MY WAR

By P. E. Newbury

MY WAR

PART ONE

MY WAR my word! Sounds a bit pretentious doesn't it? Perhaps a more appropriate title for this narrative would be 'My War Memories'. However, every individual involved had a widely-different view of the war, depending on when and where he or she happened to be in such a vast field of operations, so I can only relate what occurred in my limited field, and I regard this as **My War**.

Memories are transient things, and after sixty odd years many have been lost in the mists of time. Some are very short lived and have flown 'forgotten as a dream dies at the break of day'; whilst others are so vivid they could be of events of yesterday. Some are so terrifying and horrific they would be best forgotten. Ironically these are the most difficult to expunge from one's mind and in a distorted fashion are the basis for frequent nightmares. When I first got back to England after four and a half years abroad my sleep was so much disturbed the M.O gave me a certificate excusing me from all night duties. For many years these nightmares continued and woe-betide anyone who disturbed me for in my hazy state I would lash out with fists and feet, fighting I knew not what!

Where should I start? I think 'My War' really started in 1938 when I joined the A.F.S. (Auxiliary Fire Service), the Government having appealed to everyone to do some form of voluntary National Service in view of the ominous risk of war. Hitler had just 'Liberated' Austria meaning he *invaded* that country. When, in September, he did the same thing to Czechoslovakia things became serious. Our P.M, Neville chamberlain, flew to Munich to meet Hitler. On 29th September 1938. When he returned to Britain he waved a piece of paper saying 'It is peace in our time'. It was a treaty by which Hitler would have no further territorial claims in Europe if we agreed to his keeping the German speaking part of Czechoslovakia There was some feeling of relief in Britain, but most people were very sceptical knowing Hitler's record. In fact '*Our time'* proved very short lived as less than a year later the Nazis invaded Poland and we had little option but to declare war. Chamberlain was criticized for his 'appeasement' policy in signing the Munich agreement, but the poor man had little option as Britain, which had been disarming for years was than in no position to go to war against the mighty German forces, and it at least gave us a brief breathing space in which to strengthen our forces, train pilots and build a few Spitfires and Hurricanes. Sorry – I was digressing!

When I enrolled with the A.F.S. my employers (Car & General Insurance Co.) gave me one day off a week for training. I was issued with a navy blue boiler suit, leather belt holding a heavy axe, gumboots and a steel helmet. We had to practice rolling and unrolling long reels of hosepipe, which are very heavy, especially when wet, connecting them to a water supply (hydrant, reservoir, river or pond) and using them, sometimes from the top of a fifty-foot ladder. When using these high-pressure jets it was important to keep legs and feet firmly braced to prevent being knocked backwards off your feet. If the hose were dropped the heavy brass nozzle would fly around in the air like a demented serpent and could cause serious injury. We had to practice carrying one another in the firemen's lift, crawl through a smoke filled building in the dark, wearing goggles and respirator. The air is clearest at ground level so you always crawl in these conditions. We also had various lectures on how to tackle different types of fire, chemical hazards etc.

We rookies worked in teams of four and once a week spent the night at the central fire station. After removing our gumboots, helmet and belt we could lie on a camp bed in a room above the fire engines. If the bells rang out we hastily donned our gear, slid down a pole to the floor below to scramble on to the vehicle. We were not so fast as the regulars and invariably the engine was already moving out of the building when we climbed aboard! Unfortunately (or perhaps I should say 'fortunately') I never got to a really big fire, the largest being a fish and chip shop where the pans were blazing and threatening the whole building.

On the outbreak of war, as a team of four, we were allotted a trailer pump connected to an old Jaguar car (I was second driver) and we formed a 'Sub-station' in a private house in the Sneinton area.

We shared the post with another team and each was on duty 3 or 4 nights a week. We played Poker most of the night for halfpennies taking it in turn to have forty winks. It was the period when air raids were few. We were only called out a few times to domestic fires, which were soon extinguished. Although we were not paid for service in the A.F.S. we did receive a generous travel allowance for attending plus (if you used your own motor transport) appropriate petrol coupons, which were like gold as the ration for private motoring was extremely low. The same number of coupons were given whether you ran a large car or a small motorcycle so, with a 250 cc B.S.A, which did 120 m.p.g. I did very well!

My time in the A.F.S. brought back memories of my first fire fighting experiences so I will digress a moment. In the early 1920's when I was perhaps 7 or 8 years old we lived in the country and the nearest fire brigade was at Horncastle, five miles away. The 'Brigade', if you can call it that, consisted of a handful of volunteers who could be called upon when necessary to man the 'engine'. This was a large manual pump pulled by two shire horses! You don't see many today (if any) but in the good old days every farm had at least one haystack. If the hay was not thoroughly dry when it was stacked it decomposed in the stack creating a lot of heat causing spontaneous combustion with the stack going up in smoke. By the time the pump arrived it was seldom possible to save the stack but it could help prevent the fire spreading to other stacks or farm buildings. The pump had a thin horizontal pole on each side, which could be pumped up and down by about six men standing abreast. This was tiring work so the men frequently had to rest and volunteers were called for. I don't suppose I was a lot of help, but I was very thrilled when they let me have a go! It really was a call for 'All hands to the pumps'.

PART TWO

THE ‘Phoney War’ ended abruptly in May 1940 when massive Panzer Divisions of the German army bye-passed the Maginot Line and swept through Holland and Belgium whose armies collapsed within a week. They then faced the French and small and poorly armed forces of the B.E.F. who were unable to stop the German advance so evacuation was the only hope of saving our troops. I should not think there is anyone in England who has not heard of Dunkirk but evacuation was taking place from other French ports and I wonder how many know of the tragedy of the Lancastrian, which, at Cherbourg, took on 9000 British troops. Weary after a long march, most went below deck for a meal and rest. The ship had just set sail when three Luftwaffe planes attacked it and it turned over and sank within in minutes. There were only 200 survivors (among those who had remained on the deck)

The Government censored this information from the media for fear of disheartening the already shocked public. The evacuation was completed by June 5th. Over 300,000 men had been brought home but virtually all our guns, tanks and other arms had been left behind. Conscription was speeded up immediately and I received my call-up papers within a couple of weeks so ending my spell with the AFS, which had lasted about 18 months. I had been interviewed a few months previously by a recruitment officer and asked to join the Royal Corps of Signals in which my brother, Bob, who had been a telephone engineer had been placed. After telling them I had been a Troop leader in the scouts knew the Morse code and had made simple wireless sets my request was granted.

I was sent a railway warrant and asked (sorry, told) to report to Butlin’s Holiday camp at Prestatyn, which had been taken over by the Royal Signals as a training camp. In was instructed to take a labelled suitcase in which all my civilian clothes would be sent home.

I had only been married about eight months and it was with great difficulty that I prevented myself from shedding a few tears as the train pulled out leaving my lovely young wife standing on the platform. She was only 20 years old and looked so forlorn as she bravely waved goodbye.

There was only one other passenger in my carriage; a young man who proved to be an excellent travelling companion and he helped take my mind off my troubles. He had recently returned from Nepal, having been in a team attempting to conquer Everest and was now on his way to Wales to practice some mountaineering. My memory is weak but I think his name was Mallory. Anyway I do recall that he was well known in later Everest expeditions after the war. We had to part at Crewe Junction when we had to change trains and it was here that I first met my army pal Chris. Seeing him carrying what appeared to be an empty suitcase I guessed he was on the same mission as myself so we introduced ourselves and travelled the rest of the way together.

At Prestatyn, where a number of recruits disembarked, we were met by a sergeant who directed us to some waiting trucks that took us to the camp. As we entered and the sentry closed the gates behind us I could imagine what a convict first feels like when he first enters gaol. We were given a cup of char and then taken to the stores to be kitted out. An assistant sized up each man and handed over what he thought was the right size of battle dress etc. that we put in a kit bag. When it came to boots, he enquired, ‘What size’? If you replied ‘eight and a half,’ (for example), he would say, ‘There are no half sizes. Would you like them too large or too small?’ We were given a few minutes to don our uniforms before parading for inspection by an officer who sent back to the stores for an exchange of any item that did not fit.

As so much had been abandoned in France, everything was in short supply and we were very lucky to receive vintage Lea-Enfield rifles and army respirators as the previous intake of recruits had to do all their army drill with broom handles and carry the small rubber gas masks in cardboard boxes. These were the same as those issued to every member of the civilian population.

Chris and I were lucky to be billeted in the same wooden hut among the many hundreds erected on the site, each holding about thirty men. We spent about two hours a day ‘square bashing’, marching, rifle drill and P.T. Then there would be a break for lectures and instructions on various types of small arms, which we had to learn to dismantle and reassemble at high speed. After a couple of weeks we paid frequent visits to the firing range for target practice with rifles, hand grenades and bazookas. We also fired the Boyes anti-tank gun. The latter is a very heavy large bore rifle which has such a big kick when fired that it is much more likely to knock the firer backwards than do much damage to a tank!

For the first two weeks we were confined to camp but the next two weeks we were allowed out after an inspection to ensure we were properly dressed – '**Get that button done up.**' We did not go out very often for two reasons**:** Firstly we had no money. After being sworn in and swearing allegiance to King and Country we were given the King's Shilling, after which our pay was two shillings a day or fourteen shillings a week, but seven shillings of this was paid to the wife of every married man. From the remaining seven shillings the army deducted three for what they called 'Barrack Damage' and was used to pay for cleaning materials, polish, etc. as there was no damage. This left you with just four shillings out of which you had to buy your toiletries, boot polish, Brasso and Blanco. You had enough left if you were lucky to pay just one visit to the N.A.A.F.I. for a 'char and a wad' The second reason being that we were far too tired after an exhausting day starting at 6 a.m. reveille until evening meal. After that we were supposed to be free until lights out. However there were so many things (known as bullshit) to be done.

The most important was to clean and oil your rifle using a pull-through (a small brass cylinder on a cord holding a short strip of oil soaked flannel called 4 x 2) which had to be pulled through the rifle barrel many, many times until the rifle bore shone like a mirror for it's full length. Rifles were inspected every morning and if not up to standard you could be charged with having a dirty rifle and put on fatigues. Then your brass cap, badge etc. had to be highly polished, webbing belt and harness to be cleaned and Blancoed. Having done that we got to work on our two pairs of boots, literally using 'spit and polish' and rubbing hard with a 'bone' (either the back of a spoon or something like a toothbrush handle) until the boots looked like patent leather. Having achieved this on one pair we would not wear that pair but keep them for kit inspection or any special parades.

After completing the four weeks initial training we were given ten days leave. On returning to camp we were interviewed and assessed to decide what trade you were to be given (e.g. driver, radio mechanic, wireless operator etc) I was pressed to take a commission but declined this as being married I could not afford it. A sub-lieutenant only received 12/6 a day out of which he had to pay his mess bills and buy his own uniform. We were then moved to Rhyl where we occupied empty furnished houses for about two weeks. Forty of us who had been selected as wireless operators were then sent to Swansea for training for three months and this was the happiest time in the army.

We travelled to Swansea by train in the sole charge of a very nice sergeant who promised us an easy and pleasant time as long as we behaved ourselves and he was good to his word. We were billeted in twos and threes in private houses but Chris and I were not together. My billet was super, my landlady Mrs Walker and her husband had a 16-year-old son and they treated me and my two companions just like members of the family. In spite of rationing we were fed magnificently, including a very substantial amount of 'laver bread', which is a kind of seaweed, mixed with oatmeal and some meat. It tasted strongly of iodine but was a popular delicacy and no doubt very good for you.

We paraded each weekday at 9 a.m. in the town square before marching to the 'schoolroom'. We were the first and only troops to be in Swansea and the inhabitants took us to their hearts so we tried to put on a good turnout. We had many, many invitations to tea and, or musical evenings. The Welsh are great singers and we had a lot of fun trying to learn the Welsh words of their songs. Our 'school' was an old chapel and our instructors were two elderly civilians who had been Post Office telegraphists. We spent three hours in the morning practicing on the Morse keys and learning wireless communications procedure and another hour after lunch. After which we were free. We could go to Mumbles, a lovely sandy bay about two miles from the town, or take long, long walks along the beautiful Gower coast. In the evenings Chris and I usually went to a centre opened by Salvation Army where we played chess, bridge or darts and get a cup of tea.

After we had been in Swansea about three weeks Chris's wife, Mary and my darling Win came to stay with us for a most wonderful month. Mrs Walker kindly let us have another bedroom and Chris had the same luck at this billet. Whilst Chris and I were at school Win and Mary spent their time together and the four of us became lifelong friends. We all had a wonderful time but he four weeks passed all too quickly and it was a sad day when Win and Mary had to return home although after a few days we were thankful that they had gone.

It was that very week that the Luftwaffe started bombing all the British ports and Swansea was very badly hit. Chris and I were in the S.A. Centre when the first waves of bombers struck dropping H.E. bombs and incendiaries. The docks and railways were severely damaged and the

railway station was burnt out. As soon as there was a lull in the bombing Chris and I decided to leave this dangerous spot and make a dash for our billet about half a mile away. We hadn't got far when a second wave of bombers came roaring over dropping more bombs on the now blazing city. The main road on which we were on had been hit in several places cutting the gas mains and big fires erupted from the craters. This was literally too hot for us and as we heard more bombs falling we jumped into a garden, seeking shelter against the stonewall and a tree. Almost immediately there was a loud rustle in the tree and an incendiary hit the ground and burst in to flames within two feet of us. We decided to make a further dash to our billets. When I got home I joined my two room-mates watching the spectacle from the bedroom window until a stick of bomb dropped rather too close and we saw a church only two streets away sustain a direct hit. After that we decided that we would be better off in the cellar!

It was shortly after this that one night we were alarmed by the ringing of church bells, which was the warning that Germans were invading the coast of the Bristol Channel. We (forty Signalmen) the only troops in the area were swiftly issued with fifty rounds of rifle ammunition and two hand grenades each and in pairs sent along the sand hills to defend goodness knows how many miles of coastline. Talk about 'Dad's Army'! I suppose it was not entirely a false alarm as apparently some German E-Boats made a commando type raid a few miles away. We gather they were set on fire by spraying them with loads of petrol and dozens of bodies were washed ashore the next day.

