

**The reverse of some of the photos include:**

Reverse of photo of 3 tanks: "L/C Lester. FHQ Troop. Squadron in action - Germany possibly at near Bad [Oders loc?], the day we got [bumped?] as leading. This picture was taken by a war office photographer. It is HQ troop behind the first line (us) firing their 95mm howitzers as opposed to our 75mm long barrels." "1945."

Reverse of photo of a group of POWs: "These are some Jerry prisoners we took. They are waiting to be taken to Div Cage." "46"

Reverse of photo of a road (foreground), river (background): "Crossing the River Elbe. B Sqdn tank moving towards the hill on the east bank, one or two shell holes." "97". "L/C Lester".

Reverse of crew lounging on a tank: "Troop Leader's crew: Lt. Eyles, Cmdr.; Ginger, Gunner; Taffy, Operator; Basil, Co/Driver; Myself [Lester]. Driver" [Stamped: Foto Schubert D136 Kappeln Schleid]

Reverse of crew sat at a table next to a tank: "3 of us having grub at a quiet time. Basil, Smacker and Myself [Lester]. Germany 1945. [Stamped: Velox 1 340.]

**Jim Lester's autobiography (typed 1st February 2008) includes:**

Born on 30th April, 1925. Among other businesses his father ran Bridge Café, Confectioner and Baker Evesham where Jim grew up from 4 years old to 5 when he married. "It was not a particularly thriving concern because it was the years of the Depression. The answer to improve things was for Dad to buy a second business making just bread, a staple food of the people. He bought another business at the other end of town. He had several delivery vans in the town and country, two horse vans and two early motor vans and it was jolly hard work. They opened the café on Sundays during the summer and catered for coach parties in the gardens. I was pressed into service to run errands, fetch milk and turn the handle of the bread-slicer. From the time I was seven, eight or something like that I began to spend quite a bit of time in the summer down at the nearby boathouse, owned by Mr. Collins. I was hauled out of the river quite regularly so I was banned until I could swim the width of the river and back again. At the age of 11 I had finished prep school in Evesham and was sent to Worcester Royal Grammar School..."

"World War II was looming and in September 1939 it started. Fortunately living in a rural area there was no question of evacuation but by 1940 some of our school-masters [Worcester Royal Grammar] were called up and old boys who had left by 1939 were calling back into school in uniform of one of the services when they were on leave. At home circumstances were repeated as in 1914 with several bakery staff being called up. Fortunately the older ones were left. Bill was called up and posted to the RAF Locking Base near Weston-Super-Mare in the catering division. He suffered health problems and was discharged. I left school in 1941 and had to help out at the bakeries. I volunteered for the army in the tank division in early 1942 although Dad appealed and was allowed to keep me a few months longer. I therefore missed the opportunity of ever applying for college."

**"My time in the Army during World War II:**

My early training was at Bovington in Dorset and a fairly non-worldly wise young man of 17 reported to the primary training wing where we were inducted into army life. Discipline was fairly rigorous and although not physically attacked we had plenty of verbal abuse from the NCOs sorting us out by shouting and calling us all sorts of names until we jumped to everything at the double. We had hours of drill and polishing our boots with toothbrush handles to make them shine which was called boning. Reveille was at 6:00 a.m. There were 30 men living in a hut and beds had to be made up in a special way, no sheets of course, just straw filled palliasses. Kits

had to be laid out and the hut swept. We had to stand to inspection by 7:15 a.m., then breakfast with tea in mugs poured from buckets with a spout on I might add. We had drill, marching drill and arms drill and were not allowed off camp for the first four weeks. We then had two weeks to finish our training. We were given a day's leave on a Sunday. From there we went down to the training regiment, a proper one, and had a month's tuition in wireless instruction to learn morse code and to handle short distance radio. We also had map reading tests. Then followed a month of gunnery instruction. We learnt how to strip a machine gun, how to handle the bigger guns and then we had actual target practice from the tanks at Lulworth Cove where I did pretty well. We then had a month of driving and maintenance on both lorries and tanks and we took the tanks onto the nearby moors. Very hair-raising at first because we were totally unused to being enclosed in a tight vehicle where we had very limited vision. We were taught the basics of how the engine worked. I never did master the complicated business of the tank engine. I didn't do too badly on the ordinary lorries. The last month we had a combination of all the skills going on exercises more shooting and culminating in a 60 mile route march in the New Forest living rough. We had to carry a full pack with a blanket, ground sheet and some spare clothing. If you took your boots off, it was a job to get them on again because of our swollen feet. We were then posted to a service unit to become members of a crew."

