

*The Early Life and War Years of  
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1917-1982





something to do as did my sister. At first we stayed at Coburg Villas with my father's mother and his sister. I feel now that this was an unhappy time for my Mother and it wasn't long before we were living in rented rooms at 74 Fore St. My Mother went out to work and Father rented a small shop to do hairdressing. Over the next few years in the 30s I did all sorts of jobs – anything which paid as it was so badly needed. Amongst the work I did:

Working as a labourer for a mason

Scrubbed a hotel from top to bottom (one week's work)

Worked in a photographers for two summers – general dogsbody

Gardening (odd times)

In a general shop near the harbour

On a building site

On a tramp steamer for one trip and meantime I learned the hairdressing from my father.

In or about 1935 I was offered a full time hairdressing job at Woolacombe – you may appreciate how nervous I felt accepting this as I had very little training in the practical sense – still I had the theory. At first I travelled to and fro by bus but later lodged with people. I remember them well for the husband was a small inoffensive man who was unemployed as long as I ever knew him. His wife was very kind and hardworking as there were three of us lodging there. So matters were normally alright but the husband usually got drunk each week when he drew his dole money and of course, his wife would get very, very angry. I remember some astonishing scenes:

One night we were all having supper when the husband came in completely blotto and just stood there swaying to and fro with glassy eyes and trying to make out he was quite sober. Mrs N simply went mad with temper and told him what she thought of him in rising tones – we three lodgers were convulsed with laughter I'm afraid, until matters became more serious as Mrs N picked up the pepper pot and threw the contents in her husband's face! We had a deal of a job washing out his now burning eyes. Another time we were again eating supper when Mr N. came in swaying as usual. Ernie (fellow lodger) had just opened a bottle of beer which was on the table – in her usual (and justified) anger Mrs N snatched up the bottle and before we could move she had emptied it over his head; he just stood there as it dripped all over him. Another trip to the bathroom.

On another occasion I recall Mr N was not home when we went to bed so Mrs N decided to lock him out. We all went to sleep but woke up about 2am by a shattering assortment of noises – what a commotion! Mr N had slept off most of the booze somewhere & had a bad head and now a nasty temper as he found he couldn't get in his house, so he started to shout and bawl 'Let me in' & 'Open the door You \*\*\*\*', and other choice words all the time banging first on the front door and then the back, and back to the front for some more pounding. We dared not unlock the door as it wasn't strictly our business and Mrs N. certainly wouldn't – eventually Mr N tired of this and scarpered off to some barn to properly sleep it off.

I may say that invariably after these do's Mr N would be duly contrite and always promise not to do it again, but alas the flesh was weak. It was after I left them that I believe they separated.

After working for some two years for this employer I left and rented an empty shop to start business on my own. It went reasonably well for a time and I was thinking of opening another shop at Saunton when a big crisis in Europe made me think again. It was 1938 and during the 30s in



Germany a man called Adolf Hitler came to power – he pioneered an evil party known as Nazis ie: Fascists, and ruled the country by force and fear and it wasn't long before he looked at the rest of Europe to expand. In 1938 he wanted part of Czecho-Slovakia and at last the other countries took alarm but a miserable deal was done by France and the UK in the attempt to stop Hitler. Well a lot of people believed that the uneasy peace would stay but I felt sadly that one day we would have to fight for our lives. This made me stop where I was in my little shop as I knew I should go to war if war came. War came alright in 1939. In March of that year Hitler cynically seized the whole of Czechoslovakia and in August invaded part of Poland – so that was that, and war started on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939.

At first I wanted to join the Royal Navy and went home to talk it over with my Mum and Dad. My dear Mum was worried stiff and I could see her point so I let the matter drop. In a few months it was necessary for me to register my name for service – as I had my own business I appeared before a committee who was allowed to delay one's 'call up' if necessary but I had no wish to delay & requested an early call. This was basically because I wanted to help clear up a mess and the sooner it was started the sooner finished. So I was soon called for a medical in Barnstaple and after that was interviewed by an Army Major who, I recall, looked bored to tears! So a few questions about education led him to ask me what would I like to do in the Army! I said I didn't mind going into the Infantry. This made him sit up and as he could see I meant this, he was good enough to ask if I had any other interests. I said perhaps the Signals – why I said that I don't know! Anyway it wasn't long before the OHMS envelope was delivered with instructions to report by 9am on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1940, to the 4<sup>th</sup> L of C Coy at Colwyn Bay, North Wales. So I was recruited into the Signals Corps.

As I was living then at home in Ilfracombe I found that I would have to travel overnight to arrive at Colwyn Bay on time – this I did and on the way met up with a few other lads carrying their little cases and due for the same spot – particularly I remember a chap called Fred Newman who came from Plymouth.

We pulled into the Welsh station about 8am to be met by a Signals Sergeant who quite kindly rounded up the 12+ rookies and told us to 'sit over there' whilst he (and we) waited for the next train. I recall that I soon asked the Sergeant if he would 'allow' us to cross the road to get some breakfast at a café we could see; he did not demur and off we trooped for a much needed meal. That done & a further train having arrived we were 'paraded' outside the station and put in threes (there were some thirty of us now). Then to our horror & some amusement we were 'marched' through the main streets of Colwyn to Rhos-on-Sea Congregational Chapel. It was a beautiful sunny day I remember. We all filed into the hall for a medical inspection plus issue of vital documents such as AB64 (paybook etc) & identity discs (known always as dog tags), one had always to be worn around the neck, on it was stamped my name and number: 2344784. It is not easy to recall our exact feelings on this special day but there was a lot of apprehension. We had no idea how long the war would last; at this time it was going badly as France was clearly surrendering as the BEF was being evacuated from Dunkirk and it seemed we had no allies – but I am sure that none of us doubted that we would win in the end.

Later that day we collected each a sack or palliasse & filled it with straw – we were taken to an empty house and six of us allocated to each room. We soon learned to rough it – there was no alternative anyway. Then we entered on a hard month's foot & arms training. After a few days



pounding on the hard roads in my new hard and heavy boots, I had a mass of blisters on my feet. Many of the chaps went sick and were temporarily excused boots – I thought it best to see it out if I could so went to a chemist and bought some plaster and proceeded to cover each blister – I soon had two plastered feet! But in a few weeks my feet were hardening and I was alright at a time when others were still having trouble. On the whole I enjoyed this month – it was such a change from normality!

After this initiating month, we recruits were moved into Colwyn Bay to merge with the 4<sup>th</sup> L of C Coy and for a few weeks were just the dogsbodies and always on dirty and tiring fatigues; the worst and most persistent was a 'cookhouse'. The ?? used a huge concrete floored garage for a messroom; there were some 3-400 trestle tables and corresponding forms. Immediately after breakfast every table was taken down and stacked against the sides of the garage together with the forms. Some 15 or so of us dogsbodies were lined up against one side of the erst-while garage – each man equipped with a squeegee – then hosepipes were played on the rough concrete floor until it was swimming. After that we were released to sweep the water away with our squeegees keeping strictly in a line. This process took an hour or two but after that every table and form had to be scrubbed. It was pretty sickening job of work and very depressing.

Then in July 1940 the Coy moved out equipped with tropical gear so it wasn't hard to guess they were bound for the Middle East. The 30+ of we 'new' recruits did not go. We were regarded as too raw! Instead we were shot off to different places for training; I was on a list to go to Shirehampton near Bristol for linesman training. There were about 8 of us and when we arrived at this hutted camp in the late afternoon I remember we were shown the air raid shelter – a dingy rough walled hole in the ground covered in concrete. The hut we were billeted in was in a field some 400yds from the shelter. Shirehampton is roughly the area of the port of Bristol and we were vaguely aware that it was being bombed frequently.

