

Edward. A. Adcook
Memoirs

The Lion's Spirit with the Gentlest of Hearts

Foreword

I dedicate these pages to all those good people who take the trouble, and the interest, to read them, and whether they think this tale is good, bad or total rubbish, I want to thank them.

I also want to offer some sincere apologies, firstly for my very poor writing (and to think that I was very proud of my handwriting when I was at school) but I have a very good excuse, arthritis is my enemy there. Secondly, my atrocious spelling, yet again I have slipped, my excuse is "word-blindness" or could I claim old age? And, of course, the composition leaves much to be desired, but one virtue I can claim it was written in all honesty, as far, and as much, as I can remember.

Edward. A. Adcook

27th July 1991

I was born on the 27/7/18 in Sunderland County Durham and I am told that my parents had ten children all told, but five were either born dead or lived only a few hours. I had one elder brother, and two older sisters, then me, and in 1923 my brother.

We lived at various houses in the town but the best in my memory was 16 King's Road where my brother (the younger) and I went to School at Diamond Hall Boys Elementary. I was happy as a boy, but I'm afraid things were pretty grim in the North during the 20s and 30s and we were always hungry, but my parents did the best they could for us all.

I left school in 1932 and by then my Father and brother were out of work also my younger sister (the older one had left home a long time before and gone "into service" as a maid). I managed to get a job as an errand boy with a grocer in the town, earning 5/- the first year and 6/- the second year. My working week consisted of anything up to 60 hours riding a bike piled high with groceries in all-weather without any wet weather clothing except a cycling cape which I bought myself.

By 1934, my Father was getting pretty desperate because by the time I became 16 years old I wouldn't be able to be an errand boy as I would be too old, by the way, my wage of six shillings was helping the family budget in no small way. The stroke of luck for the family came in the shape of a friend of my Father's, who had moved to Hemel Hempstead a year before, he was on holiday in Sunderland and came to see us. I remember he talked to Dad for a long while (and to us) and we were [Page 2] all excited at the prospect of "moving South" and I think it was brave of my Father to make the move although we were sad to have to leave our home town, relatives and friends and "start anew". Now you may ask "Where did the money come from for the move?", well Father was always a shrewd and intelligent man, he had bought the house we lived in and sold it for £95. That paid for our fares, furniture removal, and a £25 deposit on a new house, the cost of which was £425.

We all got jobs straight away except poor Dad, my elder brother was a skilled marine¹ Engineer so he got a job in the Engineering Dept of John Dickinson and Co. My younger sister in the Book Dept and yours truly in the Caseworking² Dept. My younger brother was still at school, and the oldest girl was "still in service", she only came home for holidays.

I like to think that the family enjoyed their move to the South, except Father, he couldn't get a permanent job and I believe he regretted his move. But finally, he did get a permanent job as a postman, where he stayed until his retirement at 65. But as we all know life never remains the same, Mother died in August 1939, Father in the 50s, elder sister in the 60s, younger sister in the 70s and my beloved younger brother in 1985. The oldest brother is still alive at 81 years old and is in a nursing home at Chester-le- Street, Durham.

In July 1939, I had to report and was registered for Military service with the Militia. I was passed AI at my medical in spite of the fact that the sight in my right eye is very poor indeed. After the medical I was asked by an officer (army) what branch of the service I would prefer, and without any pause [Page 3] at all I replied, "The Air Force". I had always been very keen on aircraft and from the very first day I had come South I had applied for jobs in the aircraft industry but of course I had no qualifications whatever and was turned down each time, enthusiasm and keenness was not rated very highly I'm afraid.

When my call-up papers arrived (my father delivered them himself, our house was on his round, and at the time, my Mother was ill in bed. His voice carried up the stairs and I firmly believed that news

¹ Handwriting unclear

² Handwriting unclear

killed her. I went up to her room to say “cheerio” to her before going to work and I found her in a coma and she looked as if she had had a shock, she died two days later, August 24th). As I’ve said my call-up arrived and much to my disgust, I found I had to report to Kempston Barracks which was the home of the Bucks and Herts Infantry Regt, it was the one thing I didn’t want. I told my Dad that if I did have to join the army I wanted to go into his old regiment, the Durham Light Infantry.