I have already mentioned the wonderful welcome we were given by the local inhabitants but here is an example. There was a very kind hairdresser to whom I went for a haircut where the normal price was one shilling. Having cut my hair, without being asked he proceeded to give me a shampoo, a shave and a 'facial' covering my face with steaming hot towels. He only charged me a shilling for all this and I learned afterwards that he always did this for everyone wearing our uniform.

After completing our twelve weeks course I think we were all reasonably efficient, anyway we all passed the final examination. We no longer thought of the letters in terms of dots and dashes, but as distinctive ***sounds***. If you recite the alphabet in the normal way you are only making different distinctive sounds, e.g. AY, BEE, SEE, etc. The dots and dashes in Morse make distinctive sounds in the same way only in a different 'language', and it is these sounds that you read. For instance the letter A sounds like **DI DA** (**.** -) B sounds like **DA DI DI DI** (**- . . .**) C is like **murder, murder** (**- . - .**) D like **DA DI DI DI (- . . .**), E (the most frequently used letter) simply **DI** (**.**) and (I love this) F sounds like '**Did it hurt yer'** (**. . - .**). Once used to this, one has to *think* to recall a letter in dots and dashes.

All good things come to an end and our next 'Port of Call' was Egham, near Windsor and Staines. Chris and a small advance party with our kit went first and I followed the next day with the remainder of the section.

We were to be billeted in a lovely country house called '*Marlands*' (being owned by the Mars Bar tycoon). The taps in the bathroom were gold plated, I remember, but the house was completely empty and we had to sleep on the floorboards with just two blankets. On arrival everyone tried to grab the best space but thanks to Chris he and I did better than anyone. Next to the house was a large double garage over which was a separate self-contained flat. Chris, snooping around, having arrived with our kit the day before the main party, immediately saw it's possibilities and deposited his kit bag and mine on the lounge floor of the flat to reserve our bed space! When his two companions showed any interest in the flat, Chris told them he believed it was reserved for officers, so Chris and I got it to ourselves. It had a gas fire, which kept us cosy, dried wet clothes and could be used for making toast. In one corner was a small window through which we could see the large lawn used as our parade ground. It was there that everyone had to parade early in the morning and a number of men were allocated fatigue duties for the day and Chris and I laughed as we watched. We were never missed from this parade as the sergeant just checked that all the rooms in the house were empty so we didn't have a room call. We always attended the next parade after breakfast and thus took part in the main programme for the day.

This was primarily a toughening up process, for instance long route marches (twelve to fifteen miles) which gave us painful blisters. We had 'Orientation exercises' when we were deposited by trucks in some remote spot and had to find our way back by map reading. All signposts had, of course, been removed during the war. We also had rigorous sessions of P.T stripped to a pair of underpants. I remember several times when the lawn was thickly covered with snow on which we had

to lie, bare backed, doing leg exercises! I have already mentioned that we could not afford to go to the N.A.A.F.I. in the evening or go out on the town, so we used to gather up any bread and margarine that had been left on the tables after the evening meal. We then spent the evenings making toast with Marmite and playing chess in front of the gas fire.

I should have mentioned that when we had settled in Egham we were given a few days leave and went by train to Nottingham. It was late in September at the height of the Battle of Britain and London was being terribly blitzed. When I reached Victoria Station, instead of blackout, it was weird to find so much light. There were many huge fires, and brilliant lights, suspended from parachutes and dropped by the bombers, lit up the buildings like daylight. Adding to this were the numerous searchlights that tried to track the bombers, and the burst of ack-ack shells and bombs falling everywhere. No tube trains, buses or taxis were running so I had no option but to walk to St. Pancras. I had been to London many times in my youth, so with so much light it was not difficult to find the way although several times Wardens tried to make me take shelter. I eventually arrived at St. Pancras only to find the station virtually demolished and the L.M.S. terminus was being operated from a small station about two miles north. I caught a train from there to Nottingham about an hour later.

After a couple of nights at home Win and I went to Wainfleet to see my parents. This reminded me of my previous visit during my first leave. It was then that I saw the first German plane I had seen being shot down. One night I heard the noise of aircraft and many bursts of machine gun fire. Looking out of the window I could see two Spitfires chasing a bomber. Suddenly thick smoke began pouring from one of its engines as it rapidly lost height travelling towards the sea into which I presume it crashed.

Back at Egham things didn't change much except that we had an influx of about twenty men who were driver-mechanics and electrician/radio engineers who would complete the crews for the wireless sets. There was mild excitement to break the monotony the day two of our wireless trucks were delivered. These were five-ton custom built vehicles. Behind the driver's cab was a separate compartment containing a large generator and a bank of batteries, and at the rear of the vehicle was the door onto the wireless cabin. At the front of this was a swivel chair at a desk facing the mass of apparatus. You can, no doubt, recall the small valves used in wireless sets, but in these, which were known as 'Number Three Sets' there were two valves the size of footballs. These, however, were only used if we wished to transmit on high power. Along each side were six foot upholstered box seats in which were stored various pieces of equipment including coils of aerial wire and wireless spares. On each side of the vehicle were racks holding eight 8-foot iron pipes which when socketed together could form two 48-foot masts like pyramids. You might wonder how these heavy masts could be erected by a crew of six men. It would be difficult to describe without illustrations so see if you can solve the puzzle! Like everything else it is easy if you know how. Apart from the eight pipes the only other things used are a number of steel cables or Guy ropes. We spent many hours practising putting the masts up but we only ever put one up once when we were abroad and that is another story. However, we were always thankful that those pipes were on the sides of the truck, thinking they might deflect shrapnel or rifle bullets and give us a measure of protection.

One day we had a visit from a Colonel who inspected our set up and interviewed some of us. He tried to persuade me to take a commission but I declined for the reasons already mentioned. I don't know if it had any bearing on the matter but the next day I was told to sew one stripe on my uniform as I had been promoted to the rank of (acting, unpaid,) Lance Corporal!!

November and December 1940 were very sad months for me when I received a telegram from my father saying Mother was seriously ill in Lincoln hospital and asking if I could get leave. I was given 48 hours. Mother was still very weak when I saw her, from having had gallstones removed, but I was assured she was making good progress after the operation. I was shocked a week later to get another telegram to say Mother had died. It appeared that a blood clot had reached her heart causing a thrombosis. I don't think this could happen today. This time I was given 72 hours to attend the funeral at Hundleby church where Mother was buried.

In December there was a lot of activity at Egham and we were suddenly given a weeks embarkation leave. After two days in Nottingham Win and I spent the rest of the week in Wainfleet with my father. About a week before Christmas Chris and I were separated when he and a small advance party sailed with all our trucks to an unknown destination. I was fortunate to be in the main party who were given a further three days leave at Christmas. Win and I spent the time at Wainfleet

and it was lovely to be together again so soon though it was difficult to forget that it was likely to be many years before it would happen again.

Back in Egham we were issued with pith helmets and other tropical kit in which we paraded with a few thousand other men from various units. We did not know whether this was just to fool the Germans that we were bound for the Middle East when we were really going to some colder region! Anyway on 31st December 1940 (New Years Eve) we entrained for Liverpool and began what is another story.

Me in Egham

PART THREE

After a long and tedious journey our train finally pulled in the Liverpool docks in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1st January 1941. It was freezing hard and would have been completely dark in the blackout if it had not been for a clear sky and some moonlight. We had to remain on the train for some hours until first light when we had to sit in the cold on the dockside for about two more hours until finally we were marched to our ship, which was moored at a nearby jetty. It was the M.V. Britannic, the most beautiful ship I had ever seen, being the largest motor ship (i.e. driven by diesel engines) in the world. As we walked up the gangplank we noticed the decks were covered with a sheet of ice and huge icicles were hanging from all the rigging. We stepped off the gangplank and immediately entered a huge, luxuriously furnished foyer as big as a ballroom. There was a massive fireplace on one side in which an enormous fire blazed and it was nice to get really warm at last. We were served with cups of hot tea before being sorted out and directed to our cabins. When I say 'we' I am referring to our small group of Signals personnel and doubt whether those going into lower decks or steerage got such a good reception. With three others, I shared a 4-berth outer cabin complete with hot and cold-water washbasin and a sea view porthole. It opened on to a long corridor only a few yards from a sumptuous bathroom and taps of iced drinking water.

It was not very long before we weighed anchor and moved out in to the Mersey, but it took a few hours to assemble the many ships in their proper stations before the convoy could move off. There were twenty ships in the convoy, mainly passenger liners carrying troops and a few cargo vessels. We were escorted by three destroyers and one cruiser. The whole convoy made a wonderful picture and it was a thrill to be part of it.

We sailed round the north of Ireland and it was not until we were out in the Atlantic that we learned our destination. We were paraded on deck and over the Tannoy system an officer informed us that half the troops were bound for the Middle East and half for the Far East. We were puzzled as to why we were sailing practically due West and were informed that they hoped to fool the Germans into assembling their U-Boat packs half way across the Atlantic instead of near the West Coast of Africa. I think the Britannic was probably the fastest ship in the convoy but of course we could only move at the speed of the slowest ship and we stayed on course for two or three days.

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Cunard *M.V. Britannic*

It was bitterly cold on deck and we ran into a dreadful storm with 30-foot waves. We could see the propellers of ships in front out of the water and lashing in the air when they mounted the crest of a wave and then disappearing into a trough until rising on the next wave. The Britannic was fitted with stabilizers so did not roll very much, however the bows went up at a very steep angle when we struck a wave. There was a long corridor running the length of the ship from aft to bows and when you walked along this it was uphill one minute and downhill he next.

We had been at sea about two days when I was called before our C.O. and told to put a second stripe as I had been promoted to full corporal. I do not think I was really qualified to be a First

class O.W.L. (Operator Wireless and Line) but as an N.C.O. I was automatically given the highest grade. This was wonderful as my pay rose from two shillings a day to twelve shillings and sixpence a day. We were divided into two groups; H.W.T. section and 40 H.W.T. section (H.W.T. = Heavy Wireless Telegraphy) and I was fortunate to be in 39 which was going to the Middle East.

I imagine that we were about half way across the Atlantic when we changed course to a southeasterly direction and temperatures rose rapidly to warm and then hot. We passed through a large area known as the Doldrums where there was no movement of air and surface of the sea was smooth and flat like a mirror. We could picture old sailing ships being stuck in the area for days waiting for a breath of wind. Occasionally the surface of the water would be disturbed when a shoal of flying fish took to the air flying a number of yards just above the surface. Another strange thing we saw was a number of water spouts rising like fountains from the still water perhaps over 100 feet into the air. Soon after leaving the Doldrums the Britannic developed some engine trouble and had to stop whilst repairs were carried out. The remainder of the convoy carried on, as they dared not stop in case there was a U-boat attack. We felt very lonely and vulnerable as we watched our convoy disappear over the horizon for we were a ‘sitting duck’ for any U-boat. However things were put right in a few hours and with our ship able to go it’s maximum speed for once it was not too many hours before we had caught up with the slow moving convoy much to our relief

However, the next day there was a further drama when our naval escort thought they had detected a U-boat lurking around. The three destroyers dashed around like wasps disturbed from their nest, releasing loads of depth charges. These exploded with a loud boom sending a large column of water into the air and causing our ship to shudder. After about half an hour they gave up the chase having lost contact with any quarry. No oil or wreckage could be found on the surface so we never knew if it was a false alarm.

I have not mentioned much about our activities aboard ship as they were all rather boring parades, inspections, jogging around the deck, daily boat drill, fire drill and hours and hours of P.T. However , when we were in the tropics I managed at least one swim each day in one of the large swimming pools on deck. There was a break in the monotony when we crossed the Equator and the usual 'Crossing the Line’ ceremony was carried out. ‘King Neptune’ sat on his throne facing a ‘Sweeney Todd’ type barbers chair, which could be switched backwards into the swimming pool. I, with many others, was grabbed by two of Neptune’s henchmen (burly sailors) and held on the barber’s chair. Then with a huge distemper brush I was thickly lathered from a bucket of what I think was wallpaper paste, before being roughly shaved with a wooden scythe and tipped backwards into the pool. The ceremony continued for most of the day and was great fun.

I think it was the next day that we reached Freetown, the capital of Liberia. It is just North of the Equator so we must have changed to a slightly northerly course and crossed the Equator again. There were so many ships that we had to moor well out of the harbour whilst they refuelled and took on water and provisions etc. We were there for about three days and although no one went ashore there was plenty of entertainment. We were always surrounded by dozens of rowing boats and canoes. The latter carried several small black boys who were begging for money. Whenever we threw a coin from the deck they would dive into the sea and snatch it up before it reached the bottom. The rowing boats were laden with tons of the most exotic fruits of all kinds. On long ropes we lowered baskets (containing a few coppers) from the deck and the natives filled them with many pounds of fruit before we hauled it back.

Freetown is said to be about the hottest port in the world and we were sweltering in it only two weeks after sailing from freezing Liverpool. There is no doubt that this sudden and extreme change in climate was responsible for the breakdown in my health because two days after we left Freetown following a vigorous P.T. session I felt an acute pain in my chest and had breathing difficulty. The next morning, feeling no better, I went on sick parade and after queuing for an hour saw the M.O. As far as I recall, he didn’t examine me or even take my temperature. He gave me no medication but simply told me to continue to do PT and take a few extra turns running round the deck so I can only conclude that he thought I was ‘skiving’. However the next day whilst doing PT in scorching sunshine I collapsed, unconscious on the deck and woke up in the ship’s hospital. Here I was examined by the Chief Medical Officer. He asked me when I had first felt the pain and when I told him he became cross and snapped, ‘Why the hell didn’t you report sick before this?’

I told him I had done so and what the M.O. had said. At this he blew his top saying 'The M.O. said what? That is the worst advice he could have given you. You have acute pleurisy in the right lung and must have complete rest.' He then muttered something about finding which M.O. had been on duty when I went sick. I was confined to bed for at least two weeks, after which although still in hospital I was allowed to sit on 'A' deck (normally restricted to officers) for a few hours each day. Whilst I was there I got quite a surprise one day. A young Second Lieutenant recognized me and came across for a chat. He was an insurance clerk with the Norwich Union in Nottingham and we both used to attend the student's 'Study Circle' together. A small world isn't it? I soon began to feel much better and enjoyed sitting on the deck like a first-class passenger on a cruise.