We were tired that night and all soon asleep but about 12.30am we were awakened by a hideous noise: the air raid siren was located about 5ft from our hut! Well as we had been advised, we tottered out of our beds, dragged on some clothes and staggered across this field in complete darkness until we finally found the shelter. Meanwhile the bombers were overhead doing their stuff and the ack-ack boys were banging away too – so it was some racket. The shelter was dark, it was crammed with soldiers and civilians including children and they added to the noise with their understandable crying and wailing. The All Clear did not sound until near 5am – we teetered back to bed and had hardly closed our eyes before an 'Orrible Sergeant' clattered into the hut at 6am urging us to 'Show a leg'. Breakfast was at 6.45am and we had to shave, wash and clean up the hut before 7.30am for a parade at 8am. How I stayed awake that day, I do not know! The next night, without you thinking that we were really brave, I decided to stay in bed and chance risking the bombs – also some 3 of my comrades agreed to stay also. Within a week I also did not awake to the siren, so enjoyed my warm sleep. We spent four weeks at this place learning our job and it was only on the last night that we were lucky to escape damage. That night as usual the four of us slept on despite the heavy raid, until about 2am a bomb exploded some 100yds from the hut and the blast broke all the windows to pieces whilst the hut actually shivered! Needless to say we were awake and shocked but thankfully none of us were hurt. We weren't sorry to leave the next day!



One other matter whilst I was there is, I hope, of some interest. A football match was arranged between us and the Basques (from Spain) – I was left back. I was late from the lecture and as I hurried to change into my football togs & ran to the field where the referee was just blowing his whistle to start the match I threw my jacket to my chaps but forgot to take off my spectacles! With dire results for almost right away one of the Basques hit the ball high in the air and forwards – I forgot my glasses and ran to head the ball away – at the same time their short centre forward went up to head the ball forward – as I was taller I met the ball with my head but his head caught me, right between the eyes smashing my spectacles to pieces and also knocking me clean out. I recovered at the side of the field and finished the game with a very nasty headache! I think we lost but it is a bit hazy now!

From Shirehampton we moved back to Colwyn Bay which was almost deserted by then as the 4<sup>th</sup> L of C Coy had all gone. I think now that the army didn't know what to do with us as we were bundled off to Conway for some 6-8 weeks. Here we were again billeted in empty houses but the parade ground was at Morfa Camp – just a few old huts. Now and again we were taken for route marches which often ended up in a big canteen – I got fed up and offered to cut hair – this was accepted so I was kept pretty busy most days. Whilst there, my pal Tommy and myself were befriended by a family called Fryer, who were very kind to us indeed. They already had a son in the RAF who was reported as 'missing' – they had another son, David, who was about 15 in 1940. Each Sunday after breakfast I used to go to the Fryers for dinner and tea. One Sunday I arrived back at my billet to find to my surprise (and shock) that the house was empty – where were all my comrades? Well, the next morning I reported to camp to the NCO I/C as I was very curious and I didn't want to get in trouble. The NCO asked where I had been the previous a.m. but didn't make much fuss. A movement order had been received for almost everyone to report to a certain Division in Hampshire.

Well, I missed that move purely by accident! A few days later we all left Conway and moved to another empty house in Prestatyn where we linked up with a lot of other odd bods, some of whom we had met earlier and now all in different trades. We were there one day & messing in a big garage when the next a.m. there was all our names listed and the places etc to which we were posted. There were dozens of places but as usual we were in a nominal roll in alphabetical order and so I was in the last eight, ie from R-Y, and we were to report to Egham the next day. I recall we had no NCO's so the oldest soldier was I/C – a chap called Rogers. We arrived in the dark in the midst of an air raid – the guns were barking and one could hear tiny pieces of shrapnel tinkling on the roof of the station and the heavy crump of bombs exploding. There was nobody to meet us but then in the army one was used to that! Poor Rogers eventually found a telephone and managed to contact the unit office who seemed not to know about us, but they did send a small truck to pick us up – we soon filled that up and swung away into the blackness up hill. I should say that a blackout was very firmly adhered to all over the country. We were eventually delivered to a real mansion house at Englefield Green. There was hardly anyone there but a corporal took us to an ex-ballroom to leave our kit (and sleep on the floor as usual), & then to an empty NAAFI for some much needed food and drink. After this; back to the ballroom and sleep.

It was next morning we had the shock as we were woken at 6.30am and then hurried & harried from place to place for documents, fresh kit, medical inspection etc. and by noon we were all on the station platform at Egham on our way home on seven days embarkation leave! The truth is that two new line sections had been created at Englefield, numbered 38 & 39 – each comprised of two



officers, 3 sergeants a number of linesmen and drivers – totaling some 50+. When we eight new chaps arrived there, the total personnel of the made up Line Sections were already on their embarkation leave. We eight were listed as reserves to either section, i.e. as soon as, & if a man went sick from the set section one of us would immediately take his place. I don't remember much about that leave but I remember returning to the unit and meeting all the other chaps – this would be in September for the Battle of Britain was at its height and stationed as we were on the outskirts of London there was almost always air raid sirens clanging on & off. By day the battle was high in the sky and it was difficult to say whether it was one of ours or one of theirs. As they chased each other one could hear the tap tap of the machine guns and occasionally one could see smoke flying out from the tail or wing & occasionally see a parachute blooming in the distance. It all seemed a bit like a fairy tale and of course at the time it happened we were not aware that later we would know it as the Battle of Britain. But at night it was quite different for the incendiary bombs were let loose on London and the glare from the great fires lit up the whole sky – then it we saw it, felt and heard it for real. One evening for some reason another chap and I had been in the town and stopped for some tea – so we had to return up the hill in the dark during the raid. To avoid the shrapnel and perhaps a bomb we hastened from door to door keeping our fingers crossed – it was all hair-raising.



*Dec 1940: These are my 3 pals, we go everywhere together. They are Fred (Plymouth), Scotty (Edinburgh) & Phil (Tottenham)*

While here I became friendly with 3 other chaps, namely a Scot named Scott (from Perth), Freddy Apps & Phil Stern and when possible, we spent our leisure hours together. Mainly we spent our time training, consisting of lectures of varying interest and getting stores packed up ready for transport. Everything had to be stamped with the same number – I remember we had stencils for this job. Also here, my hairdressing ability came into use – after it was arranged that I would cut the chaps hair a parade was ordered so that the officer could tell the chaps concerned that their hair needed cutting. I was in the back (3<sup>rd</sup>) row and watched idly as the officer walked behind the rows tapping almost each soldier on the back – then he passed along the back of my row & I was surprised when I got a bang on my shoulder – how could I cut my own? My surprise showed in my face and at least it caused a good laugh from everyone. Well that kept me busy and for interest you may wish to not that each soldier gave me 2d each – (less than 1p), but then a soldier's wages each Friday was about 7/- (35p).



It was within a few weeks that members of the 2 Corp were going sick so we 8 people were growing less on the reserve list – it so happened that Phil Stern & myself were next in line when 2 chaps fell out of the 39 Line section and we were drafted in. By now pretty well all the stores were packed and we were on 24 hours readiness to be off. One night in October we were given 1 hour to be ready on parade in FSMO & almost before we knew it we were on a blacked out troop train on our way North & it was chilly. We disembarked at Glasgow and were marched half asleep to a huge dockside warehouse. There must have been 2 or 3,000 soldiers there and it was a ghastly cold, uncomfortable place with nothing to do but clean up and play cards as nobody was allowed outside for security reasons. We had been there about 2 days and were getting impatient when our officer – a Captain Gray came along, called us together and gave us the sad news that 'our' ship – Louis Pasteur – had engine trouble and as no other ship was available we just couldn't go! Incidentally, although we hadn't been told we were pretty sure we were bound for the Middle East. So rather sadly we had the long trek back to Egham for a spot of further training before the next off. In this period some higher-up must have decided that technical tradesmen must have a rating if they went on active service. So, a test board was set up in a large tent & as we filed in one end and out the other, the news soon spread that it was all farcical! E.g. one chap went in mentally prepared to answer technical questions – there were 3 officers sat at a trestle table – and one of them pointed at a telephone on the table and asked the soldier what it was! And that was all!