I duly reported on the 15/9/39 at Bedford and I was far from happy, firstly, because I had just lost my Mother, then the war had started and now I was away from home, on my own, for the first time in my life, not only that, but I left my job at Dickinson’s, earning £2.10 /- and now found that I was to get 1/- a day and out of that 7/- a week I had to pay back 6p a week “barrack room damages” whatever they were meant to be.

Life at Kempston Barracks was pretty grim. Most of the troops there were hard, bitter regulars with just a handful of enlisted men, the barracks were old and dirty, and we had to wash and shave in cold water under the ‘glare’ of a 40-watt bulb. On the morning of [Page 4] 16th, I had already lost my new towel, someone “borrowed” it, my face was a man of blood (the powerful 40-watt searchlight went out and I had to shave in the dark). Young men of 21 usually have a lot of spots and I must have shaved the lot off my face). Mealtimes were a real experience for us “new boys” – twelve men sat round each square table, three a side, in the meal-hall, and the food was dumped in the middle of the table by the Orderlies. On my table were nine regulars and just three of us conscripts- so there was one concerted “dive in” by the nine and we three were left with the scraps one usually gives to the dog.

Training at Kempston was very intensive, starting early every morning till late in the day, we were also subjected to many night exercises. I remember well the first time I was given my rifle; it was a WW 1 Lee Enfield Point 303. It seemed to me to weigh a ton, actually it was nine lbs and absolutely thick with ill-smelling grease, all this “gunge” had to be cleaned off until the weapon shone like a new penny, it took hours. As more enlisted men joined up, we were moved to live with private families and of course we had a much more comfortable time of it. I think often of the time when I first fired the rifle on a proper range, it was at a place called Yelldon. We were billeted in haylofts and barns, with no heat and no light, we were there for about a week but it seemed like a lifetime, - it was the middle of January 1940, we were all frozen and completely demoralised.

Orders came for us to sail to France in the late February, we sailed at night on a cross-channel ferry boat stripped of most things to make way for more troops. I fell asleep on the floor of one of the lounges with all of my kit on. I was awakened by the throb of the engines to find we were well on our way, and I felt awful, but we all cheered up at the thought of all the nice French girls [Page 5] who would be waiting to welcome us when we got to Le Havre. It was a beautiful sunny morning as the ship entered the dock, we all lined the rails, and to meet us was- one lone docker who spit laconically³ on the ground as we all shouted “Viva La France!!”. I also remember well my first breakfast sitting on that French Quay, a tin of cold Stew.

We were stationed at Rouen and we didn’t really do much, it had Nissen Huts where we lived in the forest of Rouen, and we seemed to be doing nothing but paint the damn things with a creosote-based paint and as everyone knows 1940 was a very hot year, this paint burned into our skins, which with the hot sun made our lives a real misery, but of course spent our free evenings in the town, we couldn’t afford much more than a couple of beers in one of the bars. Then suddenly there was a frenzy of activity, we started digging trenches all over the place, and felling trees over the roads to

³ Handwriting Unclear/Incorrect Spelling

block them, no one told us why we were doing this, then just as suddenly we had to pack up and be on the march.

P.S Before I go on, I omitted to say that the draft from Kempston numbered 100 men and when we got to France, 75 of us were transferred to the Queens Royal Regiment (I know on PAGE 3 I wrote then I didn't want to join the Beds and Herts) but the 75 of us were very upset to have been transferred to a Surrey Regiment, and we were nearly court-martialled for mutiny, anyway that blew over and we had to settle down).