As we sailed a few miles out to sea down the West Coast of Africa we did get an occasional glimpse of land in the distance but normally all that was visible was the sea and the vast number of ships in our convoy. However, it was interesting to watch their various manoeuvres whenever the convoy changed course. I don't remember how long it took to sail from Freetown to Capetown but think it was only a few days. No one was allowed ashore but we got a good view of the harbour and town with the Table Mountain in the background and it was nice to see a little civilization again. We stayed there three or four days during which time, apart from refuelling etc. the convoy was sorted out into two groups, one going to Egypt and the other to the Far East. I was fortunate to be in the first group. I think this was a good omen because during my four and a half years abroad I survived so many 'near misses' I was sure there was a good angel watching over me and I am convinced the angel was my mother. I knew all the men in 40 H.W.T. section who went to the Far East but I never learned what became of them. Our next stop was Durban where we remained for a week. The troops were given shore leave and I gather they had a grand time, but as I was still hospitalized I could only remain on deck.

With fewer ships in the convoy Britannic was able to moor right in the harbour and high up on 'A' deck I got a bird's eye view of the city which with its wide clean streets and modern buildings decked with exotic flowers looked very beautiful. The surrounding hills and countryside also looked lovely and I can understand why the South Africans called it 'God's own Country'. After leaving Durban I was discharged from hospital and was able to join my mates in our cabin for the final leg of the voyage up the Red Sea. We disembarked at port Tewfik at the Southern end of the Suez Canal. The water was too shallow to moor at a jetty so the cargo and passengers had to be transferred to lighters to be taken ashore. It was a bit precarious climbing down a rope ladder from the high deck onto the lighter with a heavy pack on our back and there was a lot of laughter when a very portly officer lost his grip on the ladder and dropped into the sea. You can imagine the laughter from those already aboard the lighter. It was a bit cruel to laugh really but the poor man was soon fished out.

Well that is the end of a long voyage that had taken just nine and a half weeks from Liverpool. I think it is a shame I went down with pleurisy, which must have been about the only thing against which I had not been inoculated. Before we left we were given the 'daddy of all' jabs, which was against Cholera, Bubonic Plague and everything else we had not already had. Before we paraded for this the sergeant said, 'After this you will be excused duties for twenty-four hours, believe me if the army does that you can be sure it is necessary' **It was!** For at least two days we all had a very high temperature, were bathed in sweat and felt terribly weak. It might have been better to have the disease.

PART FOUR

On getting ashore at Port Tewfik it seemed strange to be on dry land at last as our ‘sea legs’ tried to get accustomed to walking on a surface, which remained more or less horizontal. However with so many thousands of men deposited on the quayside at once we had several hours to wait for transport to move us to Cairo.

Looking back I think I can say it had been a fairly pleasant and interesting voyage for most of us but I think that those men who travelled below deck or in the hold must have been glad it was over. Those in the hold had to sleep in hammocks, which had been hastily slung up between the ships bulwarks. It was so hot below decks where there was little ventilation that whilst we were in the tropics hundreds of men preferred to sleep on deck. The sailors swabbing the decks at about 6 a.m. thought it great fun to turn the hoses on any men who were still sleeping.

We were grateful that the convoy had come through without losing a single ship. We were only the second convoy to come round the Cape to the Middle East. Previously they had travelled through the Mediterranean and we understood that the last one to do so had lost so many ships, out of twenty only nine reached Alexandria.

At long last we got transport and travelled in a filthy, dilapidated and ancient train (probably built by George Stephenson!) on hard wooden seats. We travelled about one hundred miles over scrub desert to Ismailia (a suburb of Cairo). After another long wait we then caught another train to our base camp at Maadi (about 15 miles south of Cairo) and this was to be our home for about six weeks.

When we reached Maadi Station we were transferred to army trucks, which took us to the camp where I had the most delightful surprise for there standing on the tarmac was Chris. Knowing we were due in he had come out to meet me. It gave me such joy to see him again and I know he felt the same.

Chris and me

It was fortunate for me that he had come out with the advance party, as there were further wonderful surprises to follow. Good pal that he was, in the area allocated to 39 H.W.T. Section, he had dug a shallow trench in which he had put a small ridge tent surrounded by a wall of sand bags for the two of us. From bamboo poles, which were plentiful in the area, he had constructed two camp beds, which, covered with straw filled palliasses were quite comfortable. But the best surprise of all was that on a wooden box, which served as a bedside table, were three letters from my darling wife. I had sent letters to her from Freetown, Cape Town and Durban but only her third letter mentioned that she had received my first letter. Letter writing was a little difficult, as we were not allowed to describe anything that could indicate our whereabouts. However, Win and I had a code that successfully passed the censor. I would simply end my letters with the words, ‘Please remember me to all at (say) 35 and 30’, the figures being the latitude and longitude of my whereabouts very roughly.

Our arrival in Egypt was shortly after the magnificent defeat of the Italian Army by General Wavell and his desert force. With only 30 thousand men they went out into the desert and surrounded the Italians on the coast at Sidi Barani, taking over 300,000 prisoners. It fell to me to take a lorry (with driver) carrying fifty of these prisoners to a remote spot where an encampment was being prepared. I had to sign for them before departing and get a receipt for the full number on our return.

We collected a number of picks and spades and I had to instruct the prisoners to dig large holes in the sandy ground big enough to conceal a large truck or tank. Of course this was rather difficult, as none of the blighters could understand English so I shouted, 'Parlez vous Francais?' One man put his hand up so I called him to stand by me and act as interpreter as I gave instructions in my schoolboy French. It worked quite well. Whilst the others slaved away in the heat my interpreter had an easy time of it. I did get a credit for oral French in the Oxford school certificate so we were able to have quite a chat and I learned that he had been a chef in a Paris hotel.

Our time at Maadi was spent in various ways; parades, lectures, PT, digging holes and erecting tents etc. but we had a fairly easy time and were usually free to go into Cairo in the evening.

One day after a soldier had died I had the unpleasant task of being a pallbearer. Whilst on parade, I and five others of similar height were selected to carry the coffin at the funeral. I can understand why people in those hot areas always bury their dead within twenty-four hours because the smell was horrific.

There was an open-air cinema on the camp run by a native called Shafto. It showed some good and up to date films but was constantly breaking down, whenever it did so someone would shout 'who's a bastard' followed by a loud chorus of '*Shafto'*. It just helped break the monotony.

Shortly before reveille each morning, we were awakened by a native boy walking round the tents shouting **'***Char Wallar, Apper Pie, Apper Pie,***'** to which there would be a loud and rude response of, '*Upyer Pipe, Upyer Pipe'* from men who disliked being roused so early. The tea was poor and the 'apper pie' was not made with apple but with sweet potatoes (yams). There was, however, a marquee run by some very nice W.R.V.S. ladies from New Zealand where from (the marquee, not New Zealand) we could buy light refreshments and a large beaker of iced juice from freshly squeezed oranges. Around the camp were several barrels of fresh oranges, which we could help ourselves to as they had been washed in chlorinated water. There were always so many flies everywhere that for fear of infection we were forbidden to buy any fruit from the stalls.

On one occasion I had the unpleasant job of taking a young soldier to the glasshouse, which was situated in a remote area a few miles from Cairo. With just a driver and a small truck I sat on the back with my 'prisoner'. I don't know what he had done but it was probably something very minor like 'dumb insolence' or insubordination to an officer and he looked so subdued I felt very sorry for him. I had, of course, to sign for him before starting and complete a bit of paperwork when handing him and a dossier etc. over at the glasshouse. I was only there for a short time but felt sick at what I saw and was glad to get away. The young lad I had brought was treated like dirt by bullying 'Red-Caps' and made to do everything 'at the double', whilst on the parade ground dozens of men were being forced to run at the double round and round the compound under the blazing sun. My driver told me that a regular treatment was to make a man scrub and polish a barrack room floor until it was spotless and shining ready for inspection after which rubbish bins and buckets of filthy water would be thrown across the floor and the man ordered to do the job all over again.

One afternoon we were having a lecture in a hut with instructions about some apparatus or other and when we were leaving I saw on the floor near the door what I thought was a coil of black electric cable about as thick as a pencil. Thinking it had been dropped by mistake I started to pick it up. As soon as I touched it began to uncurl and I realised it was not a wire but a sleeping snake! Someone passed me a long handled brush with which I managed to sweep the reptile outside but every time I managed to fling it away with the brush it returned with lightening speed to lay its fangs in to the brush head. Several natives who were standing nearby screamed and backed away when they saw the snake. We never knew what sort it was but gathered it was highly dangerous and one bite from it could be fatal. After fending it off for some minutes, a sergeant fetched his revolver and managed to shoot the creature.

One day we took a trip to Giza to see the Sphinx and the pyramids and of course have the obligatory camel ride! I was disappointed with the Sphinx which doesn't sit proudly on the desert but is down a hole and somewhat damaged. You have to have a guide to go in to the interior of the pyramid and it is quite an experience. I think we paid a dragoman 10 piastres each (about 10 pence) to take us. After lighting a small candle he led us through a narrow opening in the stonework in to an equally narrow tunnel rising steeply upwards. He was, no doubt, anxious to get to his next customer as soon as possible so he literally ran up the slope holding the flickering candle in front of him. As we were in his shadow we could hardly see a thing but we did notice two or three openings to narrow

shafts leading downwards from the sides of the tunnel. We were told that the slaves who had worked on the construction were thrown down the shafts when their job was done so that they could not give away any secrets.

Eventually we reached Tutankhamun's burial chamber, which must have been very near the top of the pyramid. It had been stripped bare apart from a large stone casket in which his mummified body had lain. It must have looked very different when the walls were lined with alabaster and the room filled with gold and jewelled objects. We also visited another area where we saw several beautiful temples which had been excavated and the murals on the walls were fantastic and still in brilliant colour. The pyramids too would have been a wonderful sight shining in the sun when they were covered all over with alabaster.

Chris and I went to Cairo most evenings, as there was little to do in the camp. The trains ran very frequently and the carriages were always full of troops. However there were as many, or more, natives travelling free on the outside. They sprawled all over the carriage roofs, stood on all the buffers and standing on the small steps, held on to the door handles. There were so many of them that it was impossible for the railway officials to prevent it. Until the train reached the outskirts of the city there was little to be seen except sandy waste with a sprinkling of hovels and mud huts close to the track.

We would go for a meal, visit a cinema or nightclub or wander around seeing the sights although much of Cairo was out of bounds to the troops. I remember ordering an omelette in one café and the waiter asked, ‘Would you like a six or eight egg omelette?’ But I hadn’t realised that Egyptian eggs are so much smaller. Our favourite cinema was an open air one, that is to say it had no roof so it kept cool in the night air. Everyone sat at little tables and waiters were always on hand to supply drinks. Good films were shown; all in English, but on each side and below the main screen were small screens on which the speech was shown in several languages. I remember one of the films was ‘Rebecca’.

The big museum was closed ‘for the duration’ so we were unable to see those wonderful relics from the ancient tombs and temples. However, we did go down the catacombs, which were interesting if rather macabre. The tunnels and caves are vast and the rock walls had been cut away to form holes and shelves on which lay the skulls and skeletons of corpses laid there many hundreds of years ago.

One place we visited, purely for educational purposes I must add, was the famous (or should I say infamous) Berker Street, which is full of brothels. We looked in one where scantily clad females pranced around until some punter took then in to one of the small cubicles which led off the main room. The ‘girls’ were all well past their sell-by date and I wouldn’t have touched them with **two** barge poles! However, they seemed to have plenty of trade. There was an unpleasant odour in the place and the whole scene was revolting so Chris and I left much the wiser. I believe there were better class establishments for officers only, and I understand the famous Shepherds Hotel was restricted to officers; there were always plenty of call girls available.

I think the most noticeable thing about Cairo is, perhaps, the vast number of flies, which are a constant pest. Everyone carries a fly swat, which is in constant use. The next most noticeable thing is the dense crowds, which include a large proportion of spivs, beggars and little urchins who appear to live on the streets. We were continually badgered to buy anything from jewellery, leather goods, dirty postcards or someone’s ‘nice clean sister’ or touted by a young ‘boot black’ to let him polish our boots.

Another thing was the traffic chaos. Rickshaw boys, donkey carts, motor vehicles and tram cars all jostled for space on the crowded roads, the tramcars, like the trains, having as many people hanging on to the outside as the number inside. We witnessed quite a number of accidents, which seemed to be so commonplace that people just ignored them.

Inevitably our honeymoon life at Maadi eventually came to an end and there was great excitement when we were ordered to move ‘Up the blue’. It was always a mystery why the desert was called the ‘The Blue’. I think someone must have been colour-blind!

We set off in a large convoy of vehicles with our four wireless trucks. These had been given code names, which were famous warships. I, a mere corporal, was ‘Captain’ of the ‘Rodney’ with a crew of six including myself! We more or less followed the railway line that ran from Cairo to Marsa Matruh, which was the terminus a few miles from the border with Libya. After travelling for a few

hours we took a break at a small railway ‘Halt’ which could hardly be called a station as there was just a platform and a small waiting room covered with graffiti. Above this was a sign reading ‘El Alamein’. Few people had heard of the place at that time, but today few have **not** heard of it. We went on past Marsa Matruh to a spot in the desert called Bagush where the Eighth Army had its H.Q. in a large camp. We had had no practice on a Morse key since we left Swansea several months before. But in it’s typical way the army threw us in ‘at the deep end’ and expected us to establish wireless contact as soon as we arrived with the Australian garrison who for many months had been besieged in Tobruk.

The Australian operator who answered my call was obviously an old hand as he transmitted at tremendous speed and I had difficulty keeping up with him. I asked him to slow down a little as I was a new op and he was most co-operative and helped me a lot. He had a lot of messages to send and we got on very well. When he had finished he sent the letters GBOM. I queried this and asked what it meant, he said, ‘Ask an old OP.’ I did so and learned it meant, ‘Goodbye old man’ (something not in the procedure manual).

It was the season of the ‘Khamsins’ (dust and sand storms). These are so severe that the sun is blotted out, and in the dim red light it is literally impossible to see your hand in front of you. These storms could last two or three days and we had several. The friction of the hot sand blowing on a vehicle caused it to be charged with static electricity which gave you quite a shock if you touched the metalwork and would send a spark like a flash of lightening to a screwdriver if one was held about three inches away. We were fortunately near the sea and could get a refreshing swim once the storm had abated. The static electricity made wireless transmissions virtually impossible.