I had a bared piece of cable thrust at me consisting of 8 wires and asked what that was! Needless to say, every chap was officially rated which meant we were all considered right to go on active service! Considering that in general we were butchers, bakers and candlestick makers the whole process was near to lunacy. I must emphasize, however that these were the early months of the war – I know now that proper training was enforced later on.

It was also about this time that I had a real fright. You may know that guard duty on active service in a war was considered very seriously. We all had these duties occasionally & normally they lasted 24 hours and went from 6pm one day to 6pm the next day. The guard consisted of 1 Corporal and 3 men – each man doing 2 hours on and 4 hours off & usually men would toss a coin to see who would go 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, & 3<sup>rd</sup>. On the occasion I will remember I was 2<sup>nd</sup> – that meant 8pm – 10pm which was easy and later 2am – 4am which was hard – so after a hard day when I came off at 10pm I got my head down hard. The Corporal – a Jock; Grady, woke me about 1.50am and as in a dream I went with him to change the guard – and I was alone on guard outside the big gates – it was moonlight and a light breeze was blowing. I leaned against one of the pillars on which the gates hung..... the next thing I heard was voices so I pulled myself together to challenge some approaching figures until I recognized Cpl Grady and another of the guard. I looked at my watch and to my horror it showed 4am. I had in fact slept through the whole 2 hours – had the orderly officer found me asleep I would have been punished severely with detention. I never revealed my slip to the Corporal but it taught me a lesson.

Later I did guard duties in foreign countries, even in enemy land & never again did I allow myself to relax – I would keep on the move, talk to myself, anything, and once when I was dead beat I banged my head against a convenient wall!

Towards the end of December 1940 we received urgent orders to move. It was bitterly cold weather at this time and sadly Scotty was in pain with his flat feet but he wouldn't report sick as he wanted to



stay with us, so when we moved to the station I and his pals shared his kit and rifle etc. It was late at night when the troop train moved out from Woking and Oh! It was so cold on the train as it trundled through the black night whilst we dozed off now and again, and hopelessly tried to guess where we were. We had lost track of time as we were getting exhausted when we became aware that the train had stopped and the shouting voices of the Sergeant penetrated our consciousness; 'Get outside at once you.....' & so on. As we tumbled out into the cold blackness we did not know where we were, until somebody spied a blacked out name on a seat – it was Gourock – a place at the mouth of the Clyde. In a few minutes we found ourselves marching onto a smallish ferry type of steamer into which we were packed like sardines – I am sure that many of us would have fallen down with the severe cold had we not been held up. It was in this misery that we headed out into the river and after a time we were able to discern that we were but one of a number of boats waiting our turn to approach the one light we could see – this was an opening through which men were disappearing from other tenders. As we waited it grew colder and colder and when we came to the big ship (which turned out to be the 'Franconia' – a Cunard/White Star liner), most of us had lost the use of our limbs and stumbled into the blessed warmth of the inside of the liner. There were lots of Australian soldiers on board already and they were very kind to us carrying our kit and us to a mess deck where they saw we had plenty of hot soup and tea to thaw us out. We began to feel that once again we were alive!

I remember that our resting places were on E deck which was below the water line, so it wasn't much of a place. Also it was quite bare and each of us was given a hammock – a la Navy – which we were expected to sling up somewhere to sleep in! There were plenty of curses heard as we all tried to do something – I did manage somehow but it wasn't at all comfortable. Anyway, as I was messing about some of the boys who had been adventuring over the ship returned and advised me to go & see the ship's hairdresser. This chap had noticed they were not Aussies and had asked them if by any chance, any of the British boys could cut hair & when they said 'Yes', he asked for me. So I went to see him – his name was Tom Missen and he was from Liverpool and it's fair to say we liked each other right away. He wanted me to work full time in the hairdressing saloon – in return I could have a half of all I took. I explained that I would have to get permission from my CO – which I did – and then I would start.

But fate in the shape of illness intervened for a time. There we were some 4000 soldiers packed into a big can i.e. the ship, nearly all the 4000 were Aussies – there being just the 60+ British boys – and Whoops! We were hit by influenza and it swept through the ship hitting both crew and soldiers alike. Within two days 76% of the whole lot of us were down with flu. It hit one suddenly; I remember not feeling well but climbed up the two stair flights to visit the toilet and I blacked out at the top of the stairs. I woke up back on a table in the mess deck and as the sick bay was full I had to be in my hammock whilst Phil & Scotty looked after me – which they did well. Then when they went down with it, I looked after them. I know when I felt better I was concerned about the hairdressing job but was heartened when Tom Missen sent the message 'not to worry & report when fit'.

I learnt later that with so many of the crew sick there was some serious doubt that the ship could sail on the set date, but we did. Late at night we slipped into the cold wet darkness and next morning it was interesting for a few of us to note that we were in a convoy of some 20-30 ships and it was comforting to catch a glimpse now and then of a plunging corvette in the distance. It was a grey sullen morning with low clouds & driving rain and hail with heavy seas – many of the lads were



seasick but luckily I was alright. It soon became clear that we were sailing due north up the North Channel, over the top of Ireland into the Atlantic Ocean. Within a few days I found myself with plenty of work in the saloon and got on well with Tom Missen. The days & nights passed and we found the weather improving each day as we gradually moved into southern latitudes. As you might expect boat-drill was an absolute must every day at 10.30am – everyman had to carry his life belt everywhere he went or face a stiff charge. Each belt had a little bulb attached – this was for use if it was our bad luck to be in the drink at night – the light would (we hoped) be seen by any rescuers.

So we settled down quickly into a routine particularly myself as I was kept busy cutting hair. Very soon I was on friendly terms with Tom Missen & sought jobs for my 3 pals. First Phil was employed on pressing uniforms for Aussie soldiers at 4/6d a time – he did this in an alcove in the saloon. Second, Fred Apps was used to sweep the hair up & that kept him busy. Then last, Scotty agreed to trot to and from the galley getting fresh tea and biscuits for all of us – as Tom had adopted us as crew members. As we got into warmer climes life became more pleasant as now I could also sleep on deck i.e. carry my blankets up from below and spread them on the deck; there was just one trouble with that – the crew would hose down the decks about 4.30am each day – they were not particular about us and would only give a warning yell a second before releasing the water! Many a deep sleeper was drenched before he could escape. Normally I managed to be slippery! One other thing – I had been warned of the sudden squalls that could sweep down whilst in the tropics and sure enough I (and the others involved) were really caught in a downpour one night and was truly saturated. It was a good thing that the next day was nice and hot. But before that I should speak of the liking I developed for the spaces of sea and sky – when the weather was good I would sit up front in my spare hours and watch with interest all I could see – the lines of ships (there were four I believe), with something like ten in each line, all plunging on into the blue-gray waves – sea birds wheeling and dipping – in the distance now and then I could see Navy ships careering up and down - & always when I looked up at the bridge, I would see the same faces – I always remember the tremendous strain that the responsibility placed on the Captain's shoulders.

After a week or so it became clear one day that we had altered course and a few hours after we had headed East the convoy was moving into a single line as land could be seen in the distance. Soon it was clear we were going into the deep harbourage of Freetown on the coast of Africa. Here we had a spot of excitement as we became aware of an aeroplane high in the sky – it was hostile and the various guns, pom-poms, etc opened up at the intruder. It was rumoured probably correctly, that this was a Vichy French 'plane spotting' the convoy but if so, I have no knowledge of any further attacks.

We were about 3 days at anchor in the big bay at Freetown whilst all the ships took on water and other things which were brought out from the shore in big lighters. The weather was really hot and again I can clearly see the land shimmering with heat. It was a colourful place with green jungle running down to the shores and many black people in gaily coloured jellabos thronging the narrow streets. Our ships were continuously surrounded by small boats filled with fruit and all sorts of junk – all eager to sell to us. We had been warned previously not to buy any fresh fruit so the black lads didn't sell much; when they did it was a good laugh as the cash had to be lowered down on a piece of string and the bought object tied on and pulled up. Some pretty harsh words passed on one occasion when the object fell out of the string and into the drink – the buyer demanded the return of his money but to no avail! That bum-boat soon pushed off!