Leaving Rouen behind, we started to march South, it was a long and arduous march because we did have a lot of rain, we had very little food, and had to sleep in the ditches and under trees. There was a fair number of us conscripts but still quite a few regulars as well as T. A troops in the battalion [Page 6] and I was surprised when a regular complained so bitterly that the Battalion commander threatened to shoot him. It happened because the chaps were tired and slowing up and this officer came along the road (we were single file each side of the road) and shouted, "Get a move on you Lazy lot of buggars", this chap shouted back at him, "We are not buggars-Sir!". I will tell you more about that Soldier whose name I have never forgotten Tom Gordon later on in this extra-long story.

After many days of marching, we ended up in a meadow near some railway sidings, there was no station, shed, village, not even a solitary house as far as I could see, only thing was, on the lines, a long row of good vans. We were ordered to stay under the hedges and not to move out onto the open meadow. I believe we were there about two or three days and I began to realise that there were many hundreds of troops in that area, but I only saw movement in all the hedgerows surrounding the different meadows, it was all very mysterious and somewhat weird to me. I know we only had corned beef and hard biscuits to eat and water to drink then a rumour started that we were going back to England, but I pointed out that we had been travelling South, then suddenly we were all packed into the wagon, as engines came from somewhere and when it did stop we were on the quay-side at Cherbourg.

We packed onto a cross-channel ferry boat (and it was packed believe me) and sailed home on a beautiful sunlit sea as calm as a mill pond, coming into Southampton we passed H.M.S NELSON whose entire crew lined the rails and gave three cheers, I felt like a hero, having the Navy cheer the Army. Nurses, W.V.S. and lots of ladies met us with tea and scones etc. We boarded a train, and we went all out to Leeds [Page 7] but at one station we stopped at, newspapers were handed into the windows of the train and then we learned the bitter truth- DUNKIRK! The passengers were throwing B.E.F out of France and that really deflated us we never knew till that moment why we were now back in England.

We got a great reception from the good people of Leeds, they couldn't do enough for us, I can't go into detail here, but I shall always remember their kindness and good humour and generosity, no matter how many times you told them we had never been near Dunkirk, or near any real war, they replied "That does not matter, we have got you home ". God Bless' Em. We were sorry indeed to leave Leeds after a few months and the next port of call was Gilsland in Cumberland. We actually went there to reform the Battalion properly, there was more room there to do that job than in Leeds. We were camped on the moors, and when we were sorted out, we left Gilsland as the new 2/5TH QUEENS ROYAL REGT.

We moved to Herne Bay, and was then on Coast Guard, I remember that well too, we were in empty houses and for the first week we never saw the house. We were in slit trenches night and day with cat naps through the night. I for one, started to imagine things- I was looking out over the bay just as

the dawn was breaking, and I was just about to give the alarm that a submarine was surfacing when I realised it was a long low ridge of either rock or sand with a wave breaking over it. It scared me to death in spite of the fact I felt a fool, but the threat of invasion was very real, and it played havoc with all our nerves at that particular time.

We moved around Kent like a tribe of [Page 8] wandering gypsies, always (or nearly always) sleeping in tents no matter what the weather. We were quite a while at Dymchurch, on coastal defence, one man on the sea watch and another pushing a bike in the road parallel, the idea being that the first man gave the alarm to the bike man and he pedalled like hell to inform the company headquarters of the emergency. From the road to the main part of the ground was a dyke or some sort of river and every bridge over it was packed with explosives guarded by two sentries whose job it was to blow them when the order came, it was a haunted kind of existence.

Being stationed all over Kent meant that we had a grandstand view of the Battle of Britain and most of the time nearly all the men were out guarding crashed aircraft, until the R.A.F sent out people to collect them. The most unusual thing was, that every crash I guarded was a British one, I never did see a German plane on the ground, yet I saw plenty shot down. We were often having to 'dance around' when German aircrafts going back across the channel, machine-gunned us or jettisoned their bombs.