The Eighth Army rapidly expanded as convoy after convoy arrived carrying guns, tanks and troops and our little 39 H.W.T. section was split up, each wireless truck being allocated to a different unit.

General Wavell’s Western Desert Force had increased in size and was now XIII Corps to which I was now attached. My main wireless links were to the Aussies in Tobruk, to army H.Q. (which was the truck on which Chris worked with my good Nottingham pal Cpl. Eric Rush and sometimes we contacted the L.R.D.G. (Long Range Desert Group), who made commando type raids behind enemy lines.

I always tried to get on the same shift as Chris so we could have a short chat and exchange any news from home etc. (Strictly against the rules!)

We had dug a hole large enough to contain our truck, which we covered with camouflage netting under which we slept when not on duty. Covered with one blanket and mosquito netting we were frequently disturbed by a clicking sound and would find a scorpion keeping warm under our pillow!

Cpl. Eric Rush with wireless 3 set and crew

We worked more or less like an independent unit connected by telephone to a signals office some distance away which brought us messages for transmission and took those away we had received. We had no inspections or parades and seldom saw an officer on the truck. We were on

excellent terms with the Sergeant Major and the quartermaster sergeant. They each had a personal wireless set on which they listened to the BBC World service and they asked me if we would keep their batteries charged up on our generator. In return they supplied us with a lot of tit-bits such as tins of peaches or jars of good coffee. These things were not on the menu for 'other ranks' so I assume they dropped off a lorry near the officer's mess but we asked no questions!

We remained in Bagush area until October and there were frequent air raids but the Germans were mainly occupied in attacking Tobruk which straddled the only road and was a thorn in their side as the Aussies could attack their flank if they attempted to advance further across the desert. In the meant time we were able to enjoy a pleasant swim in the Mediterranean about twice a day. I used to dive under the clear water and watch shoals of highly coloured fish darting about among the rocks, which were covered with equally colourful coral.

At the end of October, the whole army (or so it seemed) moved in to forward positions close to the Libyan border ready for the big push called 'Operation Crusader' to relieve the Australians who were still besieged in Tobruk. At dawn on November we moved off and reached the Libyan frontier where there was a thick barbed wire fence behind which there was a deep minefield. When we arrived the minefield had already been breached by sending through several driverless steamrollers, which exploded the mines and then lay in a damaged condition in a rough path across the minefield, which had been marked off with red and white tape. We could then drive through the gap taking great care to follow the tracks of the vehicles that had preceded us.

We were now about five hundred miles from Tobruk and progress was slow as our forces fanned out. As you know there was no continuous 'front' across the thousand miles of desert and various groups formed themselves in to armed defensive caps known as 'boxes' which were given names like Knightsbridge, Piccadilly etc.

To mislead observation planes groups of tanks were disguised with plywood, hardboard etc. and concentrations of lorries disguised as tanks and miles of telegraph poles, without wire, were put up across the desert leading nowhere. A few days before our advance we were busy sending and receiving messages twenty-four hours a day because although fifty percent were probably genuine the rest were dummy messages. We knew the Germans listened to all our transmissions and could eventually decipher them so we wanted to make them too busy deciphering rubbish to gather any useful information.

We were on the move nearly all day, so we were on 'hard rations' (bully beef and biscuits). As we transmitted on the move a small Lysander plane flew along the column of vehicles and assisted by a dispatch rider on a Harley Davidson motorcycle picked up messages received and handed us others to be sent out or delivered to other trucks, which acted as signal offices. I always had two of my crew on the roof of the truck to warn us of the approach of any aircraft. During the advance, the royal Engineers were busy extending the railway line from Marsa Matruh for several hundred miles in order to speed up the transfer of men and supplies, as motor transport across rocky sand is very slow.

Whenever we stopped at night the first thing that everyone did was dig a slit trench in to which they could dive and lie flat when suddenly strafed by enemy planes. Often there was no time to reach the trench so you just flattened yourself on the ground. On at least three occasions I was showered with grit and sand as the bullets of the eight machine guns of an ME 109 struck the ground only inches from where I lay. Some units had minor skirmishes with small pockets of the enemy, but the main battle was at Sidi Rhezegh and lasted two days. It was very much in the balance as the Germans 88 mm guns and superior tanks could knock out our tanks long before the enemy tanks were in range of our inferior guns. I think it was just their shortage of fuel and ammunition, which caused the Germans to retire and allow us to advance. We crossed the battlefield and the morning after before the Pioneer Corps had recorded and buried the dead (which was their job) and the sight was horrific, the area was littered with damaged or burnt out tanks and corpses. Many of the latter were charred and some had their nose or fingers chewed away by gerbils (the real desert rats).

One tank had been hit by an armour-piercing shell, which cut a neat three-inch diameter hole through the four inch steel plate at the front of the tank as though it was butter. Behind this hole the headless driver still sat at the controls.

When we were within a few miles of Tobruk the Aussies sent out a column to meet us but the Germans put a wedge between us and there was a further anxious period. It was at this time that a Brigadier came in to our truck and asked if I could get in touch with his opposite number in Tobruk so

that he could speak to him in plain language by radiotelephone. I succeeded and handed him the telephone headset. He omitted to press a button on the handset when he tried to speak and told me it wasn't working. So not to embarrass him I took the handset and made sure that he could see me operate the button before saying, 'It's alright now sir'. The next day he visited us again to congratulate us, saying we were the only wireless truck to keep in touch with Tobruk throughout the campaign.

Soon after that I was asked to contact the L.R.D.G. I called them for an hour but got no reply. The Signal Master told me it was vital and I must keep trying, so I decided to put up one of our 50-foot masts and also put up a new aerial having calculated the exact length of wire required to match the wireless frequency we were using. I also switched to high power, but before I could try it out an irate officer came dashing over shouting, 'Take that mast down. Do you want the whole German air force to start bombing you?' It would, of course, not be the mast itself but the black shadow cast across the sand. So much for using one's initiative! I am sorry to say I never got through, but the L.R.D.G. were probably in a sticky position and were observing radio silence.

When we reached Tobruk it was a sorry sight. I don't think there was a single undamaged building and most were roofless shells. There was one large building overlooking the docks, which wasn't so bad, but most of its front wall was missing and we were able to conceal our truck in one of the lower rooms.

Our first period in Tobruk seemed to go on for ages because so much happened. Looking back I realise it could have been no more than a month. Every day at intervals we were either shelled or attacked by the Luftwaffe and there were air raids every night. On two occasions our building suffered direct hits from shells bringing down our aerial and more of the masonry. Fortunately we were not hurt but our truck and ourselves were smothered in white dust.

One young man, Cpl. Offer, made himself a camp bed in one of the outhouses where he always slept during the day when he had been on night duty. One day he decided to make a change and have a kip on the beach. During the morning when he would have been in bed a bomb dropped through the roof of his outhouse. Instead of exploding it went through the centre of his empty bed. Its nose did not penetrate the concrete floor as its fins were sticking out above the bedclothes. Before the bomb disposal team were called out everyone went to view the scene. This was rather foolish really as the bomb could have had a delayed action device. However, it was a lucky escape for Cpl. Offer.

Ships bringing supplies etc. tried to enter the harbour after sunset unload and get away before sunrise. One night a petrol tanker, two cargo ships and a hospital ship arrived and anchored in the harbour amid numerous masts of previously sunken ships which were showing above the water. Of course there was the usual raid by Stuka diving bombers but this time the tanker was hit and the sea a mass of flames from the blazing fuel. All the other ships were on fire and the sides of the hospital ship were literally red hot and men jumped in to the flames to get ashore. I then witnessed an act of great bravery when a young soldier repeatedly dived in to the sea and swam out through the flames to help the injured ashore. The lad was quite small and was called Jimmy. He was very well known and popular and he was afraid of nothing. Whenever there was an air raid he would squat behind a sandbagged wall firing with a mere rifle at any planes that came his way. If we were in that position we always took cover whilst a plane was diving and firing at us, then after it had passed over we turned and fired at its tail. I doubt if it did any good but it gave some satisfaction to hit back and there was always the possibility of a lucky shot. Jimmy, I am sad to say, came to a tragic end, but that is another story.

There was a urinal constructed of timber in the courtyard of the building we occupied and one day I was relieving myself when a bomb dropped in the yard. A shower of red-hot shrapnel came buzzing in to the urinal and most of it buried itself in to the timber walls burning small holes. However one piece as big as the thumbnail struck my arm and remained buried there. I think the red hot metal cauterized the flesh because it didn't bleed or hurt too much until I went to the dressing station where the medic removed the metal and filled the hole with some wadding. I was just thankful that the metal had not hit my eye or head.

I think the air raids were much worse than the shelling, as the planes seemed to appear so suddenly and come from nowhere. The big guns of the Germans however were at least five miles away and when they were fired we could hear the boom, which warned us that a shell was on the way.

We could tell if it was coming towards us by the change in pitch of its whine enabling us to take cover. When its tone changed again we knew it had passed us and we could carry on.

Tobruk was the most heavily defended place in Libya and with hundreds of anti-aircraft guns firing at the same time the sound during an air raid was deafening. For added to this was the sound of exploding shells and in the sky the roar of planes and bombs exploding. One of the most terrifying sounds was from a kind of gun that was very close to our truck and fired nine rockets simultaneously. These rockets released parachutes from which hung long steel tapes as they floated down. These tapes were supposed to get tangled round the propellers of low flying aircraft but more often than not they got tangled round our wireless aerials. There were many other guns close to us and I can still picture the gruesome sight of bodies and limbs being blown high in the air when a bomb scored a direct hit on a gun crew. Another horrible sight was when a bomb dropped some yards from a man. He was not hit by any shrapnel but was caught in the blast. This ripped off not only his clothes but also, incredibly, all his skin and his body looked like raw meat, but he was still semi-conscious and was screaming like mad as the medics went to his aid.

Whilst all this was going on in Tobruk our army continued to advance westward and after a number of furious battles reached Benghazi on 25th of December. On 23rd December the Germans were rapidly evacuating Benghazi to avoid being cut off and I was ordered to take our truck there but, as the coast road was so jammed with armour which was being rushed forward I was told to go across the desert. This was a distance of 200 to 250 miles. I indented for the quantity of petrol I estimated I should need but as it was in short supply I got considerably less. Steering by compass and trying to follow the tracks of some previous vehicles we set off on what was to be quite an adventure. I thought we had enough petrol to get within fifty miles of Benghazi. Knowing that from Benghazi the coast road ran due south I planned to get to this road where I thought I might beg some petrol from the many vehicles which I thought would be chasing the fleeing Germans.

It was difficult to keep travelling in a Westerly direction because we had frequently to go miles off our course to avoid rocky ground or salt marshes in which the vehicle could sink up to its axles. In fact we did get stuck once but managed to extricate ourselves by pushing under the wheels two long aluminium ‘rafts’ which we carried for this purpose. We came across only two recognizable places on our route, Timini and Msus. One consisted of a few mud huts and the other was just a fort built like the one described and pictured in ‘Beau Geste’. Both places were deserted.

Sorry, I am digressing again. Shortly after getting free of the salt marsh we had another bit of bad luck. When driving through a particularly bit of rocky ground several leaves of one of our rear springs snapped making the vehicle rather lop sided. This was serious as we still had about 200 miles to go. However, we were in luck. After limping along for some miles we came to an area where there had obviously been some fighting, as there were many derelict vehicles about. After searching around our driver came across a vehicle with springs that matched ours. With some difficulty we succeeded in removing a sound spring and fitted it to our truck.. This had delayed us about two hours and it was about mid-day when in the sky we saw a mirage of what appeared to be a large camp of tents. A mirage is caused when two layers of air at different temperatures meet and form a kind of mirror reflecting the ground below. Sure enough after travelling quite a few miles we could see an actual encampment.

By now it was getting dusk and we hadn’t seen a single soul since leaving Tobruk so we thought it would be nice if we could cadge a hot meal at the camp cookhouse. There was a track leading in to the camp so we drove in intending to ask for the cookhouse and saw lines of tents on the right and rows of vehicles on the left. We could hear lots of voices coming from the tents. The voices sounded Afrikaans so we thought we were in a South African camp. I was sitting on the left of our driver and suddenly noticed the German Africa corps logo painted on all the vehicles. I shouted to the driver, ‘Carry straight on and go like hell.’ He then noticed the logo and we sped right through the camp and got well away without being challenged. It is understandable because both the Germans and we wore khaki drill shirts and shorts and they would never suspect that an unarmed vehicle driving through the camp was not one of theirs.

The next day, Christmas Eve, we made fairly good progress and late in the day spotted a bir in the distance. A bir is a well that can be seen by a big mound of rock and sand made when the well was dug. We decided to camp here for the night and went down to the well, which was like an underground cave. It was about 12 feet deep with a pool of water at the bottom. Steps had been cut in

to it and at the side of the pool a fig tree was growing. This was about nine feet tall and quite invisible from the ground.

Soon after we arrived we saw in the far distance to the south a cloud of dust being thrown up by a moving vehicle. We realised that it must be a tank but no other vehicles were in sight and we watched it warily as we did not know whether it was German or British. We were a bit concerned when it changed course and started heading straight for us. It pulled up about ten feet from us with its huge gun pointing straight at our truck and we were very relieved when a British Officer stood up in the turret. I greeted him with a broad smile saying 'Turn that gun away.' It turned out that he was lost and asked me if I could tell him our position, which I did the best I could.

We were getting short of water so we managed to get a couple of bucketsful from the well. After sterilising the water with chlorine tablets we filled our water bottles and had a good wash which was very refreshing. The next day we went down to the well again for a wash before moving off and found a dead donkey decomposing in the pool. In the dim light the previous evening we had not noticed this.

It was Christmas Day and one I shall never forget. This was our Christmas dinner: corned beef with 'dog biscuits', rice boiled in chlorinated water with no milk or sugar and tea tasting of chlorine, likewise with no milk or sugar. In the evening, however, Father Christmas came in the form of two Arabs. They brought a few eggs with which to barter for a little tea, something we always had plenty of. It was a treat to have a supper of boiled eggs and biscuits!

