

AFTER THE SHOOTING HAS STOPPED

The story of Captain Thomas Evered



This narrative focuses on my father's period in the Royal Engineers for the "duration of the emergency" as it was referred to in official documents of the time. Much of the record covers his service during the period of occupation of Germany by the allies in the aftermath of the war. Neither the war nor the dangers were over for many simply because the shooting had stopped.

Tom Evered was my father. He was a Chartered Surveyor responsible for the care and maintenance of the estate of a firm of retail tobacconists. He was just short of his 32nd birthday on 3 September 1939. He joined the Home Guard shortly after the outbreak of war and was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in March 1943. He undertook the OTU course with the TBRE (Training Battalion Royal Engineers) in Elgin and was subsequently stationed in Fareham and Havant with 696 AW (Artisan Works) Company RE overseeing works in preparation for the invasion of Normandy in June 1944. During this time he was also trained in mine clearance (February 1944). He was later posted to 46 and 50 RHU (Reinforcement Holding Unit) and finally TOS (Taken on Strength) with 760 A Troops Company RE. He embarked for France on 4 September 1944 and, following in the wake of the rapid progress of the 21st Army Group after the breakout from Normandy, arrived in Brussels shortly after the liberation of the city (3 September 1944). He was initially stationed in Brussels and, I believe, was engaged in mine clearance in Belgium during the ensuing months. Following the conquest of the Western parts of Germany, Tom was appointed to command the Mine Lifting Office in Aachen.

A quadripartite agreement amongst the Allied Occupying Powers decreed that all land mines in the occupied territories should be cleared by the end of July 1947. This agreement was reached without any clear understanding of the extent of the task. It soon became evident that this target would not be met. This was particularly true of the area close to the Siegfried Line near the Belgian border. This was one of the most heavily mined areas in the west. The 1800 km² area between Aachen and Köln was the responsibility of the Mine Lifting Office in Aachen. The zone was bounded by the Belgian border in the west, Monschau and Schleiden in the south, Euskirchen and Düren in the east and Julich and Geilenkirchen in the north. There were approximately 1200 minefields in the area. Minefield charts only existed for two-thirds overall and in some areas for less than half.

Clearance was carried out by Labour Service Groups (*Dienstgruppen*). These Mine Clearance Service Groups (MCSG) each comprised 100 – 150 men, former members of German Pioneer Battalions (the counterparts of the Royal Engineers). Overall supervision was the responsibility of divisional engineers and local management was delegated to local Mine Lifting Offices. Each was the responsibility of a single Royal Engineers officer. The Office in Aachen was led by my father. It

appears that he had responsibility for six MCSGs (nos: 179, 180, 181, 183, 184 and 733) amounting to just over 1000 men. The individual Groups were led by German officers (*arbeitsleiter*s) who had responsibility for allocating tasks to the men. A further three MCSGs were added later in Operation Tappet (after my father had been demobilised) when it became clear that the initial clearance target would not be met. This led to a doubling of the number of personnel involved. The officer in charge was tasked with meeting German Group leaders daily to agree plans, oversee the work of the groups and ensure areas were effectively cleared and details properly recorded. He was also required to provide additional technical instruction if this was needed.

There were four main types of mine to be cleared. The Teller and the Riegel (anti-tank mines) and the S (*Schrapnelmine*) and Schu (antipersonnel mines). Each posed problems. The Teller was very sensitive to movement having two fuses and anti-handling devices. The fuse wires of the Riegel were particularly prone to corrosion and it was also sensitive to disturbance. The Schu was encased in a wooden box with little metal making it hard to detect with metal detectors. The S-mines were known as Bouncing Bettys as they sprang into the air and sprayed shrapnel around at about 1 metre above the ground – in the area of the genitalia. Clearance was carried out with hand probes (prodders) and metal detectors (of which there was a limited supply). The groups do not appear to have had access to vehicle or tank mounted mine flails. The rate of clearance varied widely dependent upon the nature of the devices and the accessibility of the terrain. Clearance rates ranged from 19 – 78 hours per 100 mines cleared with an average of 62 hours. Accidents leading to injury and death were frequent. It is estimated that there was one casualty for every 700 mines cleared. In four groups of approximately 400 men 57 deaths and roughly the same number of non-fatal casualties had been recorded by the autumn of 1946.