We eventually left Kent and were then stationed in Suffolk and doing our usual "pick up the bed and walk" routine, it was in Suffolk where I was promoted to the rank of acting un-paid Lance-Corporal, it was something I didn't want, but the Sergeant-Major told me it wasn't what I want but what the Army wanted. A few days later he then borrowed my one and only £1 and I never got it back. Training in Suffolk was the most dangerous I ever went through. We had an assault course there where live ammunition was used, and Bren guns were mounted [Page 9] on tripods on a fixed spot on the wall of the quarry which was the site of the course. The troops taking part had a designated route to take through the quarry and when they reached a certain place, the machine guns opened fire. I was detailed to fire one of the guns and just as I was about to press the trigger some damn fool section leader lead his men along the wall of the quarry straight into my sights, of course every man came to an end and this man thought that by doing what he thought was a good idea, he would slip unseen and beat the "enemy". It was the same course where we had to scale a 40ft high cliff and the senior N.C.Os stood on the top to hurl stun grenades down to fall way behind us, unfortunately when I lead my section to the foot of the cliff, the Sergeant-Major accidentally dropped one and it hit my left ankle. I've never hear a bang like it, I was completely deafened and "wounded" all up my left side with plastic splinters, funny part about it I must have been walking "wounded" I still had to march two miles back to camp.

We also had hand grenade throwing practice, but this time with a difference, the Sergeant-Major took every man personally and the idea was to throw a live grenade, and under strict instruction from the S.M wait two/three seconds before "ducking down" into the trench. Unfortunately, one man "ducked" before he was told, the S.M tried to pull him to his feet and the precious time factor slipped by the grenade exploded and the S.M was seriously wounded. We were at least three fields away from a main road and without thinking I raced away and reached the main road, just as a dispatch rider came along. I jumped on his motorbike behind him and we went "hell for leather" to [Page 10] the camp for the H.O. The Sergeant-Major was saved but we never saw him again, and by the way I never did get the £1 he owed me, we had orders shortly afterwards that we were to go abroad, being now conscripted a "proper" Battalion.

I was part of the advance party of about 30/40 men who left before the main body and we found ourselves on board the "JOHANN VAN OLDENBARNIVELT", a ship of the Dutch East Indian Line with a Dutch Captain and officers and they told me 700 tiny Japanese⁴ crewmen, they all looked like Japanese to me. We sailed from Liverpool and there were 5000 of us all together on that ship. We joined the convoy off the Firth of Clyde and sailed off into the Western sea changing course every ten minutes to put the U-boats off their aim. Far out into the Atlantic we turned South and after many weeks we anchored off Freetown West Africa. Then we sailed for Cape Town and were able to go ashore. I think we spent four days there and the people were very nice to us. We journeyed on across the Indian Ocean to end up in Bombay where we left the ship. The Battalion went on up to Dolaley and our party stayed behind to guard all the Battalion stores in a "basha" on the Bombay dockside. It was a disgrace that "basha", made of rush-matting, with a floor of stones. All we had to sleep on was a sack of rags and we ate in a tumbled down shack at the other end of the dock. Also, the rats running around were as big as cats, we were there three weeks.

On the long voyage from Scotland to Bombay, we passed our time in P.T drill, weapon training, lectures and such like, and life on board was no picnic, all the cabins on the lower decks had been removed so in the space of maybe two or at the [Page 11] most eighteen men had to eat, sleep and store all their equipment. Every night eighteen hammocks had to be slung and taken down and stored every morning. I was a lance corporal in charge of my "Men's deck" (as these spaces were called) and responsible for getting the men's food from the galley, three decks down. Tempers, in such surroundings, were often very short. I had to be "on the ball" all of the time to maintain discipline. One day I brought the mid-day meal up and found I had gained an extra "mouth", this man told me he had been told to sit on my mans -deck. I went round the bulkhead to the next men and found only 17 men. The N.C.O told me the orderly officer had put the extra man onto me. I told him in no uncertain terms that he would have to have his man back again, anyway, to cut a long story, the orderly officer came charging up and started tearing me off a strip. He shouted at me "I'm bloody fed up with all this" and in a louder voice I called back "Yes, Sir, and I'm bloody fed up too"- I was put on arrest and appeared on company orders the next morning. The C.O heard everything and turning round to the Officer he said "Mr So-and-So, you and I are fairly comfortable on this ship having a cabin. Have a little more thought for junior N.C.Os having to live like they have to do- case dismissed!!" I was told to wait by the Sergeant-Major and after all the other cases were dealt with, I was called back in front of the C.O and promoted to Corporal. I can't understand why that orderly officer never seemed to like me after that- but then he was not my Platoon Commander, so I didn't mind.