On Boxing Day we hit the coastal road about fifty miles south of Benghazi. By now we were almost out of petrol and there wasn't a single vehicle in sight until a lone jeep came along but they could not spare any fuel, as they were very short too. It appears that our main forces had already passed through the area and were pursuing the Germans further south.

We turned towards Benghazi hoping to meet another vehicle but what a sight met our eyes. For several miles there were lots of burnt out vehicles that had been bulldozed in to the ditch by the road and in between were several dead donkeys and the corpses of many dead Germans. We hadn't gone many miles, however, when fortune smiled on us for we came to an airfield that was deserted apart from half a dozen abandoned planes. We had a good look around and found a drum of what appeared to be aviation fuel and we filled our tank with this. All the planes appeared undamaged and I can only assume they hadn't the fuel to get away or they were taken by surprise. For a bit of fun I climbed in to a ME 109 fighter and sat in the cockpit but realised afterwards that it was a foolish thing to do as the plane could have been booby-trapped. We were able to travel faster on the tarmac road and the aviation fuel did us fine so it was not long before our belated arrival in Benghazi, but that is another chapter.

PART FIVE

It was a big thrill but rather strange to enter Benghazi on our own without the usual convoy. However with the help of a couple of Redcaps we soon located our small group of signals personnel. They had been expecting us for a couple of days and gave us a great reception.

We set up our truck on the outskirts of the city and accommodation had been reserved for us in a large block of luxury flats. You can imagine how wonderful it was to sleep in a proper bed with clean sheets for the first time since leaving the ship, apart from the week spent in Cairo. Richard Dimbleby (the famous war correspondent) and a team of newsreel photographers also resided in the same block of flats so I saw him frequently. We had seen him on two occasions previously during our push towards Tobruk. Once newsreel pictures were taken of us attending a Church of England service and to add a bit of colour a couple of the newsmen found a couple of camels and placed them in the background behind the makeshift altar! We never saw any other camels in the desert.

Things were fairly quiet as the Germans were licking their wounds and conserving their equipment. Although we had a few air raids they were trivial compared to those in Tobruk and we had plenty of time to scout around.

We found a number of food dumps which the Germans had abandoned during their retreat and we stocked up our truck with tinned foods, cases of cognac and Chianti as those things we had picked up during our advance to Tobruk had all been consumed. The tins were always a bit of a gamble, as they had no labels only code numbers printed on them. Until we began to recognize these we did not know if we were opening a tin of peaches, pineapple, meat, fish or vegetable soup.

We paid a visit to the main Post Office, which had been deserted, and found many sacks of Christmas greeting cards addressed to German and Italian troops. Knowing how much a letter from home meant I felt very sorry for them. Whilst I was there I picked up four sheets of new postage stamps depicting Hitler and Mussolini shaking hands. I thought they may fetch a good price after the war, but of course I lost them when Tobruk fell and all my kit was destroyed.

Having travelled almost 1000 miles from their bases in Egypt our forces were exhausted and short of men and arms. Any vehicles or tanks that had survived the many battles needed replacement or drastic overhaul so they had to halt at the Tripolitanian border. For about four months we remained in Benghazi whilst both sides recovered and tried to build up their strength. Logistics were our problem as all supplies had to be transported over such a great distance whereas the Germans could get arms and equipment quickly over the med. from Italy to Tripoli. So naturally they were prepared for further battle before us.

In the meantime, one of my operators, Jack Needle and I were given ten days leave. We were working a wireless link to Eighth Army H.Q, which was several hundred miles away to the East, so I managed to speak to Chris (in Morse) and arrange for him to take leave and join us in Alexandria. The journey took two days, stopping one night at a transit camp after travelling by lorry along the coast road and then continuing by train. The railway, having by this time, been extended several hundred miles to the West.

Alexandria seemed much fresher and cleaner than Cairo. There were fewer pimps and beggars offering dirty postcards and not so many flies. The city had some nice tree lined squares with green, well-watered lawns and flowerbeds. There were also some very lovely parks. It was pleasant to walk beside the Nile and watch the busy river traffic with its odd looking boats called dhows and feluccas.

We had a bit of fun with the boatmen who were very friendly although they could not speak much English.

Arab boatmen

The army had provided us with a list of bed-sits and the one we selected was clean but basic. However, we only used it for sleep and had no meals there apart from the odd snack, which we took in, as there were plenty of good eating-houses. Our leave passed all too quickly and was followed by the tedious trek back to Benghazi.

One night I remember I was having difficulty in contacting Army H.Q. due to atmospheric and went ask the corporal on a wireless truck in another section if he would try and contact H.Q. and ask them to listen for me on an alternative wavelength. He asked if I would like a drink whilst I waited. He handed me an enamel mug which I imagined contained coffee and I thought it was a bit mean when I saw the mug was only half full and no milk or sugar had been added. I was a bit taken aback when I took a large swig and realised it was neat cognac. Of course to be polite and show my gratitude I had to drink the lot. It goes without saying that I never got through to the Army H.Q. that night!

So much happened in the first few months of 1942 that my memory is a little hazy about the order of things. I think it was early in February that Rommel's African Corps had recovered sufficiently to go on the offensive and advanced from Tripoli back into Libya. Benghazi being on the northwest corner was in very vulnerable position and could so easily be cut off that we had to do a hasty retreat and there was a real 'flap' on. Once again the coastal road was so overloaded with traffic that I was ordered to take our truck across the desert back to Tobruk.

Before we left the road in a stream of slow moving traffic we had to get to the top of a high escarpment up a very steep hill. Our truck was sadly overdue for a complete overhaul and the handbrake wouldn't work very well, which meant that every time we had to stop, which was frequently, the vehicle began to run backwards. We moved forwards so slowly in the dense traffic that I got two of my crew to walk behind with long logs which they jammed under the rear wheels every time we stopped. It was a big relief when we left the road and got in to open desert. We hadn't covered many miles before we began to have trouble with our starter motor. This meant that every time we wanted to stop we had to do so at the top of a hill so that we could make a jump start downhill when we wanted to move again.

On one occasion we ran to the bottom of a slope but the engine failed to start and we were stuck. We had seen very few vehicles on the desert and didn't know what to do until, luckily, a huge tank recovery vehicle carrying two damaged tanks came thundering by. I flagged down the driver and he agreed to give me a tow to start the engine. The big vehicle had a very powerful engine and he just raced away with us in tow. Our engine started immediately but there was such a noise I couldn't tell the other driver that we were O.K., so we had a very bumpy ride for several hundred yards.

I don't think anything else momentous occurred until we reached the airfields at El Adem a few miles south of Tobruk. We were greeted there by a number of old friends. They had been expecting us to come by road so we were later than they had anticipated and were very pleased to see us.

Me again

Tobruk was now occupied by the 2nd South African division, who were responsible for its defence, and my truck and crew were seconded to them. Instead of going back to our old position as expected we were directed to a spot about five miles to the west of the harbour but well within the mined perimeter of Tobruk. This perimeter was a fifteen-mile semi circle with its two ends finishing at the sea east and west of the town. The division had established their headquarters in some caves that had previously been dug out in a high cliff by the Italians. In the flat ground in front of these caves they had made a number of dugouts lined with concrete and roofed with corrugated iron and sand bags. The six of us made ourselves comfortable in three of these, I sharing one with Jack Needle. When I say 'comfortable' don't take it too literally as it was like a red sea of fleas jumping up about a foot high, reminding me of raindrops bouncing off a pavement in a heavy down pour. These soon made our lower legs red and sore with their bites but they liked Jack's blood more than mine and didn't bother me much as long as he was present.

We concealed our truck in a large hole close by, and our driver/mechanic lost no time in starting to overhaul the vehicle and engine, which he took out. We soon got used to the South African fare, which was quite good and prepared by blacks. I particularly remember big helpings of 'Mealy-meal' dished out for breakfast. This was porridge made from Indian corn.

There was an issue of a tot of rum each day but none of my crew cared for it so I was able to enjoy the six rations I collected. This was fair exchange because I never smoked and always saved my cigarette issue and was able to hand them all a packet when, as often happened, supplies failed to come through. We got on quite well with the South Africans but I didn't like the way they treated their black troops like slaves. They were given all the dirty jobs to do but were not allowed to carry rifles to protect themselves. Also they tended to talk among themselves in Afrikaans and we often felt they were talking about us behind our backs.

There followed a period of big battles with heavy casualties on both sides. Rommel attacked our 'boxes' which had been given names like 'Knightsbridge' Piccadilly' etc. He was first held by the Bir Acheim box which was occupied by Free French forces who held on for a long time and after that there was a fierce battle at 'Knightsbridge. The German advance was, therefore, a slow process, as

they dared not advance beyond an unconquered box as it could then be used to attack their lines of supply and communication. Whilst these battles were raging we didn't get quite so many air raids although Tobruk harbour still got its nightly raids as the Luftwaffe tried to destroy the ships bringing in our supplies.

Suddenly, however, there was a dramatic change when, without warning, there was a massive attack on Tobruk. At dawn on June 20th 100 tanks crossed the perimeter defences through what they must have known was a dummy minefield. After capturing the harbour area they swept west towards our area. There was great confusion as we saw this mass of tanks advancing towards us firing shells and machine guns as they came. Our artillery did its best to stop them and even our big anti-aircraft guns with their barrels horizontal but it was hopeless.

In Greece the Germans had captured a wireless truck like ours and, pretending they were British operators, continued to transmit to our army obtaining a lot of secret information. I didn't wish our set to have the same fate. However with its engine out we could not move so I went and saw the South African Signal master for permission to destroy the truck. He curtly replied, 'I can't give you permission, you are not in my army'! He then added, 'You must get in touch with your C.O.' This was of course impossible, as my C.O., Major Mann, was in the harbour signal office, which had been over-run. I therefore had no option but to decide myself, and with 80 gallons of petrol on board it was not difficult to burn the truck. Shells were falling thick and fast and machine-gun bullets were whistling past our ears as I emptied a four-gallon can of petrol in the truck and then pouring a trail across the sand for about twenty yards. When I put a match to the end of the trail the flame ran across the sand and the truck with a huge explosion went up like a fireball.

I should mention that just before I started this operation I was in contact with Chris at Army H.Q. and sent him the closing down signal and he replied with a signal saying, 'When shall I see you again?' Three times I repeated my signal followed by, 'Nix Nix Nix, Jerry ere, Jerry ere.' He did not understand but I could wait no longer as the tanks were almost upon us. I gather Chris kept calling me for days, of course getting no response.

As soon as the truck exploded, we all jumped on a small lorry, which, with a few men, was trying to get away from this dangerous spot. Shells were bursting all around us and as we passed my dugout I saw it had received a direct hit and all my personal kit must have been destroyed. To avoid being a sitting target we zigzagged about until we were concealed in a valley a few miles from the perimeter. Later in the day we met a group of New Zealanders who heard on their wireless that General Smutts, the South African Prime Minister, had ordered General Clopper, C.O. of the 2nd S.A Division to surrender Tobruk to save the lives of his troops and we were ordered to lay down our arms. We proceeded to smash up our rifles and set fire to the van, which was loaded with small arms ammunition, which with lots of small explosions kept spraying from the burning van.

After being scorching hot during the day, the desert becomes bitterly cold as soon as the sunsets and as most of us were only wearing thin khaki drill-shirts and shorts we were not very comfortable. Trying to keep warm I curled up in a hollow entrance to a burrow formed by some animal but got little sleep. The next day, June 21st, was most certainly the longest day we were ever likely to experience. Being so cold we were up well before dawn scouting around and were lucky to come across a vehicle loaded with blankets so we grabbed one each.

At first light a lot of tanks in line abreast accompanied by infantry slowly advanced across the desert towards us forcing any of our troops they came to, to put up their hands and surrender. We were formed in to a long column, which grew to several miles long, and had to march along a track back to Tobruk, about six miles away.

Most of the African Corps were decent men but there were some thugs. Two of them, armed with revolvers, walked along the column threatening our troops and demanding that they hand over all watches and gold rings. As soon as we realised what was happening we hid these items and shouted to the troops ahead, 'Hide your watches and rings, pass it on.' I dropped my wedding ring in to my water bottle where it remained until I got back to England three years later.

When we reached a cross roads before entering the town Rommel stood on a jeep saluting us as we passed (not the Nazi salute) and we all respected him for it. We were directed in to a barbed wire pen not far from the harbour and the next day I saw Rommel again when he did a walkabout in the compound to ensure we were being properly treated. One of the first people I met in the pen was Major Mann (my commanding officer) and my best friend Charlie Barnes (a line operator from

Tobruk signals office. They were pleased to see me, but the first thing Major Mann asked was, 'What happened to your truck?' I replied 'I burnt it sir' and he said, 'Good show.' If, by some miracle we had managed to drive the Germans out of Tobruk I could have been court-marshalled for destroying army property without permission. Charlie told me what had happened at the signal office by the harbour. Apparently our sergeant and the staff on duty heard loud sounds outside and the sergeant with a revolver in his hand went out to investigate. He came face to face with a German tank and was literally cut to pieces by a hail of machine gun bullets at close range. At the same time Charlie and a relief team were being driven to start their shift in the signal office. Not knowing that this was in the hands of the Germans, they drove up to the door and were met by a blast of machine gun fire, which killed the driver and our Captain Phillips who sat beside him. This was bitter news for me because I knew them both so well and the captain was a particularly nice man.

Bearing in mind that Rommel suddenly had to accommodate and feed about 33,000 prisoners I can't say that we were treated badly whilst we were in his hands. Our troubles started when he handed us over to the Italians some days later. In the meantime we were divided into groups of twenty (an N.C.O. and nineteen men). My group included my crew and Charlie Barnes. Each group was given a reasonably sized tent and each day I, accompanied by one of the men, had to collect our rations. These consisted of a small tin of unidentified meat (probably horse) per man and two loaves to be shared out. It was difficult to cut the bread in to twenty exactly equal pieces for twenty very hungry men who counted every crumb. So I borrowed a pack of playing cards, which I shuffled and let everyone take a card, and according to its value took turns to pick one of the bread portions, which were spread out on a blanket. You wouldn't believe how long it took some men to make their choice but at least it saved any argument. Water was rationed to two litres per man.