The area most heavily seeded with mines within the zone allocated to the Aachen Office was the Hürtgen Forest (*Hürtgenwald*) close to the Belgian border. It is about 130 km² in area and lies within a triangle formed by the towns of Aachen, Nideggen, and Düren. The terrain is characterised by plunging thickly wooded valleys which separate broad plateaux. The Forest was the scene of a long, bloody and drawn-out battle, over five months during a very cold winter from 19 September 1944 to 10 February 1945. This was largely a German defensive victory – albeit a temporary one. The Americans suffered 33,000 casualties during the course of the battle, including 9,000 non-combatant losses – a 25% casualty rate. The Germans also suffered heavy losses with 28,000 casualties – including many non-combatants and prisoners of war. In early February, American forces attacked again through the Forest for the final time. On 10 February, the Roer Dam was taken by American forces only to find that the Germans had jammed open the dam's floodgates a day earlier, flooding the Roer Valley. This delayed the U.S. advance to the Rhine for two weeks as they paused until the flood waters had receded. The battle is well described in a chapter headed "Hell in the Hürtgen" by Max Hastings in his book "Armageddon". It was described by an observer as "a dark and bloody ground" and by Ernest Hemingway as "Passchendaele with tree bursts". The aptness of Hemingway's description is evident from photographs in a report prepared by MCSG 179 (see below).

The clearance of the Forest was the responsibility of MCSG 179 based in Düren and Nideggen and many of the details of the day to day operations have been gleaned from a document prepared as a tribute to my father by the members of this group. This is entitled an "Illustrated Report" and was signed by the German leader of the Group. The title page is inscribed "To Capt T C Evered R.E., the helpful protector of the Mine Clearance Service Groups to remember the time of his successful activities as boss of the Mine Lifting Office Aachen." This document provides a visual record of the challenges posed by the terrain and the procedures involved in locating, lifting and transporting mines to "exploding grounds". The record highlights the approaches to detection with hand-held prodders and detectors and the high casualty rate amongst the Groups.

Members of the groups were "recruited" amongst the prisoners of war who had served in the Pioneer Battalions. Few were serving entirely voluntarily. They were subject to military discipline and would have been treated as deserters had they absconded, although it was unlikely that they would have been found had they done so in the chaotic conditions which prevailed at the time. They received a reasonable food ration and pay based on their old service pay. This was a modest level of compensation for the risks inherent in the work. Most simply wanted to know "when will the war be

over for us” – as did many amongst the occupying forces. The German personnel were also at times abused by locals who assumed that they had been assigned to this hazardous task as punishment for membership of the party or the SS. Sensitive management was essential to maintain morale and create as safe working environments as possible. The “Illustrated Report” referred to above includes a cutting from the *Rheinische Zeitung Köln* (21 September 1946). Under the headline “For the mine clearers in the *Hürtgenwald* “. The item opens with the line “Death still lurks in the Hürtgen Forest”. This included the following paragraph – “The central management and the administration of action plans and the management of the area in the administrative districts of Köln and Aachen is the responsibility of the English Mine Lifting Office of Captain Evered in Aachen, whose energetic support is gratefully acknowledged by all mine clearers”.

The members of MCSG 179 appear to have been a particularly close-knit group. They referred to themselves as *Rabauken*. My dictionary translates this as bullies but discussion with a native German speaker suggested that the word has a more positive connotation and that “rowdies” or “hellraisers” might convey the meaning more accurately. They appear to have established an active sense of community and I have invitations to my father inviting him to join them for three social events – a ball, a summer party and a drinks party. Relief that the hostilities were over was as common amongst the German people as it was amongst the British and other combatant powers. I also have an invitation to him from MCSG 184 to a social event as he was nearing the end of his time in Aachen. These fragmentary pieces of evidence underline the extent to which my father succeeded in managing the groups and their recognition of his efforts to minimise the exposure to the risks inherent in mine clearance.