"I became a Gunner Driver and posted to the Gloucester Hussars and posted to the north of England where it was very, very cold. We had manoeuvres and gunnery practice and generally learnt how things should work. An interesting point in all this, the more we fiddled with the tanks the more they broke down but when it came to actual action in Europe we didn't have time to touch them and they ran perfectly well."

"Prior to the invasion we were drafted to Norfolk and I learnt many years later that we were there as a decoy for the invasion. They had built dummy aerodromes, merely roofs, purporting to be hangars for planes and they sent us out every day on what we thought were meaningless trips in the tanks going round as much as possible to give the impression that we were doing final training perhaps being observed by any spies that the Germans might have placed in that part of the world prior to the war."

"We were posted south ready for the invasion and quite suddenly the regiment was disbanded and we were posted to various other units. I went to the 15th/19th King's Royal Hussars. We embarked for the channel crossing and it was quite rough going over and we landed in France. We were moved up the line from France in cattle trucks where it said on the side of the truck "40 men or 8 horses". I had come a long way with a friend called Peter. However, I was posted to B squadron and he was posted to C squadron so we were parted then. Regrettably in one of the actions his tank was hit and it burnt out and the whole crew died. I remember passing his burnout tank next morning as we passed through. I do want to stress here that there are no heroics in my time serving. I was just an ordinary soldier, a member of a crew, hundreds doing exactly what I was doing. I suppose we had a slightly closer bond with each other because we were living and fighting close together. I seemed always to have an officer as crew commander and therefore we had a little bit more work to do because on breaks he would be able to go back to join the other officers. We carried our own supplies including water which was very carefully used, mostly for drinking and very rarely for shaving. We had a certain amount of freedom in the way we appeared, many of us sporting various modes of dress with mufflers etc."

"Actual designation was the 28th Armoured Brigade of the 11th Armoured Division and we travelled up through Belgium on various occasions. We had several operations and one day our

troop commander decided we should reconnoiter out on foot the silly man that he was. We were immediately shelled by mortars and one chap, Fred Frost, received fifteen different wounds. Eventually of course he was evacuated to England but he did rejoin us right at the end. I felt a piece of shrapnel land between my legs when I fell flat on the ground so I was very fortunate. Another time we shelled a position and emptied our ammunition bins. I was turret gunner that day. Normally I was the hull gunner and as we turned away a German aircraft came down to attack but we moved quite quickly and were able to escape any attention. By now we were in Holland near the River Maas and it was late Autumn and the winter was setting in and it was very, very cold. The ice was at least 20 inches thick on the dykes and it had become a stalemate for both us and the Germans as neither side could do much. Things began to move at last and we crossed the river into Germany knowing we were winning. I recall one instance when we were harboured up and during the night we heard a huge bang. Once daylight came we found an enormous 12 ft. or 15 ft. crater a few yards away from where we had pitched our bivouac. We slept dressed of course under the back of the tank with a tarpaulin stretched from the back to the ground and we had a ground sheet and whatever else to keep us warm. We never took anything off. The thing I disliked most of all when we were in harbour was when we were attacked by what they called anti-personnel bombs. They were sent over possibly by mortars and they exploded about 15 inches off the ground. The only means of protection when they were scattered around was into a slit trench so it was not particularly pleasant. Going back in my memory an early incident I recall in Holland; our tank was stuck in the mud. Fortunately we were behind the line but who should drive by in the staff car but General Eisenhower so we felt quite embarrassed to be stuck where we were. The last very major incident for me was when B Squadron was given the lead for the whole brigade so we knew things would happen. I was in the hull gunner's position (that is in the bottom front of the tank) and I had a German motorcyclist crew right in my sights and I was just about to deal with it when my machine gun jammed. The very next minute we hit a mine which they had possibly laid and it blew up my side of the plating. The crew bailed out but my hatch was jammed so I had to wriggle through the bulkheads to the driver's side and get out that way. Fortunately the tank did not catch on fire so we were able to scramble away while my colleagues passed by in the tanks to deal with the situation. We were eventually taken back to base and a bit later given a new tank. This was a new type. The early type we had was called The Cromwell and it had a 75 mm gun in the turret and it had my machine gun down in the front of the hull. The turret revolved driven by the tank engine and we could elevate or depress the barrel using a shoulder mechanism and hydraulically rotate the turret. Our new tank was far better. It had a 77 mm gun and a slightly better machine gun and we had to learn quickly how to strip that down and in both cases re-assemble it.

