

My Retreat and Escape from Dunkirk

From the beginning, when I was called up into the forces, I was a driver in Battery Head Quarters. It was 158 Battery, Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. In France I was given the 200 gallon water truck to drive and I had to supply the Battery Head Quarters and the guns with supplies. My mate was called Tommy O'Connor and we both had to go and find water from fire stations, or even pump it out of canals and then treat it with clorene to make it safe to drink.

After the war had really started, when the Germans began to hit the Belgians and the French, one of our troops (D Troop) moved up into Brussels and I was sent to D Troop with a lorry load of Bofor ammunition. The lorry was really a civilian coal lorry from Trowbridge in England and it was night-time when I got to Brussels in it. I was immediately put on guard when I got there - four hours at a time - and was told to watch out for snipers. In the morning we had to move out because we found we were being surrounded and we pulled into an orchard for awhile.

We soon found we were being shelled there too so we began to pull out and I was the last to get out on to the road. My lorry suddenly stopped and when I looked at the engine I found that some shrapnel had gone straight through the engine block which made it useless. Being the last out onto the road, I found that all the other chaps had gone and so I was now left on my own. I made the decision to walk in the direction that they had gone. A short while later I came upon an infantry officer who gave me a lift to his Head Quarters where the Battery despatch rider came looking for me. I climbed on to the back of his bike and he took me to a big garage in Roubiex. Here, we got ourselves another lorry and drove back to where I had left mine in the road. We unloaded the Bofor ammunition and smashed up the lorry so that it was no good at all to the Germans.

So, at this point, I was left without a vehicle, but an ordanance chappy called Green happened to have a motor bike which he didn't fancy riding during action, so I accepted it with pleasure and from this moment on was classed as a despatch rider. The garage we were in at Roubiex was in-between two streets so we knocked out the wall at the back in order to provide a means of escape should Gerry come down either way.

I was later detailed to go with a major and two guns to a bridge over a river or canal and I had to stay there until the infantry had all got back over. After they had the Royal Engineers blew it up and I was finally able to move off. We travelled towards the coast and travelled all night, but it was very slow going owing to all the refugees filling the road with their prams, horses and carts, and all the possessions they could carry. About dawn we pulled into a farm-yard to brew up some tea and to have some breakfast but the major came to me with a map reference and told me to go on to Dunkirk on my own to let them know, he said, that we were on our way. I think he thought we might get left behind when everybody else left France and Belgium for England.

At least, on my motor bike I could make quicker time than the larger vehicles but even on the bike it was slow going and Gerry kept coming over in his planes and bombing and shooting. Lots of people, soldiers and horses were killed in these raids. I made it safely to Lapanne and found there the Regimental Head Quarters. When I reported in they were all fast asleep after travelling for so long. All our guns were surrounding Dunkirk and Lapanne on the beaches, and at the back of the town.

I soon found myself in the basement of an hotel on the front of the promenade, and there were soldiers everywhere you looked, all just waiting to get a boat home. Our guns were continually in action firing at the Gerry planes which came over all the time. I got into a bomb hole on the beach with a First World War machine gun and I and some other lads took it in turns firing it and then filling the pans up with bullets.

I was told to go around the various guns and collect ammo reports. I was just approaching one of these guns when they had a premature shell burst as it was firing and it blew off the Troop Sergeant's arm and shoulder. I found out afterwards that he did get back to Blighty O.K.

The next day the Major asked me to ride with him on the motor bike down beside the sea, on the hard sand by the water. We seemed to be making our way towards Dunkirk again but then he pointed to a dead sailor in the water and asked me if I would go in and get his life-jacket off him, because, the Major said, he could not swim. I have no idea what nationality the dead sailor was but he certainly wasn't English. Later, he took me to Regimental Head Quarters at the back of the dunes where he told me to follow with my bike him, his driver, and his batman, all of whom were in his truck. He parked it at the side of a house next to a lorry full of ammo and I left my bike against the gates of the garden. Just then, once again, Gerry started shelling us. One of the shells hit the lorry and set it on fire and I jumped into a slit-trench with a young officer. Every time we looked out of the trench the Bofor shells were swishing over the top of us. Eventually we got out and I found that the garden wall had collapsed on top of my bike so I had to leave it there.

We got into the house and I soon heard the Adjutant shouting up to the bedroom window that he must have words with the Colonel. The next thing I knew was that we had to go to a point on the beach at 8 o'clock at night ready to try and get a boat which would take us out to one of the larger boats which were further out to sea. We drove all the trucks into the sea to form a kind of pier so that the boats could approach the end of this makeshift pier without grounding. Eventually, as a small metal whaler approached, we climbed over the roofs of all the trucks and got into the boat. We found there were only two sailors in it so about a dozen of us had to row whilst the Colonel stood up in the bow and shouted out to keep us in time with one another. We made it to a ship anchored further out in deeper water and finally got picked up. I can't remember much about this ship, or what it was called, because I and all the others were so dead-beat, but I do remember seeing the white cliffs of Dover appear and thanking my lucky stars that we had managed to get away.

We went straight to some place for a meal when we landed at Ramsgate. We were then put on a train to Rugby in Staffordshire and at every station where we stopped on the way people gave us cups of tea and cakes. We were given a postcard to write and send home but mine took over a week to get home and until that time my Mother thought I was still in France.

We stayed for a couple of nights in a tent at a camp. We had no kit at all. I didn't even have a razor and the only clothes I had were what I stood up in. We eventually got a bath and some clean clothes then we were put on a train again which took us this time to Penhale in Cornwall where the rest of the regiment had assembled. A few days later I was given a 48 hour pass home but afterwards I had to return to Sturminster-Marshall near Wimborne in Dorset. There, we started being re-fitted with guns and trucks. The Ministry of Transport Sergeant gave me a truck to drive but when the Major appeared to make an inspection he asked me what I was doing with a truck. I said I was a driver but he told me I

was to be his despatch rider in Battery Head Quarters and that was how I spent the rest of my war days - as a despatch rider. With my two friends Frank Sims and Wilf Pearson we discovered the freedom of getting around on our own and we became known as Pile-up Pearson, Sideslip Sims and Broadside Bath. We were together for most of the war and we had jeeps in the desert from Alemain to Tunis but always looked after one another.

Frank Sims was my best man when I got married after the war, and I was his.

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