Then early one morning I was one of the few up on deck to see the convoy maneuvering to steam out of Freetown – to me this was a beautiful sight. So out into the Atlantic again, and the soft balmy days and nights running into weeks interrupted only by a 5 day stay in Durban in South Africa. The convoy stopped there for water and provisioning. Here we tied up to the dockside and here we had a bit of fun. As I have said the Franconia was full of Australian Infantry and they were pretty tough – when we docked we casually looked at the notice board and saw with a shock that we 4 were down for guard duty on the dock gates. Well we certainly didn't want that particular job so set out to see what we could do about it. The four of us saw the Aussie Sgt I/C the Guard and he was very good – said he would much rather have Aussies only on the guard as he expected a tough time. Then we went to the ship's orderly room and complained to our unit clerk, a certain Cpl Adams, by name. This latter was a charming chap, older than all of us being in the later 30s. He agreed that it was silly for us to be on that guard and told us to forget it, that he 'would put it all right'. So forget it we did and with our earnings in the saloon we wine and dined well in the good restaurants in Durban, went to the cinemas and bathed on the beaches. The days soon went and we were ready to be off again. I may add that by then the cells were full with defaulting Aussies i.e. AWOL, drunkenness, fighting, etc and each day for the rest of the voyage court-martials were convened to cope with the hard cases.

Various tournaments were arranged on board and I was lucky enough to win the 'draughts' event for which I had a £1 voucher to spend in the NAAFI. I bought a £1 worth of airtight tins of cigarettes which later proved invaluable. Now we were moving north, i.e. parallel to the East Coast of Africa but well out into the ocean – the weather grew hotter each day and it was stifling below decks. It was lovely to see flying fishes and dolphins and the sunsets were marvelous. I worked hard each day and this was a good thing – I do not recollect ever being afraid of the sea but I did respect it – even though I knew this from maps I still wondered at the vast amount of water.

So the weeks passed until we eventually came to the Gulf of Aden where it was really hot and the Red Sea where it was almost paralyzing. It was hereabouts that I fell sick with some sort of fever and had to go into the sick bay where I was when the ship docked at Port Suez. Luckily for me the M.O. I/C released me to go ashore with my unit but I know I felt pretty rotten. In the later afternoon we disembarked onto a dirty quayside and made our way to a pretty ancient and primitive type of train. As darkness fell the train pulled out and in fact, we travelled almost parallel to the Suez Canal to Cairo, where we climbed into vehicles which dumped us somewhere on the desert where there were tents. It was quite dark and we could see very little also I was feeling ill still and slept little as I had constantly to visit the latrine. As it grew light I was most surprised to see a great pyramid looming over me, and further away yet another one.

I had better make clear the whole position at this point. I was a member as a linesman of a complete section – 39, and with us was our other section – 38. Both of us entirely new and on paper, capable of any form of communication. This was March 1942. The Desert Army was advancing on this Libyan front whilst in Europe the Germans & Italians were attacking the Greeks.

The morning after arrival I had to report sick as I was ill and I had to go into the local sick bay, such as it was. I was told I had contracted 'clinical malaria' and had to stay in bed. I was glad that Phil and the others could visit me as I felt depressed. This seemed a lousy place, very hot and sand everywhere and above all, flies in their thousands continually, and brackish water. I was glad I soon



recovered and was released – to go back to my section which luckily was still where I had left it – at Mena camp. 38 Line Section had moved out lock, stock and barrel and at that moment we did not know where but later we knew & realized how lucky we had been. They had gone to Greece and as things turned out they were all killed or captured within a few weeks of being there.

But we hung on at Mena for a week or so and got used to the conditions as well as we could. I remember one hilarious evening when we went to the famous Shafto Cinema. This was a big marquee or two complete with benches and scores of attendants with trays of dubious sweetmeats and drinks – these lads invaded the cinema every time there was a break – usually every 5 minutes. The films were very very old indeed and full of dots and dashes and the whole affair was conducted in uproar. The soldiers all joined in this atmosphere by hissing when the baddies came on, cheering when the heroes appeared and so on. At the end of the show we were all tired from laughing and at least we could forget the war for an hour.



*Captioned on reverse: Cpl. Robinson and self*



*Captioned on reverse: Taken sometime in August 1941: 'out in the blue'*

We were confined to camp so could not go to Cairo. The Cpl Adams I mentioned before came around and kindly collected any money from anyone who wished to send it home by telegraph post as he was able to visit Cairo officially.

Each day we paraded and were warned to be ready each hour to be properly prepared for sudden movement to the actual active area – and so one morning we were alerted for the move. The trucks were all loaded so it didn't take an hour for us to be aboard. Silly as it seems we were excited and anxious to get going – if only to know what war was all about – although we didn't think it would be pretty. So away we went on the one and only desert road – it was reasonably good at first but as we approached the areas which had seen recent fighting the road surface deteriorated as parts had been blasted out by shells – so there were lots of bumps! Now, too, we were in a stream of military traffic travelling in both directions, with camouflaged tanks moving in the sandy desert parallel to ourselves. We stopped at night and brewed up before sleeping. We were getting tired and dirty as



water was severely rationed and so almost exclusively used for drinking. The powdered sand covered us all over and the flies continued to worry us everlastingly. Already we felt we had had enough of this war.

I remember stopping near Tobruk one evening and a detail was sent to get water from a nearby point. By now we were almost always thirsty and so were waiting for that refreshing cup or mug of wet char when the water was boiled. I took a first mouthful and spat it straight out – it tasted foul and it was – we had to drink it, however as that was all the water there was. It appeared that when the Italians retreated they had sought to make things awkward for us by tipping sacks of salt down the few waterholes – the chief boys decided that although the resultant salt water was unpalatable it was alright to drink, i.e. it was not harmful! Well, you just try drinking  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of really salt water and see how you would feel if that was all you had to drink for weeks on end and remember it was very hot in Africa!

On this particular journey we had no idea where we would stop or what we were doing until we arrived at a spot near Tobruk when the section split up temporarily. I was with some 3 or 4 other soldiers in 2 trucks and we were detailed to pick up some radio equipment at Derna Airfield. So we left Tobruk early in the morning; it was soon clear that in general something had gone wrong for there was a lot of traffic travelling East and worse still, we soon noticed that a lot of infantrymen were also walking East and as we passed them going West they were pointing up to the sky. When we stopped for a drink of char we realized that the army was *retiring*? And as we did not know just where the enemy was we were not too keen to still go west, but on we went.

I must mention a certain fact – a Corporal called Johnson was I/C of the truck and as we 3 in the back of the 3-tonner could not see out of the front of the truck it was arranged with the Cpl and the driver that if they saw any enemy aircraft coming they would warn us at once by blowing the klaxon before they left the cab and ran for cover. We had been warned that the Jerries always went for the trucks so it would be wise to get clear of them.

There were of course several trucks of different units behind us, well we stopped many times for varying reasons and at first we were a bit edgy as to whether or not Jerry was about but we grew blasé after a bit – so when again we stopped we didn't stir until one of us saw chaps running away from the stopped wagons behind us – I jumped down off our truck, looked around the side and to my dismay saw 3 German planes in a V roaring towards us. I shouted to the other 2 to jump off but we could only drop down where we were and pray. We had great luck as the planes must have been after bigger game, they roared by overhead so low I could easily see the pilots heads, but they didn't fire their guns. They had disappeared in a split second and as we picked ourselves up and our fright slipped away we began to wonder why we weren't warned by the Cpl. – there was no satisfactory answer to that I'm afraid as the Cpl and the driver climbed out of the sand some 200 yards away. They had seen the aircraft alright but in their hurry to escape they had forgotten us in the back of the truck. I wasn't keen on this Corporal before that day and after this episode, I was much less keen! Well, we finally got to the Derna Airfield in the dark and it wasn't pleasant as shelling was going on and fires were burning here and there and we were worried that we might be caught, but we weren't and luckily picked up the equipment and turned round to go East.