When we were handed over to the 'Ities' we were herded in to large lorries and in a long convoy driven west. We were given no food and had no water apart from that in our water bottles, but I did have my small pack, which I had picked up from our truck before burning it. Apart from my mess tins, cutlery and spare clips of rifle ammunition I had over 1000 issue cigarettes which I had saved and was able to hand out a packet to everyone on the lorry and you can imagine their delight. I think we travelled about fifty miles when the convoy was attacked and strafed by the R.A.F. We jumped off the lorries and dispersed but three lorries went up in flames and I think quite a few men were hit.

The first night was spent in a barbed wire enclosure in an old graveyard, which was littered with bones and shell holes. Some of the men were so thirsty they dug among the graves until they came to a little muddy water, which they scooped up. I suspect this was the cause of a big outbreak of dysentery that occurred later. The next day it became obvious why the 'Wops' had kept us hungry and thirsty because they came round offering a small cob of bread or a bottle of dubious water to anyone who would hand over a watch, ring, fountain pen or other valuable. A few Germans spotted what was going on so they kicked the 'Ities' up the backside, took the bread from them and tossed it over the wire to us. They also offered to fill our water bottles. I think the Germans despised the Italians as much as we did.

We eventually got to our destination, which was a large barbed wire enclosure on the outskirts of Benghazi. We had to sleep in the open and were given very little food or water. One day there was a big raid by the R.A.F. and a large ammunition ship in the nearby harbour was hit. It is impossible to describe the scene. There were a number of loud explosions and the ship was blazing when suddenly it erupted like a volcano in to a huge fireball amid which could be seen large pieces of debris, bodies and human limbs flung hundreds of feet in to the air. I think everyone was too shocked to cheer.

After a few weeks in this camp we were told that we were to be moved to Italy. We had mixed feelings about this for as long as we were in Libya there was always the chance of our being rescued if the Germans were driven back in to Tripoli. (This of course did happen after Alamein, but too late for us) On the other hand we looked forward to getting away from the heat, dust and flies of the desert. A few thousand of us were marched to the harbour where three cargo ships awaited us. These were obviously built to transport wine for they only had one deck below which was a huge hold about thirty foot deep and the fumes from the spillage of fermented wine were intoxicating. With very little space per man, we were put in to the hold which was battened down and we had to squat on the steeply sloping sides of the steel hull.

There were two thirty foot ladders (one up and one down) to the deck and just six men at a time were allowed on deck to go to the ‘heads’ (latrines). Half of the men were suffering from dysentery so there was a queue on the ladders all the time. Strings of jelly, like frogspawn, dripped from the shorts of the sick men on to the men on the steps below.

During the first night at sea we were attacked by the R.A.F. and we could feel the vibration on the thin steel hull beneath us as bombs exploded in the sea around the ship. Fortunately for us, our ship was not hit but one of the three ships was sunk. With water gushing in to its hold the prisoners would not get a chance to get to the deck with just two ladders. After another night at sea we disembarked at Brindisi, the big Italian naval base on the heel of Italy and from there begins another story.

By the way …

Did you hear about the man (whose name was probably Patrick) who was on a ship bound for the Middle East? Crossing the Bay of Biscay he got a queasy tummy so he went on deck and called to a sailor,

‘Excuse me, where are the nearest loos?’

‘Port side,’ replied the sailor.

‘Goodness me,’ said the man, ‘don’t you stop at Gibraltar?’

PART SIX

When we got off the ship in Brindisi we were put in to some warehouses and every man and any kit was thoroughly searched. Anything which might be used as a weapon such as razors, cutlery etc. was confiscated. When the Italian sergeant, who could speak a little English, took my army knife I said, 'How are we going to cut our meat?' This caused him to laugh loudly as he said 'What meat?' I then noticed that at a further point they were taking British army blankets from the men as they were very valuable on the Italian black market. So, whilst I was waiting my turn, I hastily made a hole in my blanket for my head and wore it as a kind of cloak. This was the only bit of warm clothing I possessed.

We spent the night in the warehouse on the concrete floor and next morning we set out to march across the heel of Italy to Taranto, a distance of about 25 to 30 miles. Of course we formed a very long column and the guards who walked alongside us were very widely spaced. Now and again when the guard was looking the other way we were able to snatch a bunch of grapes from the occasional vine growing close to the side of the road. Whenever we approached a village or town our Sgt. Major called us to attention and we marched smartly through singing one of the well-known army songs to show the inhabitants that although we were captured we were not defeated. When we reached Taranto we were allowed to fill our water bottles and were given a ladleful of spaghetti in watery tomato sauce (so we didn't need our knives) before being herded in to railway carriages with armed guard on the observation at each end of the carriage. Here we spent the night and after our long march soon fell asleep. We roused to find the train on the move making slow progress to the north with many stops and starts.

It was just getting light when we saw the harbour of Naples a few miles to our left and a bit later passed quite close to Rome. A few hours later we got a close-up view of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and then went on to place called Lucca, which we understood, was an olive oil producing area. This was to be our first camp in Italy. There were rows and rows of olive trees adjoining a large flat field surrounded by a double high barbed wire fence. Unfortunately the olives were only just forming and so small and hard they were quite inedible.

We were issued with Italian army ground sheets and short poles with which to make some sort of shelter. The ground sheets were the ridiculous size of four foot square with eyelets round the edge so all we could do was string them together in long rows with one row along the ground, one row along the back making a four foot wall and another row for a roof. Just four foot from back to front this produced a long 'windshield' (you could hardly call it a tent). Lying side by side, each man had just a two-foot space with his legs exposed to the elements.

About half a mile away were the foothills of some very high mountains and almost every night we could see thick clouds roll down the mountains bringing heavy rain, which soaked us from foot to waist. Our daily ration consisted of one small cob of bread and a ladleful of skilly, which was little more than green water which had nettles or thistles boiled in it. If you were lucky you might find one or two macaroni rings in it too. Then once a week we were given a spoonful of sugar and a spoonful of olive oil. Thinking how strong horses grow on a diet of grass and hay I expect we thought we might survive on it so we plucked and boiled grass from the field until the ground was bare. Then we dug up the roots and boiled them. Unfortunately, grass contains a lot of cellulose, which our stomachs are not designed to digest so it didn't help a lot apart from making our stomachs feel a little less empty.

At first it was dysentery, which took the biggest toll for with no medical attention men were dying every day. After a few weeks it was malnutrition, which was the biggest killer after we had exhausted all our body fat. We became walking skeletons of skin and bone. No, that is wrong because we were too weak to walk and blacked out if we tried to stand. We were all weighed on the cookhouse scales and found that from a weight of thirteen and a half stone I had dropped to six and a half stone, losing over half my weight. Starting with one death a day the mortality rate rapidly increased to six per day.

Before the men got too weak there was one escape attempt by two men. They got two friends to start a mock fight and a noisy argument causing a large crowd to gather and distract the guards. This took place at one side of the cookhouse, the only brick building, whilst on the other side two men

cut a hole in the wire and dashed out. However, they were spotted by one of the more alert sentries who opened fire and one of the pair was killed, whereupon his pal gave himself up.

This reminds me of another escape attempt, which I witnessed when Tobruk surrendered. Before we were 'mopped up' the New Zealand officer Captain Matthews who had befriended me tried to persuade me to join himself and two of his men on a jeep and try and break out across the perimeter in to the desert. I thought this was crazy and declined the offer. It would have meant crossing through a deep minefield and then driving hundreds of miles through enemy held territory trying to catch up with our retreating forces. They drove off and hadn't gone more than half a mile when they were spotted by the Germans who opened fire. The jeep exploded when it was hit and I assume all three men were killed.

Well, to return to our Lucca camp, we were growing weaker each day and many of the men were on the verge of giving up hope when something wonderful happened. The very first issue of Red Cross food parcels arrived. These were supposed to be issued at the rate of a parcel per man per week but this issue was one parcel between six men. Never the less it was like manna from heaven. It lifted our spirits and no doubt saved many lives. Two weeks later there was another parcel issue, this time a parcel between four men and we began to recover a little strength. With this issue came ten cigarettes per man and, thanks to Adolph Hitler, I started smoking at the age of 27 because it did help to ease the pangs of hunger. Shortly after that, although there had been no further parcel issues, we were given the news that we were to be moved to a better and permanent prison camp. With the approach of autumn we were thankful for this.

We once again travelled by train and finished up at Fermo, a village up in the hills and five miles inland from Porto St.Georgio on the Eastern coast. The camp was called P.G.70 and consisted of a disused factory of some sort with large concrete warehouses standing in a large filed surrounded, of course, with the usual high barbed wire fencing. We were billeted in the warehouses in three tier bunks with straw filled palliasses. What luxury! Anyway it was good to be under cover and we could keep dry. A pile of old clothing arrived consisting of coats and tunics that were the uniforms of different armies of the countries conquered by the Nazis. We were allowed to pick what we needed and the large letters P.G. were painted in red on the back of every uniform.

It was many more weeks before we saw any more food parcels and when they did arrive it was usually about at six-week intervals and issued one between four men. Thus we were always very hungry and this field was soon stripped of grass and roots like the last. Other things added to our discomfort in the form of fleas which danced on the concrete floor of the warehouse as they enjoyed our blood, mice which suddenly produced a litter of young in a nest made in our palliasses and worst of all lice. These infested every inch of our clothing and laid eggs along every seam so that as soon as we got rid of one lot the next day as many again had hatched out.

With no razors we had been unable to shave since leaving Benghazi so when we reached P.G.70 we all had a considerable growth of beard and must have resembled Bin Laden's army. However the first thing the Italians did on our arrival was to shave all the hair off our heads (presumably to get rid of any head lice which are very tiny compared to body lice) but they did not touch our beards. Then they took a photograph of every man with his POW number across his chest for their 'rouges gallery'. After a few weeks they allowed us to purchase safety razors and also create a barber's shop for haircuts, though all the scissors etc. had to be handed in every night.

We had only been in this camp about two weeks when young Jimmy (the hero of Tobruk harbour) decided he had enough of POW life. Putting on a thick pair of gloves he made a dash for the wire and using the horizontal wires like rungs of a ladder tried to climb over. Before he could reach the top he was spotted by sentries and was riddled with machine gun bullets. As a warning to others his body was left suspended on the barbed wire for three days before we were allowed to take him down for burial.

I think it was about four months after my capture that I got my first news from home and the absence of mail had been the hardest thing to bear. Win first got a telegram to say I was missing but didn't know whether I was dead or alive for about two months. Then she got a printed card from the Red Cross saying I was a POW and was 'being treated well'. It did not give any address and apart from signing the card we were not allowed to add anything else. Whilst in North Africa a fair amount of mail got through though rather spasmodically. A space of several weeks and then three or four letters all together. I think our letters arrived more regularly as they were sent through a system

known as ‘airgraphs’. We wrote letters on special forms, which were photographed and reduced to microdots. Thousands of these could be printed on film and sent to England by plane where the film was printed producing a letter about half the size of the original.

I think the saddest letter I received reached me just after I had moved ‘up the blue’. Shortly before my embarkation leave, Win and I were thrilled to find she was pregnant. We were sure it was going to be a little girl and called her Sandra. At the time win was working in some R.A.F. stores where she was the supervisor and one night she was on duty as a fire watcher at Nottingham castle when there was an air raid. With other girls, she ran to Mortimer’s Hole, which was used as a shelter and she slipped down the rough sandstone steps and her fall brought about a miscarriage. The news was hard to bear, as I so wanted to be with her in her distress. With hindsight it was probably just as well because Sandra would have been about five years old before I saw her.

The skilly was marginally better than at Lucca and we were occasionally given an orange, which we ate completely: skin, pips and all. Very occasionally we found a bit of bone in our skilly and we gnawed on this for days until it had all gone. We never knew from what animal it had come though a cat, which used to frequent the cookhouse mysteriously, disappeared. With this and the rare appearance of a shared food parcel our health picked up a little.

My ‘mucker’ (someone with whom one shares everything that comes your way and looks after your kit in your absence) was Lance Cpl. Charlie Barnes, my very good pal from Tobruk days.

Our next of kin were allowed to send, twice a year, via the Red Cross a personal parcel containing clothing, toiletries etc to which the Red Cross added a half pound block of chocolate. In the three years as a POW I only received one of these and another redirected to me after I got home. Likewise my employers (Car and General) were posting me 200 cigarettes a month but I only ever received one parcel of these. The enemy no doubt stole the missing items in transit although some may have been lost in the bombing.

We were allowed to draw a very small amount of our army pay in the form of ‘larger-geld’, slips of paper, which could be used only in camp, but they were practically useless. The only merchandise we could buy were things like razor blades, pencils and paper. No food was available. We indented for a thousand pencils and notebooks but the Italians could not understand why. Apparently, not many of the ordinary soldiers could read and write and anyone who could was automatically made a sergeant. We found this difficult to believe until several Italians asked us to read an Italian paper to them.

The most valuable currency was cigarettes (when you could get any), as they were much wanted on the ‘black market’. It was a serious offence for the guards but several of them could get almost anything if sufficient cigarettes were forthcoming. A number of POWs became dealers and set up a market stall in camp selling items of unwanted clothing or tins of food from Red Cross parcels all priced at so many cigarettes or negotiation.

When our cutlery was confiscated we were allowed to keep a desert spoon, which was fashioned in to a knife by sharpening on a stone one edge of the spoon handle. As all materials were scarce and anything found, like a piece of string or wire or a piece of wood were treasured. Empty tins from the food parcels were very highly valued as everyone became very adept at making miniature cooking stoves with them. Most of these had an ingenious wind creating system, either bellows or a revolving fan, which turned the stone into a small forge, as it would burn fiercely all kinds of small rubbish. With suitable stones and other primitive tools it is surprising what could be done with tin plate, which once flattened out by a simple method joined together to form large and strong sheets. By this method I made myself a suitcase (about 24 inches by 18 inches) in which I kept all my possessions. The most amazing was a wireless set, which was used to receive the BBC overseas service. The solder was melted off the tin joints and used again to solder wires to home made parts like condensers. The only thing they couldn’t make was a valve so they told the guards that the valves in the camp Tannoy system were defective and got replacements which they used in the set. Someone took a transcript of the BBC news and read it out to us in our billets every night. Overhearing prisoners discussing the news, the Italians realised we must have a wireless set but in spite of numerous thorough searches never found it. When Italy eventually surrendered it was disclosed hidden in the seat of the stool they had constructed for use in the barber’s shop.