A personal note. My father was demobilised later than many of his contemporaries. He sadly committed suicide suddenly and unexpectedly in 1959 as I was completing my second year as an undergraduate. There had been all too few opportunities to get to know him well as a child (I was sent to boarding school) or as a young adult. The suddenness of his death had a profound effect on us all, particularly on my mother who was to live as a widow for over fifty years. We felt it necessary in the days following his death to fill the time with practical tasks and decided to sort his personal effects. It was while performing this melancholy duty that we discovered the small collection of documents listed below and learned of his war record and his role in Germany during most of the two years following the cessation of hostilities in Europe. I have added to this information as listed below. He was demobilised in January 1947. His role in mine clearance had been unknown to anyone in the family. In common with many who served, he rarely referred to the war after demobilisation. If he did so it would only be to recount some comical episode in military life.

Documents and records.

An “Illustrated Report” signed by the *Arbeitsleiter* of the MCSG 179.

Detailed notes and line drawings from the Mine Clearance Course attended by Tom Evered in February 1944.

A menu from the Royal Engineers Mess in Brussels

An invitation to the Opening Ceremony of the Patton Bridge over the Rhine in Cologne accompanied by a programme for the day.

Miscellaneous photographs of my father taken in the field and with colleagues and mine clearers.

Invitations to social events issued by leaders of two of the MCSGs.

I have carried out further research and have obtained the following further documentation:

Application for Registration in the Army Officers’ Emergency Reserve and associated papers.

Officer’s Record of Service Book’

Details of Home Guard Service

Release Certificate and Release Book.

The narrative above is based on the documentation listed, information available from publicly available sources (e.g accounts of the occupation) and research in the archives at the Royal Engineers Museum in Gillingham, Kent.

A SMALL CHILD AT HOME

David Evered's story

I was born in the earliest months of the war. I pointed out at my eightieth birthday lunch that I might have been a war baby but I had been conceived to pre-war manufacturing standards! This claim resonated with my contemporaries. We all grew up during the period of hostilities and its aftermath and our childhoods were overshadowed by the impact of the Second World War. My family inevitably shared the anxieties and the privations experienced by all those in Britain during the war years and the period of austerity which followed. The phrase "if only it could be like it was before the war" was repeated endlessly as our elders recalled an imagined golden age which they believed, erroneously, had existed prior to September 1939.

I came into this world in Beaconsfield, a small town 23 miles (37km) to the west of London. My maternal grandparents were well-known in the town. My grandfather had established an estate agency there in 1906 to take advantage of the demand for property locally by the growing number of commuters seeking homes in the area following the arrival of the railway in the early years of the century.

We were fortunate. Despite our proximity to the capital, we escaped aerial bombardment although 60 bombs fell on Slough, an industrial centre 7½ miles away. Nevertheless, one of my earliest recurrent memories is of the siren warning us of impending air raids. Periodically we would retreat to the air raid shelter in our garden. This was a very substantial structure underneath our garage which had been built out over a dell on brick piers. At the outbreak of war this area was encased by solid walls with a small entrance at the lower level. The area was opened up again after the war and was later used as a studio by my father to paint scenery for performances for the local amateur operatic society of which several members of the family were enthusiastic members.

Beaconsfield was, however, the base for two establishments which feature in the history of the Second World War. The Wilton Park Estate was leased to the War Office at the start of the war for use as a top secret interrogation centre. It was occupied from July 1942 and from the middle of 1943 and, later, prisoners included some high ranking officers – Field Marshalls von Rundstedt and Busch and Rudolf Hess. They allegedly lived in considerable comfort supported by staff. Their conversations were monitored by listening devices. Similar environments were established at nearby Latimer House and Farm Hall at Godmanchester. Following the end of the war in Europe the Centre was used for the de-Nazification of German POWs. The other property was Butler's Court which was used by the Free French as a convalescent home and was visited in 1941 by Queen Elizabeth accompanied by General Charles de Gaulle.