Now when it was light we could see that we were in a real retreat – everything was going back. It didn't feel good. Spread all over the desert – wagons and trucks of all sorts were hurtling along as



fast as they could go and we were amongst them. I know that eventually we met some others of our section and together we brewed up one early morning before the sun became too hot – about 20 of us including officers and NCOs. This was again fairly near Tobruk and by now there was a genuine pervading unease that the Jerries could easily cut us off at anytime so although we were tired, filthy and hungry we still wanted to stay free.

Then however, a dispatch rider found us and Captain Grey told us that some 6 or 7 linesmen were needed back in Tobruk to see to the Air Force communications. It was a case of you, you & you, at first this included me, but someone else went instead of me as it was thought I would be needed to cut hair! Those of us left swept further back again and later that same day the enemy cut the road off to the coast. Tobruk was isolated and the front line was stabilized at Sollum.

So things settled down a bit and we found ourselves at the desert AFHQ in a wadi at a place called Maarten Bagush as we were now known as part of the Air Force Foundation Signals and our job basically was to ensure all communications for the RAF. Various landing grounds were soon set up for the different squadrons in the revised areas and it was necessary for us to link them all up effectively.

A useful line was known as 'multi air line'. It consisted of fairly light poles (with stay wires on every 4<sup>th</sup>). Carrying 2 light arms equipped with at least 4 pairs of lines. Back in UK we had practiced erecting this in accordance with the army manual of instruction – some 10 men were involved numbered from 1 – 10, inclusive, eg Nos 1&2 were the hammer and jumper men. No 1 held the jumper whilst No 2 hammered it into the ground, thus creating the hole for the pole. So the first day on active service we were taken out into the desert to erect MAL we were solemnly given our numbers! On arriving at the due spot Nos 1&2 were ordered to do their stuff – it was quite an event and we all stood round suitably impressed.



*Fred, Rand & Gibby. Nov 1942*



*Where we were gunned Oct '42*

*Also captioned: Sheiba. 30miles multi Curline? 2prs – each term. Pole being Frittory*

*(This was difficult to read, I may have not read some of it correctly. KHS)*

No 1 held the jumper firmly and No 2 swung the hammer as the ground was entirely soft sand the jumper almost disappeared from view! Now what! No 1 managed to retrieve the jumper and promptly the hole filled up with the loose sand! We all roared with laughter at the dismayed looks of Nos 1&2, but the laughter didn't last long when we realized we should need to start at scratch.



We learned quickly to forget the army manuals and devise our own methods which in the months to come proved very effective.

The Front now stabilized at Sollum for a period and we settled to hard work in linking together the airfields or landing grounds in a large area of desert. It was about this time that some weeding out was done and 6 or 7 chaps were returned to Cairo for varying reasons. Scotty sadly had to go back as his flat feet trouble was causing him much pain.

At first most of us lived in bell tents but early one night I could not sleep as I was itching a lot and so were the others – of course at night we dare not show any light as Jerry bombers were always on the watch – but at last I lit a candle and lowered it to the ground only to see thousands of sand fleas jumping up and down. Next morning early we brought out our blankets and spread them out in the sunlight – I was horrified to see how lousy I was. Well, I almost soaked my blankets in paraffin in an effort to get rid of the fleas and that night I could hardly sleep because of the paraffin odour! It soon became clear that everyone was itching although I can't say I got used to it! But what a few of us did was dig up the sand and have a dug-out & then we were fairly free of fleas – this time though we were bothered with rats who used to scamper about at night. Also about now we suffered for about 3 days from a KHAMISIN – this was a fierce wind and really hot. It swept across the desert raising the sand into the air so close that I could not see one foot away. Indeed all one could do was to lie down and try not to suck sand into your body as one breathed the hot air – to try to drink from a bottle was difficult. It really was extremely hard just to exist and certainly the war was dead for a few days.

Now, too, we began to realise that we were really at war and up against it. Water was very short and we were severely rationed. I took my turn at water fatigue – it meant collecting all the empty barrels from the dugouts and putting them all on a big truck – then getting the authorization from the 'office' and travelling to the nearest water point about 15 miles away. The rationed supply was poured into the barrels and the driver and I had to lift each one up on to the back of the truck – very hard work in such heat. Then back to the camp, driving very carefully over the humpy desert so as not to lose any water at all if possible. When we got back we had to deliver the barrels to each dugout that was after taking about 75% for the cookhouse.

Hereabouts too, I recall one of our officers, a Captain was killed by persons unknown – he was found dead in a jeep one morning. Also the OC a certain Major was rushed back to Cairo very ill – it was rumoured he had been poisoned. Just after that we were on the move in an attack so heard nothing more but I will say here what I later found out in Deolali India in 1945, when I met up with a chap I had known back in 1941 – then he was a batman and as we talked about old comrades he told me how the Major had had car battery acid put in his morning char by his batman. Incidentally the Major survived.

Over these few months we saw a lot of desert and a lot of airfields; Fuka, El Daba, Sidi Haneish & the Desert A F HQ where we were at Maaten Bagush. We also went out many miles South laying lines to landing grounds. One day when we were working & strung out over a few miles there was the sound of an aircraft – we always had a chap on duty with a Bren gun in case we were attacked & on this day this was a Cpl Rand – anyway we looked up and saw it was an RAF Tomahawk so relaxed and carried on working. I was engaged with 2 other lads in putting stay wires on the top end of a pole as it rested on the truck. Suddenly there was the horrible rattle of a machine gun – I glanced around the side of the truck and saw the row of bullets or cannon shells ploughing up the ground nearing



me – without thinking I dived under the truck and was vaguely aware of others doing the same. This all happened in a split second as you may guess. As the plane passed over with a roar I was aware that I was splattered with blood and at first thought it was me but after a quick glance I realized I wasn't hit but Frank Whitworth who was lying beside me had sustained a wound of some kind. The Sergeant who was also under the truck, & I did our best to get Frank from under the truck as, from the noise from the sky, the Tomahawk was returning to give us another pasting, & we were anxious to get away from the obvious target – the truck. So between us we supported Frank and got about 150 yards before the Tomahawk again attacked. We slipped to the deck and stayed still and when the plane had passed we grabbed Frank and got him to a small truck where we had a closer look at him. We could soon see that he (and us for that matter) had had a narrow escape from severe injury – either a bullet or a sliver of displaced stone had taken a nick out of the bone inbetween his eyes. We stopped the blood flow and as the plane had disappeared Frank and other wounded were quickly on their way to a first aid post. This whole incident riled us a lot coming as it did from an RAF plane! Later, I know, Capt Grey (our O/C) made enquiries but apart from ascertaining that the pilot was a South African, all we got was a remark that 'he thought we were an enemy line party'. Frank (and the others) soon returned to us although his nerves were in a shocking state.

Incidentally, Cpl Rand weakly never fired a shot! He felt he 'couldn't fire on the RAF'.

We rapidly became very efficient in the laying of all sorts of lines connecting up landing grounds. The latter began to increase in the July/August period and we knew this was a build up to an attack of some sort. In mid-November we packed up, got rid of surplus stuff and moved in our lorries up to the 'wire', ie: the demarcation line between Egypt & Libya. Here there were gathered many arms, infantry, tanks, gunners etc and almost overnight the heavy stuff moved off to do battle. It was our job to move behind this lot and to connect up the landing grounds around Tobruk – especially seeing to the main drome at El Adem. We guessed the attack wasn't going well when we had to wait and wait and wait..... When we got the word to go it was clear that nobody was too certain where Jerry was! We had to keep our eyes open. After some scares we reached El Adem – all the area was badly shot up, including the various pole routes, both German & Italian. We were constantly at work all the hours of daylight working over a wide area El Adem – Tobruk – Derna & on the whole, we avoided enemy attention. We eventually again followed up the advance troops as they pressed on to Benghazi & beyond & so we eventually arrived at El Agheila which was as far as this advance went.

