", cared about his students and was a patient and effective lecturer. It makes us smile when Tony remembers he was particularly renowned for his class projects. The "projects" usually involved the students making things to go on either dad's railway engine or the track! Dad loved his railway engine, which he kept on the track in the garden. It was an extension of his love of cars, and engineering in general, so it really comes as no surprise to hear he once again combined his working-life with his passion and hobby. The railway engine was large enough for his grandchildren to sit on and they enjoyed travelling around the garden in style. The students at Brunel Technical College all recall making brackets, panels and numerous other items, and Tony revealed his friends enjoyed working on the engine and track projects, as they had a genuine purpose. Dad eventually became head of department, and had a team of lecturers - Clarke, Crosby and Betts - who all lectured in sheet metal work. He worked at the college until

his retirement in 1974 and they presented him with a lovely card and gift at his retirement party, reinforcing how highly regarded he was by his students and colleagues alike. Tony started at the college in 1977 and although dad did a very small amount of stand-in work, he didn't have the opportunity to attend one of his lectures.

Dad found it difficult to sit and do nothing and had so many interests. He would walk miles every weekend with his brother Graham. They would stroll with their walking sticks, and occasionally a family dog, through the countryside around Bristol. He continued to enjoy travelling, both at home and abroad and loved visiting castles. Dad even bought a small caravan upon his retirement, and him and mum would head off for the weekend with Graham and his wife Rose. Every year he would tow the caravan to a campsite in Mullion Cove in Cornwall and the whole family could visit during the summer months.

Family was still at the core of everything he did. Dad took great pleasure from learning about new places, hence his voracious appetite for reading. He would make the trip to the local library - often the mobile library which pulled up near his home - and return with a stack of books on a range of subjects.

He also maintained his love of boats. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he owned a small boat with his friend Sid Wherlock from Bristol Motor Company. They named the boat Sally 56, and he would spend hours on the river. They even went sailing on the River Severn once but had to be towed back to shore. Sally was a cabin boat, but she would quite often sink! On one occasion, we had a phone call to say she had sunk at Pill on the outskirts of Bristol, not far from where dad was stationed during the early stages of the war! Dad also used his hands-on skills to build a smaller boat with an outboard motor.

Mum and dad continued to live on Stapleton Road until 1971 when they moved to Duchess Way, close to Stapleton Church. Lyn was still living at home but had met her future husband, Alan, and Stephanie had moved back to the family home for a short time.

The only thing dad ever seemed to regret in life was mum's illness. Mum started to develop dementia in 1980. Dad had recently had a lung operation and mum had an operation on her ankle after fracturing it in a fall. She had it set under anaesthetic, but it didn't set properly, so

they inserted a plate the following week. Upon leaving hospital, we immediately noticed a difference in her. Mum was hallucinating and dad phoned us to say he was incredibly worried about her. After another spell in hospital when the confusion and hallucinations initially got worse, she was allowed home.

Over the next few months, the hallucinations became few and far between, but her memory and walking continued to worsen. She was still able to get out and about with help from family and friends and even visited the Netherlands with dad, Lyn, Alan and the children. We travelled on the overnight ferry and mum and dad shared a cabin next to ours. Our cabins felt like they were right down in the hull of the ship and during the night we heard an awful bang. Our first thought was that our vessel had collided with something and we might have to abandon ship! But it went quiet again and we went back to sleep. The next morning, dad asked, “did you hear me fall out of the bunkbed last night?” There was us wondering if we should look for the lifejackets, when it was just dad falling out of bed! Thankfully he was fine.

We had a lovely week and visited Ghent, Bruges and the bulb fields, and dad could remember some of the nearby villages from his time in battle. He didn’t really talk about it, but you could tell there were times when he would take a few minutes to be alone with his thoughts. Dad still loved to drive but Alan did the driving on this occasion!