I understood from my parents that the first direct impact of the war on their day-to-day lives was the arrival of my paternal grandparents and my father's unmarried elder sister on the doorstep. They had left their flat in Kensington on the outbreak of war anticipating that aerial bombardment would commence within days – if not within hours! This first period of eight months of the war came to be known as the phoney war – or to some as the "bore war". They stayed for only a few days before retreating (possibly rather shamefacedly) to London where they remained throughout the blitz and the V1 and V2 attacks later in the war.

Two family events led to us moving from our home early in 1943. My mother's elder brother, an RAF pilot, was lost, missing in action, in November 1941 and my maternal grandfather died after a cholecystectomy in December 1942. My grandmother was devastated by the loss of her elder son and husband. She withdrew from the active roles which she played in the local community and devoted herself to her family. It was decided, I suspect at her instigation, that we should evacuate our house early in 1943 and move in with her which we did at about the time my father was commissioned. This was to be our home for the next two years while our house was occupied by a family of evacuees from London.

Inevitably my clearest memories are of the latter years of the war and those that followed as we adapted to the necessities of the time. We were all required to have an Identity Card (I still have mine) and were encouraged to carry a gas mask (contained in a flimsy cardboard box) when we were away from home and this became a part of the routine when leaving for school. I had started in a nursery school in 1943 and entered a preparatory school in January 1945 shortly after my fifth birthday.

Rationing was a major feature of our lives and this was not limited to food; clothing, shoes, soap and fuel were also rationed. As a child I was well fed. Vitamin supplements and other nutrients were a major addition to my diet – cod liver oil, virol, powdered milk (which came in a blue and silver tin labelled KLIM) and “welfare” orange juice. My family home was almost entirely alcohol free but I learned later that some parents appropriated the last of these items for an evening drink of gin and orange or, as it was popularly known, gin and “welfare”. Our diet was supplemented in a number of ways. These included staples of the war years such as Woolton Pie, snoek (a fish which was never popular) and, living in a semi-rural area, occasionally by locally shot or trapped rabbit. We grew some of our own vegetables and we were well supplied with eggs. My aunt who lived close by kept chickens during the war years. We would take the egg coupons from our ration books to her to obtain our supply and she, in turn, would use these to buy chicken feed.

I do not recall the end of the war in Europe being accompanied by great rejoicing locally – more by a sense of relief. Late in May 1945 I visited London for the first time and stayed with my grandparents in Kensington. The area close to their flat had survived relatively unscathed. I was taken to the Mall during my stay to see the flags which had been flown to mark the cessation of hostilities.

Rationing, of course, persisted for many years after the end of the war and some items, such as bread, were rationed for the first time. The restrictions were lifted in stages and the final items were finally freed from rationing in 1954 when I was a teenager. The rationing of confectionery was discontinued in 1949. I remember well the excitement of a visit to the local sweet shop. Unfortunately, this excitement was shared so widely that demand hugely exceeded supply and rationing was reimposed a few months later and remained in place until 1953.

The period of austerity which followed VE Day is etched indelibly on my mind. The continuing shortage of the items which remained rationed were generally accepted with resignation. It was simply the way life was. The strongest memories were of the extreme cold of the early months of 1947. Huge snow drifts accumulated and solid fuel was in short supply. There were frequent power cuts. Prior to the onset of this spell of extreme weather I had regularly bicycled the half mile to and from school. This became impossible for some weeks and I would tramp through the snow – often arriving home to find the house in darkness and the family clustered around an open fire fuelled by an inadequate supply of coalite. The power outages deprived me of the opportunity to listen to Uncle Mac on Children’s Hour.

My generation is generally known as the “silent generation” (born between 1926 and 1945) which is said to be characterised by thriftiness, respectfulness, loyalty and resilience. It should be added that, for many of us, we are also members of a fortunate generation. We benefitted from a balanced diet in childhood and were not exposed to the sugary temptations which have contributed to the obesity of later generations. We have also gained from advances in public health, immunisation programmes and modern medicine. We have not been required to serve in the military* and many of us have acquired a degree of comfort and prosperity unknown to and unimagined by our forebears.

*The abolition of National Service was announced during my final year in school. It had seemed very close as fellow pupils who had been with me in the sixth form a year earlier were being deployed to Suez in the autumn of 1956.