We arrived at this barren cold piece of rocky ground tired out and started as usual, to dig slit trenches and drag equipment about when, to our astonishment, we were told to stop and get packed up quick. We had, it seemed been ordered back to Cairo, so back we went, day after day after day. Naturally it was not without mishap. We had In Charge a silly young officer and whilst travelling through the coastal occupied part of Libya, he decided to pull off the road one night by one of the vacated farm houses – most of the chaps decided to kip down in the house where it was warmer, especially as it was raining. I didn't fancy the house somehow and decided to sleep in the back of my own lorry – together with 2 other chaps. Regrettably the rain crept through a hole in the canvas roof top and woke me up about 4am and quietly I got up and went to the cab where it was warmer & dozed off. About 5am I woke (it was still very dark), to the sound of a low flying plane – I felt safe enough as it was so dark – then I looked at the house and to my horror I saw flames coming out of the chimney. The pilot also saw and down came a bomb with a harsh whistle- crashed right



into the wall of the house, bits of bomb and brick flying into the air. I crouched by the lorry and was lucky – I then ran to the back of the lorry to warn my 2 mates to get clear as the plane was still right over our heads – by now the fire was out. As the plane dropped another bomb the chaps came pouring out of the house and some went flying down the field so it was all a bit chaotic and afterwards was good for a laugh. I may say that we were packed and out of that place in five minutes dead. Still we were without any breakfast or hot drink and we could not stop for quite a time as we were travelling through occupied territory; ie plenty of civilian Italians about this area and at this time of the war they were untrustworthy. So we travelled back day by day and I well recall how tired hungry and thirsty we were plus being very dirty.

Once, so hungry were we that we decided to try and cook something whilst travelling over this shelled road – one started by lighting a primus stove, then emptying some bully beef into a mess tin. Now it was necessary to hold the tin over the flame to get a result but no matter how we tried it could not be done so in the end we gulped it down cold and lumpy and swimming in grease! We got lost eventually on the desert by the officer of course and in some panic he decided to steer by the sun and go North, that meant a painful ride over dunes, along wadis and through patches of soft sand for a day or so as we abandoned the relatively known route ways. Eventually we made the single road and arrived back near the Pyramids in a tented camp. Here we bathed, shaved, washed clothes and rested just for a day or so until again we were told to be ready for another move out and we were confined to camp. This was a bit much for my pals and myself so one night we crawled under the wire around the camp and hitch hiked our way to Cairo where we enjoyed a good meal for the first time for ages. After this we went for a few drinks, now fortunately I am no great drinker and I stayed sober whilst my chums got merry. About midnight I decided we had better get back to the camp so I managed to get a taxi to cram the boys into. I was doing this with difficulty when a Red Cap turned up and asked to see our passes. We had none so I thought this is it! We shall all be in the clink! I spun quite a sad story to the Red Cap who was very decent and let us go. We sneaked back in camp very tired and luckily we had not been missed.





*August 1941  
During 5 days leave from the Western Desert.  
Taken in Cairo*



*Captioned on Reverse: Stan, Dobby, Frank, NAT, Mick, Jock &  
Frank  
Taken a long time ago!*

Next day we were paraded about 10am with full kit and we were off again in trucks – but this time we were taken to the harbor at Port Said where we looked up and gazed woefully at this steamer we were about to embark on; 'The Silver Teak'. This boat was totally unsuitable for trooping, we were dumped in the holds and had to work hard getting all the vehicles on board and then tying them down as securely as possible with ropes etc. Some were on the open deck and others down in the holds.



*On the Silver Teak. Nat top row second from right. Put your pith helmet on Dad!*



It is difficult now to know how I felt – at that stage the war wasn't going well for us and now the Japanese had attacked in the East – as a result the USA had become our Allies. We had no idea where we were going in this lone ship, about 5000 tons – we embarked on a Monday 26<sup>th</sup> January 1942 & I was on guard the first night. Next day we left Port Said early and sailed down the Suez Canal which took all day. For the next 5 to 6 days we sailed steadily East via the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden & it was very hot indeed. Conditions were atrocious – food was bad, i.e. only bully beef and biscuits and not much of that, water severely rationed; water closets had been erected on deck; 2 for about 60 of us. Also, I think 4 taps on deck but the water was on for just 20mins in the a.m. All of us had to shave and wash then – it was a good job that we all helped each other all we could; still we knew not where we were going!

About the 6<sup>th</sup> February we ran into a storm and it was rough! I was on guard on deck and supposed to look out for submarines – some hopes!

Next day we crept into Colombo harbor where there were a number of vessels including 2 USA Naval ships. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday, we were allowed ashore and so had a first glimpse of the East. Well, we just stayed in that harbor until the 16<sup>th</sup> Feb & then set off suddenly with 4 other ships, still going East and the rumour goes that we are for Singapore ie. at first because later that day the news came that that city had fallen. Still. We went East, can it be Java?

By now we realized we were in dangerous waters, everyone was instructed to look out for U-Boats. On the 21<sup>st</sup> Feb we were picked up by, I think, HMS Kent or Dorset & then changed course to NNW so seemed set for India or Burma. But no, unbelievably it seems we return whence we came which we reached on the 25<sup>th</sup> Feb in a real old downpour and it was cold. We again stuck around Colombo until the 2<sup>nd</sup> March and set off for Bombay on that day.



*Bombay Camp 1942. Dad standing 5<sup>th</sup> from left*

We arrived at Port Trust at 6pm on the 6<sup>th</sup> March and understand we maybe the remains of the 18<sup>th</sup> Division – in Singapore & 'missing'. Again we just stayed on board until on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March we disembark and settle into a temporary camp at Collaba. Still in Bombay we stayed here for 12 days doing virtually nothing. This was at a time when there was a lot of unrest in India due to their desire for independence (with which I sympathized).

During these 12 days I, with a few of my chaps did a 24hour guard on a number of Indian sailors who had 'mutinied', we were told. Actually they were decent chaps caught up in the Brits v Congress warring and certainly we had no trouble at all from them.





*Bombay: Rumsey, Tolchard, Phil, Thompson, Stan, Quy, Frank, Steve, Tom, Alf Cole & Jerry*

So on the 24<sup>th</sup> March we had a reveille at 5am & moved off at 8 – finally embarking on the HMTT 'Rhona', much better than the 'Teak'. We set off the next day back to Colombo which we reached on the 28<sup>th</sup> March – a Saturday. I wasn't feeling at all well over this period but I kept going. We disembarked on the Sunday, it was very hot and humid, and had a long cruel march with FSMO to the Graving Dock Camp – just a few Cadjan huts. I went sick next am & it seems I have had a touch of sunstroke – I had tablets which did me good. This week we had a lot of duties so got out little until the Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> April. That evening all the Navy boys were being rounded up to return to their ships – all of which left port that evening if they could. Next am Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1942, I was serving out breakfast about 8am when the sound of planes became too loud to ignore. I went outside the hut to see about 60 planes – I couldn't identify - flying in over the city. I thought they were Japs & they were. One came diving so low over my head I could almost touch the rising sun – he dropped a bomb neatly on a nearby destroyer in the dry dock.