After Jimmy’s disastrous bid for freedom I only know of one other attempt to escape before Italy surrendered to the Allies. A group of women used to do the laundry for the Italian garrison and

once a week came in to the camp carrying on their shoulders bags of clean washing and then went out again with bags of dirty washing. Having studied these movements an enormous black South African prisoner dressed himself in women's peasant clothing with a bonnet on his head and a bagful of his own clothes on his shoulder hiding his face calmly followed the women past the sentry on the gate. We never saw him again and only hope he got clear away.

Our spirits rose when we learned of our brilliant victory at Alamein and later the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. Then when our forces landed in Italy we were over the moon, optimistically expecting an early release. However the progress of our troops became slow after the Germans sent large divisions of troops to meet them. I think it was September when Italy finally surrendered to the allies and we were virtually free. However a message was received form our High Command saying it would cause confusion if we tried to move south to join them and ordered us to remain in the camp and wait for our forces to arrive.

For several weeks we wandered around the countryside fending for ourselves with products from the fields and farms returning to the camp each night. One night we heard strange noises and discovered that German paratroopers had dropped around the camp and there was a machine-gunner in every sentry box around the barbed wire fence. So we were, once more, 'in the bag'. In the sentry box close to our billet was a Polish soldier who had been forced in to the German army, but he was pro-British. He agreed to turn a blind eye if two men broke in to a nearby building that housed transformers for the camp lighting system. At an agreed time this was done and the transformers smashed so all the lights went out. Immediately this was done long ladders were put against the fence and, two at a time, men began scaling the ladders and dashing to some nearby woods. Our Polish friend was shouting '*Goot, Goot, cum' cum'* at the same time firing his rifle in to the air.

A small queue of would be escapers soon began to form by the brick washhouses, which concealed them from the sentry boxes. Charlie and I decided to join them. When there were only two men in front of us it was almost our turn to dash for the ladder floodlights suddenly came on when the Germans got a portable generator working. The ladder was brilliantly illuminated and the two men on the ladder were killed immediately by a burst of machine gun fire. At the same time we could hear rifle fire outside the camp as the other escapers were chased. Charlie and I dashed back in to the billets and so ended my only bid for freedom. However, we learned that an escape tunnel, which had been nearly finished when Italy surrendered, was now opened up and about seventy men got through it before it was discovered by the Germans. About two days later we were informed that we were to be taken to Germany. We were marched to some railway sidings where there was a long train of cattle trucks in to which we were packed forty men to a truck. There was no room to lie down so we had to either stand or squat on the floor leaning back to back. There were two buckets in each truck, one filled with drinking water and the other for use as a 'potty'. We had not seen a Red Cross parcel for many weeks but the Germans discovered a hoard of these in a warehouse in Porto St. Georgio and these were distributed to us for the journey. It was a long tedious journey that lasted for seven days and six nights.

It was extremely hot in the truck and we were soon suffering from lack of water. During one of our frequent stops some slave workers in the fields, hearing our cries for water attempted to bring us some but the German guards riding on the buffers fired over their heads and drove them back shouting 'Marxists!' Many men died during the journey due to heat stroke or dehydration but we were lucky in our truck. When we got to Verona there was an air raid by the RAF and we pulled up in some railway sidings opposite some sheds. Suddenly there was a heavy downpour of rain, which poured off the shed roof. There was only one form of ventilation in the truck, a small hole about a foot square but through this we formed a ground sheet in to a sort of funnel and got a stream of water running in to the truck from the shed roof. With this we refilled our water bottles and the empty bucket.

We were fortunate in our truck to have on board a professional opera singer we called George. Before the war he had actually sung several times in the Milan opera house. He kept our spirits up by entertaining us with well-known arias and was so good that even some of the guards started to applaud his performances.

We went through a very long tunnel (was it the Bremmer Pass?) in Germany stopping at a very large station, but I cannot remember its name. Here we were allowed to stretch our legs for the first time and on the platform some women (like WRVS) served out a ladleful of watery porridge from a big cauldron. Some German soldiers passing spat in to the cauldron shouting 'Marxists!' but

we were so hungry it didn't bother us much. Whilst we were there the dead were removed from the trucks and they found one truck empty, the floorboards having been prised open!

After many more hours, I think it was about midnight when we finally arrived at our destination. It was a depressing sight that met our eyes. The weather was bitterly cold with heavy drizzle and through the haze we could see a massive complex containing hundreds of long wooden huts. These were surrounded by huge barbed wire fences, above which, about 25 yards apart and supported on poles, were sentry boxes. The whole scene was illuminated by electric lamps hanging from cables connecting the boxes.

We were herded in to a compound after passing through an impressive gateway guarded by two sentries above which in large letters were the words *Stalag 1VB.* A German officer who could speak a little English stood on the back of a lorry and addressed us through a loud hailer. 'Velcum to Stalag 1VB. As you behave zo vill you vill be treated. Vor you the vor is over. You vill be shown to your huts and given tea. Goodnight.' Each hut held 200 men and the 'tea' turned out to be made from senna pods but we were thankful for a hot drink before settling down for the night.

The next morning we were all given a shower and once again had our heads shaved before being photographed for the 'rogues gallery'. We then were told that the British section of the camp was for Warrant Officers and N.C.O.s only (There were, of course, no commissioned officers with us as from the start they had gone to 'Five Star' camps like those usually depicted in films of POW life.) All the other men were sent to working camps and this meant that not only did I lose my pal Charlie, but also I had to say goodbye and wish good luck to my crew. I was very sad about this as I couldn't have had a better set of lads and we had been a wonderful team. Most of them were about five years younger than me and I think they regarded me as a father figure. Anyway they willingly did anything I asked and I never heard them swear (in my presence) because they knew I didn't like swearing.

I was lucky to find another splendid 'mucker' in Johnny Gates, a bombardier in the R.A. He was previously a bank clerk and a keen athlete in the London Harriers, and we got on famously. We discovered that we were at Muhlberg-on-Elbe on the East bank of the river and it was so much colder than Italy. I think the first snows fell before the end of October and remained with us until the following April. However, I forgot to mention that before leaving Italy the Red Cross produced a large pile of second-hand British uniforms so we had been able to fit ourselves up with battle dress, greatcoats and warm shirts so it wasn't too bad.

We soon began to put on a little weight because each day we received: Two thick slices of black bread, which was so old it was always covered with green mould and was so coarse it was said to be fifty percent sawdust. Two potatoes boiled in their skins (we ate these skins and all). Also once a week we were given a little sugar and a small amount of margarine or cheese. We never cared for the senna-pod tea so we opted for the alternative, which was ersatz coffee. This, we understood, was made from roasted ground acorns and I am convinced it was the same thing called 'oak crystals' which I used to buy in hardware stores to make a cheap but excellent wood stain. It wasn't very palatable but at least it made a hot drink. The issue of Red Cross parcels was very spasmodic but a little better than in Italy.

There were quite a number of professional and amateur actors and entertainers among the prisoners and one group calling themselves 'The Curtain Club' used to visit the various huts performing a radio type play with sound effects from behind a curtain in the dimly lit hut. One hut was allocated as a theatre in which we built a stage from tea chests in which the Red Cross parcels were delivered. With cigarettes we were able to purchase a grand piano and all the instruments for a full orchestra. Whenever there was a good issue of Red Cross cigarettes we paid one cigarette each for admission to the show and this allowed costumes and theatre props to be bought.

As in Italy we had a hidden wireless set and got all the BBC news. Frequently we had to stand outside in the snow whilst the 'Goons' searched all the huts for the sets without success. One day they were excited when they found a wire protruding from some floorboards. They dug a hole beneath the floor and found a tin in which was attached to the wire and it contained a note reading 'NIX!'

There were, of course, still many big battles being fought in Italy and many new prisoners were brought from there. I remember the first group of Americans being brought in looking very well fed on their wonderful 'K' rations. The first time the skilly appeared they took one look at it and said, 'Ugh we are not eating that' and there was an instant chorus from our lads, '**You will!**'

One day I went with a party, which included a number of GIs, pulling two carts to Muhlberg to fetch supplies. After two hours we were halted on a country road to relieve ourselves. The GIs noticed some rotting turnips in the ditch where we were urinating and they immediately dived between our legs to get the turnips so they had soon begun to know the pangs of hunger. When they saw the first food parcels they went crazy and we were amused to see one man open a tin of sardines in oil and empty a tin of sweetened condensed milk over them!

Johnnie Gates and I linked up with another pair, Des Hazleton of the Coldstream Guards and a South African called Theo to form a foursome to play bridge and other card games and a lot of chess.

There were prisoners from many nations in the camp, Dutch, Danes, Czechs and Russians in addition to the British and Americans. The Russian compound was by far the largest and contained at least 50,000 prisoners who had to work like slaves and were brutally treated and starved, as Russia was not a party to the Geneva Convention. I saw many of them being struck by guards with rifle butts or prodded with bayonets if they did not move fast enough. We tried to help them a little by donating at least one item from every food parcel we received but this was not much as there were only 5000 men in the British sector.

By this time massive air raids were being made on Germany and those on Berlin were often with up to three thousand bombers, which passed over our camp in formation after formation, which for a long time filled the sky from horizon to horizon. We all cheered except a German guard who looked in to the sky and snorted ‘Huh, propaganda!’

Anti-aircraft shells were bursting among the formation and now and again a plane would burst in to flames. As it lost height we counted the number of parachutes to see if all the crew had survived. On one of these raids a bomber was hit right above us and three parachutes floated down. One of these landed right inside the camp and the other two some yards away, so the three airmen were immediately taken prisoner.

When you remember that in the Battle of Britain the raids on London were usually with about 200 or 400 bombers at the most, you can imagine the damage that 3000 would do to Berlin.

Our huts were heated by a long brick built stove running down the centre and fuelled by coal bricks made from coal dust and straw. In the very cold weather we did not get nearly enough fuel so our hut leader suggested that each of us (200 in all) should pick up just one coal brick from a pile in the corner of the compound and slip it in to the pocket of our great coat during our morning exercise each day. This worked fine for a while until a guard saw a man picking up a brick and shot him through the head.

It must have been the spring of 1944 when a similar incident occurred. Between the two rows of wire fences was a garden area used to grow produce for the German officer’s mess. There were some ripe strawberries growing just beyond the fence. One man could not resist the temptation of this luscious fruit and crawled to the fence and was trying to reach some of the berries when a sentry came up behind him and shot him dead on the pretext that he was trying to escape.

There were several escape attempts and we gave up half the boards from our three tier bunks to support the tunnels that were being dug. I don’t think anyone succeeded in getting out of Nazi held territory as most of those who got away were either shot or brought back badly beaten up and put in to solitary confinement in dark cells for a few weeks.

We were feeling a lot more optimistic by Christmas 1943 as the Germans were retreating on all fronts and there was talk of a forthcoming invasion of France by the allies. We had been saving all the coloured labels off the tins from the Red Cross and used these to make paper chains to decorate the hut and the Germans gave each of us a can of weak beer and an orange.

In the New Year the Russians made rapid advances and it was pathetic to see many thousands of refugees, women, children and old men who struggled along the road past the camp for days. They had left their homes and all their possessions apart from the little they could carry. Most just carried a large suitcase, but some pushed a handcart or a loaded pram, and some women had babies in their arms.

The RAF and American Air force continued their attack with even heavier raids and in February Dresden was virtually completely destroyed. It was made worse because there were many thousands of refugees in the city and over 200,000 people were killed.

The whole city was ablaze and the intense heat caused a ‘firestorm’, which burnt up all the oxygen and cremated people in underground shelters, which became knee deep in human ashes. For two days after the raid it was like night in our camp as the sky was black with smoke and pieces of charred clothing, paper etc. came floating down.

We were thrilled on June 6th 1944 when we learned from the BBC news of the D-Day landings in Normandy. Someone made a large scale map of Europe which we pinned to the wall of the hut and a line of flags showed the positions of the opposing forces according to German news. However each night when we got the BBC news the newsreader pointed out the true positions as it was three or four days before the Germans admitted any defeat or retreat.

Once the Allies had crossed the Rhine we started getting regular fighter patrols in our camp area and they shot anything on the roads or railways that moved. One day an American Mustang fighter dived towards the camp with the roar of an express train and all machine guns blazing. I could see I was in its direct line of fire so I flattened myself on the ground praying, ’Mother, help me,’ as the bullets missed me by inches and showered me with mud and stones. Immediately It had passed I looked up to see it flying directly towards one of the raised sentry boxes at the far side of the compound. The sentry was so scared he jumped to the ground and broke both his legs. It was so close that the plane cut through the electric cable supporting the perimeter lights.

The Americans obviously thought the camp was a German barracks because a few days later there was a further raid when one POW was killed and another had his leg shot off. Fearing for their own safety the German garrison allowed us to place white painted bricks across the compound forming in large letters POW and we had no further trouble.

However, one day three fighters attacked a train on a railway line running a few hundred yards from the camp. The wagons must have been carrying ammunition because when the train went up in flames there were many fantastic explosions.

As the Russians continued to advance the German camp garrison were terrified of falling in to their hands and wanted us to accompany them towards the American lines where they would give themselves up. We refused to do this because we had nothing to fear from the Russians and in any case if we were seen moving along the roads we were almost certain to be strafed by the American fighters.

I think it was the beginning of April 1945 when we woke to find the German guard had all fled and within an hour a number of Cossacks on horseback and brandishing huge swords swung open the gates and set us free. They would not stay as they were anxious to catch up with the fleeing Germans but shortly afterwards their infantry arrived. (Many of them tough looking girls armed with Tommy guns), also a few tanks that were decorated with human skulls and trapped in the tracks of one of them was a man’s torn off hand.

We asked if we could be put on their ration strength but they thought this was funny. They said we must feed off the land the same as their troops, but they did agree to supply us with bread from their field bakery. Like the Cossacks, these troops did not linger but dashed off in pursuit of the fleeing Germans and later we found many of the latter hanging from nearby trees.

The Russians had not been gone for more than an hour when three jeeps arrived carrying American troops drove in to the camp and we could hardly believe our eyes as they began handing out candy bars. They had crossed the Elbe by a Bailey bridge that morning only a few miles from us, and this was the very first meeting of American and Russian forces. Unfortunately, we were on the wrong side of the river and had to remain in the Russian zone and in fact were in the hands of the Russians for over six weeks.