Mum enjoyed the break, but she was starting to get very confused and needed help with most things. Her mobility issues confined her to a wheelchair and the symptoms of her dementia became more pronounced. About one month after our return from the Netherlands, mum fell out of bed. Typically, it was during an evening when most of us were out. Dad couldn’t help her back into bed and was advised to call an ambulance. Our family doctor explained to dad that they would admit mum to Frenchay and they would help her get back on her feet. Following an assessment, the specialists told dad that she really needed to receive specialist care.

It was obvious being mum’s carer was taking its toll on dad and we didn’t want his health to suffer. He was still comparatively fit but there had been occasions when he had almost been dragged to the ground when helping mum.

She moved to the care home at Manor Park Hospital in 1985 but the thought of mum moving into care made dad very upset. They were a devoted couple and he would have done anything for her. They had a special relationship and we realised recently that we had never even heard them argue.

While mum was in Manor Park, dad never felt sorry for himself and made a real effort with cooking. We would sometimes visit him in our lunch breaks, and he would always have a cooked meal waiting. He also loved having the family over on a Saturday and he enjoyed preparing all the food. He really could turn his hand to anything. As with his time in the army, dad would always look on the bright side, even during worrying and uncertain times.

Then, one day in 1989, our lives changed for ever. It was 7 August, and Dad was out walking Lyn's dog when he was very suddenly taken ill after suffering a heart attack.

Dad had also had a cardiac arrest seven months earlier when visiting mum at Manor Park, but the nurses managed to get a resuscitation team to treat him just in time. He recovered in Frenchay hospital and spent some time recuperating at Lyn's house, before returning home. Once again, he really surprised everyone with his speed of recovery.

He went for a follow-up with the consultant and was told there was nothing more they could do to help dad. We remember him telling us in a very matter-of-fact way. He knew he'd had a few warnings and even wrote a letter to us, detailing who he wanted to receive some of his more personal items and keepsakes.

Sadly, on this occasion in 1989, it wasn't another warning, and Dad passed away one month before his eightieth birthday. We were heartbroken.

Just a few weeks later, on 10 October, mum died. There are no words to describe our pain during this period, it was truly awful. Auntie Joyce and Uncle Ken, who came on holiday with us to France, Switzerland and Italy, had passed away earlier in the year as well, so 1989 was a terribly sad year for our family.



Looking back on dad's life and everything he experienced, the one constant throughout was his huge love for his family. A loving wife, brother, sisters, daughters, grandchildren and his wider family, all brought him huge amounts of pleasure.

He was always cheerful and whenever you saw him, you had a good time with laughter never far away. His grandchildren remember him with great fondness and simply as a fun grandfather, from playing with model trains in the back garden to happy memories on holiday.

Dad had experienced the horrors of war first-hand but seeing his wife of over fifty years so terribly ill, and not being able to do anything to help, was the hardest and saddest time of his life. They were inseparable throughout their lives together, and it really hurt him when she had to leave the family home and move into Manor Park Care Home. In his letter to us before he died, he told us he'd had a good life. He didn't waste time and filled every minute. Maybe that was a legacy from his time at war – he'd witnessed death and destruction and was determined to live every day and enjoy every moment of his future. The future that so many had taken away from them at such a young age. He was extremely proud of his family but also very proud to have served his Country.

Dad kept in touch with some of his close friends from his time in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, sending and receiving Christmas cards each year, and very occasionally visiting friends like Roy Bradley at his home or catching-up at reunions or dinners. As with many soldiers, we're sure his experiences during World War II shaped his character and outlook for the rest of his life.

We are incredibly proud of our dad. We were lucky to have him as our father and he was the greatest. We felt that way before we read his diaries, but his wartime stories just reiterated what an extraordinary man he was.

When dad had his lung operation in 1980, the man in the bed next to him called Lyn over and said, "I'm proud to be able to call your father a friend."

That says it all and he had many friends who felt the same way. We think dad would like to be remembered as a man who did his duty, was a loving family man and a good friend to many – and that is exactly what he was...

Good night, god bless.

Stephanie Williams and Lyn Channing

(Stephen Henry Baker's youngest daughters)

*June 2019*