There was little cover at this bare dockside and I lay by a grass bank with some others and watched the planes pattern bomb the harbor – there were some 6 planes in a vee and it seemed clear the leading plane was the bomb aimer in each vee as he waggled his wings for each plane to let loose each bomb. I could see clearly each bomb leaving before I put my head down to dodge the flying splinters when they landed. It was very noisy for there were one or two bofors guns banging away as well as ships guns and the odd rifle. It lasted about an hour and I was delighted to find I was OK. It was only when we were aware that the bombers had gone that we took stock of ourselves and that is when we all had a laugh. One of the chaps with me by the bank had been cleaning his rifle when the bombing started and as he had his rifle in his hand he was anxious to fire away at the flying vees as they came but always when he said 'I'll have a go', Frankie (who had been hit in the desert), would stop him, saying 'You'll draw their fire, Herman' (his name was Cater but he was always called Herman) – so the argument went on between the vics flying over – then when the leading plane's pilot waggled his wings down would go Herman's head with the rest. The joke was that – as I said – he was cleaning his rifle and so had removed the bolt (which rendered the rifle useless), and even



had his pull-through dangling from the barrel! It was the last 6 bombings that caused us most anguish and these bombs (luckily they were not big) hit the dockside concrete about 150yds away and the debris and splinters were whizzing and humming through the air around us, suddenly we were all conscious of something smacking into one of us! I said 'Who's hit?' and Frankie quietly said 'I am', we looked at him lying there and could see no blood and told him so but he stayed where he was on the ground with his eyes closed and he said, 'It's my leg, it must be gone'. Well, his leg was OK, so we thought he was a bit of metal until one of us had a closer look then we could see that the heel of his boot was gone..., well, to cut it short the piece of steel had shaved his foot and buried his heel in the earth – the shock had numbed Frankie's leg. He dug the steel up and kept it as a souvenir.

I know now from reading books that the Japanese planes came from aircraft carriers from the fleet in the Indian Ocean. Some further raids were made the next week before that fleet withdrew.

We moved from the dockside huts to the Royal College where we had decent billets for a change. Here we waited for our stores and transport which was due to follow us from Bombay. These eventually arrived and in general for some weeks we worked on the stores. In May I went with a party to Dambulla and helped lay a line to the peak of Dambulla Rock; we travelled back via Kandy, the ancient capital of Ceylon, I didn't know it then of course but I was to spend the next 3 years in Ceylon.

Later in 1942 we had the big job of connecting Colombo and Trincomalee with wire – this meant working in the jungle areas. It wasn't long before the chaps started going down with malaria, dysentery and other tropical diseases. We were into 1943 before I sustained my first malarial attack when I was moved to the hospital at Kandy. I got over that and went convalescent to Diyatalawa before returning to my section but it wasn't long before I went down again and so it went on until after about 5 or 6 fresh attacks I was again in Kandy Hospital but this time I was in trouble as I had lost too many red blood cells to the disease and in consequence my heart was affected. This time I was there for 6 months and when eventually got back to the section I wasn't very fit for the heavy line work so I went into the office and got along well enough to continue on my own when the Cpl clerk was recalled to Colombo – we were very near to Anuradhapura I recall. Again I was asked to go to Colombo for a few weeks to learn the trade and another Cpl was sent to take my place – I don't quite remember his name but I still feel sad about the chap as he seemed to be afraid of the jungle and all that it meant. I had only been in Colombo for 2 days when we had a signal to say the Cpl was ill with malaria and in hospital and he died there. Poor chap, naturally he wasn't the only one I'm afraid, we lost too many that way.





*Two uncaptioned photos – so take a guess re location!*

So now I was told to return to the jungle and was handed 1 stripe – L/Cpl. A few weeks later I was promoted again to full Corporal. Somewhere about then I had a nasty attack of dengue fever – I remember feeling ill. So the few years passed until in 1944, SEAC was set up and a move was made to send the lads home who had been out over 3 or 4 years. By 1945 we started to leave in groups as we were replaced until at last I was ordered off to Deolali in India where everyone was to go home.

I travelled from Colombo by train to Deolali and as I was on the train overnight I wasn't able to wash my feet and change my socks so my foot rash, with which I was continually bothered in the Far East, simply increased. Deolali was a huge transit camp full of time expired men just waiting for the boat home. As smallpox was raging in India it was necessary to parade every day for vaccinations – otherwise it was very boring indeed. One of the troubles at Deolali was the fact that nobody reported 'sick' unless absolutely forced to as a stay in the sick bay might easily mean missing the boat home. So in almost every hut there were the odd chaps with odd diseases like malaria, fevers, dysentery, footrot etc. and by and large, the 'whole' chaps took care of their sick mates. My footrot wasn't improving and needed medical treatment but like the others, I wasn't going sick! There too, in the vast NAAFI canteen I met a few of my old 1941 desert mates and talked over the years between. Each day a notice would be put on the official board giving a list of names for repatriation, I remember the pleasure at seeing my name there. So again we packed up and went by train to Bombay where we limped (in my case), on to the troop ship 'Ranchie' – the feeling was indescribable – more than 4 years had gone since I left Britain and now I was to go back home; it was March 1945 and the war with Germany was in its final throes. We sailed away in the evening and the rather sad song hung in the air from 3000 voices 'A Troopship is leaving Bombay'.

All the sick and suffering (including me), lined up at the sick bay door as soon as the harbour was cleared to have our troubles seen to. By now, my feet were badly infected and the poison was in my groin making it very painful just to walk. The young RAF MO really didn't know what to do about it



but luckily I knew the treatment and told him. He was only too glad to tell the orderly to carry on. So each morning I went to the sick bay for the treatment and slowly the feet recovered, fortunately for me I was excused duties for the whole trip. It was a poor trip for food, which was short and alas as a Corporal I was I/C of a mess table of 12 men; it therefore fell to my lot to share the food equally. This was difficult and often I had to take the smallest share. Although the war was still on we travelled on our own to Gibraltar via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal but at Gib we waited 3 or 4 days to form a convoy for the UK. The weather wasn't good and the sea was rough – just out of Gib the destroyer in front of the convoy started dropping depth charges and when we caught it up the boat combed down a lane between our column and the next and continued depth charging after we had passed. Later, a few days from the UK we ran into thick fog – this was weird in a convoy as one sensed the danger amid the intermittent noise of the ships hooters. I slept on 'E' Deck with many others and that night about 80% of the chaps decided to stay on deck as they were nervous about the situation. I wasn't happy but stayed down mainly because it was nice and warm! A day or so after we realized we were near England and as the shoreline came into view the excitement rose and the ship tilted with the weight of men all on the one side, until we were told to shift!

When we could actually see buses on a road, tears fell. It should be remembered that many of us had been away more than 4 years and many of us had, at times, doubted that we should ever see our country again and it would be true to say that most of the chaps were far from fit still suffering from their Eastern diseases. I, for instance, was still taking anti-malarial pills which had the effect of making the skin look quite yellow, I also had one of my front teeth missing (taken out in the jungle by a young medical chap as it had developed an abscess), I limped badly (foot rot) and I was down to about 8 stone (due to successive malarial attacks) – and I was one of the better ones. Anyway we approached the mouth of the River Clyde and as we came closer so it was possible to distinguish the small dockland houses. It was heartwarming and heartbreaking for us to see the mothers and wives rushing into their little back yards waving handkerchiefs, towels and even sheets at us – they knew we were returning home and without asking they gave us a welcome.

We docked far up the Clyde but nobody was permitted to go ashore so again we just had to wait patiently – usually. We slept on board that night and abided again the next day but now things were stirring and that evening we went ashore and were soon on a train. It soon got dark and blackout was on but we Signals guessed we were heading for our depot at Thirsk in Yorkshire.