We progressed to an area where they had been launching the Doodle Bugs which were the flying bombs that were going to London. They had launching platforms along the autobahn because Hitler had built these amazing roads called the autobahns which were the forerunner of what we call motorways and so we were able to prevent some of those being launched against London. They were pilot-less bombs and timed to explode from the time they got over London. They were called V1s and V2s and the engine would suddenly cut out and they would descend and there was no knowing where they were going to fall. If they were picked up on the radar the RAF fighters would try to fly along side them and tilt them off course by flipping their wings underneath these flying bombs which was a pretty brave and dangerous operation to do in those days in fast flying fighter aircraft.

I do recall when we went into Germany the first time we saw a German jet fighter before they were very prevalent in our forces and another instance I recall we saw a German fighter screaming over a hill quite low to us and suddenly three English typhoon aircraft appeared and they formed a circle round him and it was quite obvious that the poor guy was never going to escape. I think they must have sort of said OK Charlie you can have him and they shot him down and he landed just the other side of the hill.

So we began a steady push through Germany and began to come across several prisoner of war camps. I recall one incident very amusingly a bomber pilot crew member who had obviously bailed out some time and taken prisoner came dashing along pushing a child's pram that he had found from somewhere with all his bits and pieces that he had picked up on his way from camp. It was really quite a chaotic situation because prisoners were being released on various stretches of the front and there was no particular organisation. Amongst the things that happened at this particular time either our brigade or regimental headquarters were involved in opening Belsen, the infamous prison camp. Our own medical officer came back and he was personally talking to me and some of my fellow soldiers and he said he just could not believe the sight he had seen. It was totally unbelievable. Eventually we began to push on further into north-west Germany and we directed our push towards the port of Flinnsburg and our own particular regiment took Admiral Doenitz as prisoner. He was the one who masterminded the U-Boat War. Of course being a senior officer he was treated with great respect. Our own regiment itself finished at a small port called Kappeln from where midget German submarines had been trained and stored. We imposed a dawn to dusk curfew patrolling the streets. We met some of the German crews as prisoners, just decent young men such as ourselves but of course on the losing side. We continued there for a few weeks after the official surrender. During the final days we had met up with some Russian troops and thought they were a very hard and cruel lot. The prisoner of war cages were getting quite crowded and they eyed our column of tanks with despairing looks. A slightly bizarre, almost semi-amusing incident, my wireless operator in my tank was shepherding some prisoners into the cage and accidentally shot one of them in the foot. Not a laughing matter for the poor chap but he was taken care of. The only time we saw American armour was near Heidelberg and they were bemused that our crews were only wearing soft berets instead of crash helmets and quite rough overalls compared with their elaborate kit. A couple of additional thoughts:

The tank regiments evolve from the former cavalry on horses and they were split up into groups (squadrons) and our squadron leader was an Irish man named Lord Rathdonnel. I remember one incident when he was carrying out an inspection of all our guns. We had to dismount the machine guns from the hull or turret and he would peer down the barrels and in his very cultured voice I remember him saying looking down "uum yes it's just a case of war and tar (meaning wear and tear) but I'm sure it will do for a bit longer". Another incident he gathered everyone round after he had briefed the crew commanders and in this very matter of fact voice he said we will probably be engaging with our old friends (friends indeed) Panzer Laird. Panzer Laird was a division of the German Army who were equipped with probably the finest tanks in the whole of the war. They had a long barrelled 88 mm gun which was capable of passing right through our own front armour in our tanks which were called Cromwells. The redeeming feature of the Cromwell is that it did not catch on fire too easily.

Some time during the slower parts of action various crews were granted 48 hours leave and because we had an officer as a crew commander there were four of us and our number was

made up by the scout car driver of the squadron whose name was Brown. We called him Topper Brown and so we were taken by lorry back to Brussels just for 48 hours leave and things were relatively civilised because the Americans were there and they had various sort of things going on. We could get a coffee and that is where I saw my first American doughnut. I do remember that one of the well known film stars was there entertaining the American troops, I think it was Hedy Lamarr. Unfortunately when we returned Topper Brown was killed. His scout car was hit, a direct hit so it was blown up, so we did not see him decorated for bravery in World War Lin 101-918 again.

Within six to eight weeks we were told that we would not be part of the army of occupation but were going straight out to Egypt so we had no leave. I didn't really know our mission but shortly after arrival we moved up to Palestine. We were no longer a tank unit but just semi-armoured trucks to attempt to control the landing of Jewish immigrants and prevent fighting with the Arab Palestinians. Still an unresolved problem 60 years later..."