Soon after the Americans left some of our lads who were obviously butchers drove a bullock in to the compound and slaughtered it handing out lots of juicy steaks we had not seen for years. Then someone brought in a suckling pig that we boiled. The meat was so white and tender it really did melt in the mouth. We spent most of our time foraging on farms and in warehouses or in the pantries of private houses, which had been rapidly deserted. Someone would bring in a sack of sugar and others a sack of flour or a drum of treacle, etc. We fed better than we had done for years. For bread we had to queue up at a bakery with the German civilians, and I noticed that all the women carried their shoes and walked bare-foot. The British POWs patiently waited their turn, but the Yanks all went to the front demanding to be served before the Germans.

We got on well with the ordinary Russian troops who were always pressing strong drinks on us and we had a lot of fun trying to learn some of their language. However, we were not allowed to cross the Elbe to the American lines. It transpired that the Russians were holding us as hostages until the boundaries between East and West had been agreed with the Allies. After a few days we left Stalag 1VB and had to march about twelve miles to where we were billeted in some good brick German barracks. It was lovely to have a proper bed for a change. The barracks were in a small market town and the residents were forced to go out each morning and sweep pavement and roads. Fraternising with the Germans was a serious offence and a number of men who went to live with German women were arrested and we never saw them again. It was rumoured that they had been sent to Siberia.

The Russian troops used to get drunk every night roaming around the town firing Tommy guns in to the air and frequently bullets would strike the barrack walls so we used to stay indoors at night and kept well below window level.

You can imagine the excitement when we heard that Germany had surrendered unconditionally and we thought at long last that we should shortly be on our way home. In fact it was another two or three weeks before agreement on the boundaries was reached and the Russians handed us over to the Americans. They did this with the most pomp and ceremony. They gave every man three Havana cigars as a parting gift and then to the sound of their military bands we marched to the river crossing at Torgau.

Here they had built a big archway festooned with flags and banners and huge pictures of Stalin. We had to march under this to the other side of the Bailey bridge where the Americans greeted us and were waiting with trucks to take us to their camp at Halle. It was here that we were introduced to their ‘K’ rations which we understood were standard issue to those on active service. They were like Christmas hampers and we could hardly believe our eyes when we saw the contents. There were self-heating tins containing a variety of meat and pudding dishes, cake, chocolate and candy bars. There were also cigarettes and of course the inevitable supply of chewing gum. Scattered around were lots of children’s comics containing stories in cartoon pictures, which the GIs seemed to lap up. We had a good tuck in and next morning we were all flown to Brussels by a shuttle service of dozens of Dakotas.

In Brussels the British army took over. We were showered and deloused and give a complete set of new uniforms before being taken to billets in a square in the centre of the city. Nearby was a large hall, which had been set out rather like a Woolworth’s store. There were stalls loaded with toiletries and comports of every description and we were allowed to wander around taking everything we needed, soap, shaving tackle, combs, toothbrushes and toothpaste, handkerchiefs, gloves and scarf etc. etc., all for free.

We were then taken to another hall where a wonderful meal was laid on. One thing I will always remember was the sight of a half-pound pack of butter at every man’s place at the table. I’m afraid quite a number of men made themselves sick.

Early next morning we were all driven to an airfield where a huge fleet of Lancaster bombers were lined up. We were divided in to groups of twelve (I think) and as I awaited my turn I watched as each group climbed in to a plane carrying their newly filled kit bags. They made them selves comfortable (I don’t think that’s quite the right word) lying on the bomb doors in the belly of the plane praying that no stupid idiot will accidentally press the button marked ‘Bombs away’ after the plane has taken off!

As soon as one plane became airborne the next one started its take off run. I imagine there was less than half a minute between each take off, but with the large number of men to be carried this must have gone on for many hours.

We were allowed in to the pilot’s cockpit as we crossed the Channel. The sun was shining brightly and what a wonderful sight to see the White cliffs of Dover and know that we were at last back in England. The pilot asked me where my home was and was surprised when we found that we both lived in Nottingham. I met him several times after we had been demobbed but he had great difficulty in settling down in ‘Civvy Street’.

PART SEVEN

After leaving the white cliffs behind it seemed only a short time before we landed at Brize Norton in the Cotswolds and we could hardly believe we were on English soil at last. A group of WAAF girls met us as we got off the plane with our kit bags. Immediately the girls seized a man's kit bag each and put it on her shoulder and with her other hand led the man in to a large hangar. It was filled with rows of trestle tables and benches on which a good meal was laid out and each girl remained with him whilst he ate, chatting to him. After that they escorted us to an office where we were handed telegram forms for us to send home to inform our families of our arrival.

We were all given a medical check before being given a railway warrant, leave pass and food coupons for a double ration. The POWs from Stalag 1VB were the last to return from Europe, as the 5000 of us were being held by the Russians for long after all the other POWs had returned to Britain. I was shown a full-page newspaper cutting headed: *The mystery of 5000 missing prisoners.*

I met another young fellow who lived quite close to me in Nottingham so we travelled home together via London and taking a taxi between us we were pleasantly surprised when the taxi driver made no charge**.** We reached my companion's home first so as it was only about another 200 yards to my home we got out of the taxi together and I walked the rest of the way.

I couldn't attempt to describe my feelings when I reached home but was very moved to see a banner over the front door reading 'Welcome home Phil'. When Win opened the door we just fell in to each others arms and wept for joy, it was quite a few minutes before either of us could speak. All the POWS who had returned to England before us had been on one month's leave and were then sent to special rehabilitation camps for a few months. However, all these camps were full when our month's leave was up so we were given a further month's leave and when this expired we were given another month. So we enjoyed three months in all.

I was anxious to know how my old 'mucker' of PG70 had fared in the German working camp so I wrote to Charlie Barnes to send my best wishes on his return and ask if we could arrange to meet. It was a dreadful shock when I received a sad letter from his mother telling me he was dead. Apparently when he was released from his POW camp by the Americans he was put on a lorry driven by a black GI to take him to an airfield for a flight home. Tragically the lorry overturned and Charlie and several other POWs were killed. After enduring three years of POW life what a way to finish.

I did manage to get in touch with Chris who had got home several weeks before me and you can imagine we had plenty to talk about. He told me that he and Mary had just enjoyed a 'honeymoon' at a lovely hotel in a pretty Cotswold village. (Like Win and myself they did not have a proper honeymoon in 1939 because travelling was difficult and all the seaside beaches were closed to the public.) Win and I were already thinking of taking a holiday so after visiting Skegness to see my father and brother we booked in at the hotel recommended by Chris. It was called *The Swan*, but I can't remember the name of the village. I do recall that it was only a few miles from Brize Norton and catered specially for anglers and adjacent to it were some preserved National Trust cottages in a row, which I think was called 'Arlington row.' I imagine the staff thought we were newly weds because they gave us the Honeymoon suite and treated us royally also the food was magnificent.

I went to see my old colleagues at the Car & General who were in temporary accommodation having been bombed out of their old offices. The manager, Mr Jenkins, invited Win and me to have lunch with him at his club, the Reform club. We were rather amused when he ordered a double whisky for himself and half a pint of beer for each of his guests. Isn't it strange how little incidents like that remain in your memory?

My three months leave ended far too quickly and I was ordered to report to some ex-naval barracks in Portsmouth where there was a terrible amount of bomb damage. When I arrived I was surprised to find Jack Needle, one of my old crew who went on leave to Alexandria with me so we palled up together. There didn't seem much reason for us being there and we wondered if we were about to be sent to the Far East where of course the war was still raging.

We were in Portsmouth until October and had several weekend passes when I and another Nottingham fellow travelled home together. However we also came home several times without a pass and had some exciting times dodging the Military Police at St. Pancras Station by dashing through the platform barrier just as our train was about to move off. When we reached Nottingham

instead of staying on the train until Midland station where M.P.s always checked passes, we got off at a small station before the Midland and climbed a fence at the side of the line instead of going through the ticket barrier.

On the weekend of October 7th all leave passes were stopped as arrangements were on foot for us to be moved. Where to, we were not told. However, as it was my wedding anniversary and I hadn't had one with Win since our first in 1940, I took a chance and got home ok. When I got back to Portsmouth, however I found an advance party had already been sent ahead to our new destination taking everyone's kit bags. Fortunately Jack Needle had answered my name on roll call and loaded my kit bag with the others taken by the advance party so I was never missed.

The next morning the remainder of our Section were given railway warrants to Ellesmere Port in Wales. When we arrived there we reported to the R.T.O. who had no idea why we had been sent there. After making several phone calls he ascertained that we were supposed to have been sent to a place called Ellesmere which was quite a distance away, so we had to make another train journey.

Our new camp was in a pleasant area in the country and consisted of a number of brick barracks in a small park. Jack Needle and I managed to find a separate room which we shared as we were now members of the camp 'cadre' (permanent camp staff).

The war, of course, was now finally over following the release of the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and many thousands of troops were returning to Britain. They were sent to camps like these for a few months rest. I think the reason we were not demobbed immediately was that we were not on very good terms with our old allies, the Russians, with whom they thought there might be trouble. Or could it have been that the release of so many men without jobs would have sent the unemployment figures soaring?

Of course they had to keep the men occupied so I was instructed to give the men a refresher course on wireless procedure, etc. Could you imagine anything so ridiculous? These men were veterans, many with more than five years experience who should have been instructing me who had hardly touched a Morse key for three years. Since then the procedure had changed dramatically to comply with the American system. I got a couple of men to watch through the windows for the approach of any officers and had a few notes written on the blackboard in case any of them gave us a visit. Otherwise I allowed the men to smoke or talk among themselves. Quite frankly the army didn't know what to do with everyone, so apart from a lot of 'bullshit' like whitewashing stones along the edges of the drives, everyone was given a lot of free time.

The nearest town of any size was Wrexham and liberty trucks known as 'passion wagons' were run there every evening but there wasn't much to do apart from spending the evening in the pub or going to the cinema. However I met a young airman in the RAF who I got to know in Stalag 1VB before he was transferred to a 'Luftlarger'. He was a navigator in a Lancaster bomber and jumped with a parachute when the plane was shot down. He was knocked out when he landed in tree and when he recovered consciousness he found himself hanging from the tree suspended by his parachute which he could not release. He hung there for hours before some German soldiers appeared and when they cut him down he thought they were going to kill him.

I am afraid I have forgotten his name but mention him because we became good friends and visited Chester (which happened to be his home town) several times and occasionally going to the cinema. One day he took me to meet his parents who had invited us to tea. They were very kind and nice but they were dedicated Salvation Armyists, his father being a captain in the organization. Ralph (I've just remembered his name!) had previously warned me on no account should I mention that we had been to the cinema, as his father thought that a Mortal sin. I don't know what he would have done if he knew we had also been to the pub!

I think I had two official leaves with railway warrants whilst I was at Ellesmere but I also went home several weekends without a pass having mastered the art of dodging the M.P.s. Anyway I wasn't worried a lot about being caught as I thought that anything the army did to me would seem trivial after what I had been through.

We were given seven days leave at Christmas 1945 and Win and I spent it with my father at Wainfleet in much happier circumstances than in 1940. Soon after my return to Ellesmere I was posted on my own to Cheltenham and from there, with six other men, sent to guard a deserted American hospital in the country about two miles away. The hospital was in a fenced off area about half a mile long and half a mile wide with brick buildings in the middle containing two operating

theatres. It also had the usual examining and treatment rooms, nurses' and officers' quarters and the wards, which were in long Nissen huts on each side.

The storerooms still contained thousands of blankets, items of bed linen, crockery, cutlery and kitchen equipment, etc., and the hospital contained many thousands of pounds worth of expensive apparatus and equipment. I really don't know how I could be expected to guard this huge area with just six men and any thieves could have made a fortune. The best I could do was to divide the six men in to two pairs with each pair doing two four hour shifts in each twenty-four hours with each man in the pair going round the fence in opposite directions, whilst I kept my eye on the buildings and manned the telephone. This was pretty useless as there were no lights around the perimeter so it was impossible to see across the camp in the dark and any would-be thieves could easily slip through one side of the fence whilst the guards were patrolling the others.

We were, of course, armed with rifles, but I think there might have been trouble if we had shot anyone, so what were we supposed to do if we were confronted by a gang of tough thugs? Fortunately there were no incidents and we had a pretty easy time. We found ourselves comfortable beds in what had been the nurses' quarters, which were most luxuriously furnished and certainly smelled very nice!

I remained there until my number finally came up for de-mob in June 1946, having been in the army for just over six years. I had to travel to Newcastle-under-Lyme to go through the procedure of becoming a civilian once more. Here there was the largest clothing store I had ever seen and we could take our time browsing around choosing our civilian wear. There were endless rows of suits of many patterns and I picked a navy blue pinstripe. We had the choice of an overcoat or Mac and a trilby or a soft cap, so I took a coat and a trilby. My memory is a little hazy, but I don't think that any shirts or shoes were provided. However, we were allowed to keep our army greatcoat, best battle dress, khaki shirts, kit bag and boots.

Talking about boots, I forgot to mention that my original army boots finally fell to pieces in 1944 and for the last 12 months in Germany I had to wear wooden clogs supplied by the Red Cross, which presumably came from Holland. They are not the most comfortable footwear, so to get some relief I made myself some slippers. The Red Cross parcels arrived tied up with thick hemp string, and I managed to get hold of a quantity of this. Using three strands plaited together I made yards of rope, which, with more string, I sewed together to form the shape of two soles, to which I attached rope uppers. They didn't look very smart, but then we weren't going anywhere! Well, that is the end of an era. I am glad to have put it on record even if much of it is boring, but 90% of army life is just that. I would not like to go through it all again, but I am glad to have experienced it. What impressed me most of all was the wonderful comradeship between people from all walks of life when they are just flung together in grim situations, and I am ever thankful that I had such a splendid crew who gave me wonderful support. I don't think the experience did me any lasting harm, but I think it made me more patient and tolerant with people. Incidentally, being de-mobbed doesn't mean completely discharged, merely transferred to the 'Reserve List.' However, things would have to be pretty bad before they need me in Iraq!

THE END

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