We arrived at Thirsk about 11.30pm in a complete blackout, tired and hungry and thirsty. To our surprise we were met by an army of men with torches and a tannoy blared out instructions. We were rapidly gathered in groups of twelve and each group given its own number. This one NCO was IC my group and he stuck with us. We were taken by truck to the depot and late as it was we were rushed around the various places ie: medical inspection, documents, kit deficiencies etc and finally in the mess for a meal before bedding down by 3am – but not much rest for we were roused out at 7am & by 8.30am we were at Thirsk Station waiting for our trains. I eventually landed at Waterloo Station by 8pm – where I managed to get a meal of sorts – by now I was done up and feeling rough and sadly a queue was already forming up for the night train to the West Country – this left at about 1am. I jumped over to where I had left my kit bag and had trouble carrying it but a man in civvies came over and carried it for me. After a long wait I crawled on the train which by now was choc-a-bloc but I got a seat on the floor in the corridor jammed in with other tommies, sailors and RAF lads as well as ATS Wrens and WAAFS & slowly we progressed out of London to the sound of anti-aircraft



guns in the distance. I dozed until we reached Exeter and the crowd gradually thinned out. So we reached Ilfracombe about 8am and an RAF chap carried my kitbag to a taxi. Knowing my sister, Ruby, normally walked to work in the High St about this time I asked the taxi driver to go slowly and halfway along the High St I spotted my sister walking along so I told the driver to stop (here, I think I should remind you that my sister & I hadn't seen each other for over 4 years) & looked at my sister – to my dismay she looked at me and passed by! I called out 'Ruby' and she stopped and looked back and then she started to cry and caught hold of me; I put her in the taxi and we went on to home at 74 Fore Street. I got out of the taxi and walked down the passage in a dream, opened the living room door, my dear Mother had her back to the door as she was cleaning the grate – she turned round and saw me – I find it hard to say what happened next. My Mum cried and laughed and cried – so did I. Mum was trying to get food for me and trying to talk and kiss me all at one and the same time. My Father was in the bathroom and it was some time before Mum remembered and rescued him but he was equally pleased to see me as they all told me later they were upset because I looked so poorly and thin and of course different. I think that this was possibly the most emotional moment of my life until then.

It was very difficult for me to realise that I had survived and had come home. I was on 28 days repatriation leave – it was April 1945 – which was extended by 2 days as the Germans surrendered in May and so we celebrated with a VE day or two.

I thoroughly enjoyed being in England again and gradually put on a little weight and lost a bit of my yellow look – due to the mepacrine tablets I was taking to prevent more attacks of malaria. This wasn't too preventative as for many years I suffered malaria attacks of various strengths and as late as 1977 when I had an operation I had another attack!

Back in 1945 – I reported back to Thirsk in Yorkshire; this was a Holding Battalion for Royal Signals and men were posted out every day. I was hoping to be posted somewhere south, as promised by Lord Louis Mountbatten C-in-C of SE Asia Command, but alas I was posted to Catterick – the Aldershot of the North – to No 1 T T Btn.

There, as was the custom I was wheeled into the CO's office for interview, which really meant just a welcome but I did get a word in about my disappointment in not being posted somewhere near my home – particularly after being away more than 4 years. This was ignored and I was given a job in the Pay Dept. After 2 weeks I put in a written application for a posting to BAOR (British Army Of the Rhine) in Europe – this was rejected so I had another go again in writing and this time I was ticked off by the CO and told to stop wasting his time! So I tried to settle down and see out my time. Each soldier was given a Group No which would be applicable when demobilization was started. This would not be until the Japanese were defeated – this was in September 1945. I was in Group 27. The Group No was determined roughly speaking on the principal of 1<sup>st</sup> in 1<sup>st</sup> out, commensurate with age etc.

Well I guessed I would have about a year to go so settled down in the pay office – a quiet little number but plenty to do. There I was friendly with the Sergeant I/G named Evans and helped him after hours. I had been there a month or so when I was told that the Adjutant – a Captain – wanted to see me. He was a cold fish but I hardly knew him so I was shattered when he told me I was to take over the job of ORS – a hateful worrying job – my first reaction was to say I was only a Corporal! I was coldly told I was promoted to Sergeant as from then to take over the job ackdum. The RSM



told me to put the extra stripe up right away and report to the Sgts. Mess for tea! Well orders is orders and I so complied and took up my new job which was very exacting but very interesting – I was responsible for the issuing of all PT 1 and PT II orders, all records and documentation, etc etc – I had a staff of 7 ATS all girl clerks, who were on the whole, very good. I guess we all had a bit of fun at times and there were a few dances etc and quite a few nights at the Sgts mess. I had a caller one day, it was Scatty from our 1940 days – he had heard someone say my name, Vellacott, and thinking it might be me he made his way to our lines and found me; we had a long chat about old friends. Another old friend, Phil was also in the same area and we met on and off. It was very cold indeed that winter – Phil who was my especial pal was still a private soldier and as such couldn't enter the Sergeants mess so when we had a good evening, he would come over to my room and I would loan him a jacket – nobody else at No 1 T T Btn. knew him so he was safe enough and we had some good evening together in the warmth of the Sgts. mess and in my own room. I was in possession of this single room set off a long barrack hut housing some thirty men of the Admin Section and I was I/C these chaps, all of whom were below par one way or another. They had varied jobs around the camp, eg, runners, NAAFI attendants, cleaner-uppers, etc. I had a Cpl. in the hut and left everything in the hut in his care and I shut my eyes to what I shouldn't see! I in return ensured that the lads always had their leave passes very early and also did them such favours that I could give.

On the whole however, this was a boring time with most of us 'war' soldiers only just waiting to return to civvy street. I had one break – a month at Welbeck Abbey near Nottingham, and that time went nicely. This was the home of the Duke of Portland.

In September 1945, the Japanese decided to surrender – that was after two atomic bombs had been let loose, one at Hiroshima and one at Nagasaki – they were devastating to say the least. It is easy to condemn now, but in the light of the situation at that time I cannot say it was a wrong decision in that one sense. The Japs were fanatical and didn't believe in surrendering at all so each bit of land they had, had to be fought for inch by inch with the heavy toll of casualties. I think it was seen that this 'new' bomb could hasten the end of the war. It did that alright and set off a new sequence of terror affecting the whole world in subsequent years – in 1978 we are still very much afflicted.

Back to 1946 and at last the day of my group came around. The CQMS was out on the same day so we travelled together – in May – to Aldershot where overnight we slept in an old barrack room which must have been built in the 1840s – it must have been well, perhaps it was a fitting place to spend my last night as a soldier. Next day all documentation was done first then we were taken to a huge type of warehouse full up with men's clothes – it was up to us to choose a suit which fitted and this we did – not without a lot of fun! So away we went to catch our train home again to try and find a job and settle down etc. – not at all easy after over 6 years at war. But I had months of leave, because of my years overseas – so I wasn't worried overmuch. Once again I was at Ilfracombe with my parents, my Dad was an invalid now and we used to wheel him out in his chair. I spent a lot of time reading and resting. It wasn't long before I was offered a job at Smith's Hairdressers, but I put off making a decision, the truth being that I didn't want to go back to that work. Fate stepped in. In Newport my Uncle Fred died and I travelled there for his funeral as my parents couldn't go. My cousin's wife, Lil, suggested I took a job there for the winter, so I went to the Labour Exchange at her suggestion – and was sent to the War Agricultural Executive Committee offices in Kensington Place at a house called Cefr Parc. I saw a Captain Matthews who turned me down! I returned to the chap



at the Labour who promptly made a phone call and told me to go back to the WAEC & ask for a Major Harris - this I did and was offered a job as a TCIII in the Labour Dept at a weekly pay of £4.5s  
Major Harris was a real old soldier and very stern but later...

This is the end of the diary. It does appear that some must be lost, which is both sad and very annoying.

To finish, I include Dad's writing on the back of a postcard, it must have been toward the end of the war, but there is no date, just a few clues and the fact that it is Christmas Eve.

I saw loads of prisoners -  
poor devils, feel sorry for  
them - as soon as job is  
finished we go to Benghazi  
& onwards? Tripoli? &  
then England? I was day  
longer on & apparently we have  
to work! pretty bad manage-  
ment on part of superiors -  
don't study psychology -  
writing this at tiffin in Ted  
Jackson's truck - bully biscuits  
pig jam & tea as per usual -  
this time last year I was  
at home with Eileen - I  
wonder if she is thinking  
of me now? I am very tired  
of being away from her, because  
I love her I expect - I can only  
pray that I shall soon go  
home to her -  
I wish myself a happy  
Xmas - in sheerest irony!