When the Battalion returned to Bombay (and by Jove were they fed up) they had had a very hard life at Dolaley. We were put on another ship, a much smaller one this time, and steaming up the West Coast of India, we sailed on up the Persian Gulf to [Page 12] Basra, where we boarded a train and finally ended up somewhere just north of Kirkuk. We had to pitch tents on a muddy desert either side of a road leading to the distant hills. It was very wet and cold; it was really an anti-climax after all that travelling. The biggest laugh I had was about a week later, when someone got hold of a rumour (he swore it was true) that we were going back home to England. I told my blokes then (and my words came true) "You will go home (if you are lucky) but you will have to fight your way there".

We organised the camp at Kirkuk by putting up bigger tents and digging down three foot into the ground and putting the tents over the holes. We could then stand up in the tents, we only had ground sheets to sleep on with one blanket under and one over us. There was one section of men (9)

⁴ Handwriting Unclear

to each tent and all men had to sleep with their weapon chained to them. As an N.C.O, I was issued with a Thompson sub-machine gun and I could name a more comfortable bed companion than that "Tommy".

I can't remember how long we were at Kirkuk, but it meant a very intensive training programme. After nearly three months of travel from home, we were doing weeks of training in the mountains and deserts of Iraq. I remember one where we had to cross the very fast flowing river named the Little Zab and the Great Zab. We had to use small collapsible canvas boats to cross. Several men were drowned, the weather was atrocious, and the water was flowing very fast. It was night-time and I for one was terrified. I can't swim very well but that wouldn't have mattered, even for a cross channel swimmer our kit would have sunk us like stones. Another time we had to bivouac and picking a spot by the wall of a dry Wadi I made my men make a tent of ground-sheets, and we [Page 13] all packed in, side by side, with the ground sheets about two inches above our faces and settled down to sleep. The next thing we know a flash flood in the mountain swept our "tent" away and we were soaked to the skin. I don't think I was very popular after that.

Christmas of 1942 was spent at Kirkuk and I must say that we had the best cooks in the British Army there. They gave us a lovely Christmas lunch cooked in "tin ovens" made with ordinary tins and baked clay from the desert. There was one very peculiar place we had to guard. I only done it once and I believe that every man in the Battalion had only one go at it. The place was miles from where we camped and was an R.A.F fuel dump. The fuel was in 40-gallon drums, but it was all buried under mounds of earth. The centre was flattened hard and smooth like a parade ground. It was as big as a football field and surrounded by a high wire fence topped with barbed wire. Strangely enough, there was an R.A.F camp about a mile down the road, but I don't believe it was an airfield. I didn't see or hear any aircraft. I often wondered why the R.A.F didn't guard it themselves. It was a very lonely place, miles from anywhere, with only a few army men there. I knew that it was around Christmas time when I was on guard and the R.A.F invited the off-duty men to join them in their Mess for a drink. It was night-time, of course, and the party was pretty hectic, with plenty of drinking. Anyway, it came the time to part and the five or six of us staggered back up the road to the fuel dump. It was a breath-taking sight, a bright-full moon and frosty air, the lonely hills and desert all round. We were all walking along on the moonlit side of the road, except one private. He walked in the shadow of the cacti hedge on the other side when suddenly he shouted "Stand still you b-----ds! I'm going [Page 14] to shoot the lot of you!" We all froze, and a cold sweat came out of me as I heard the tommy-gun he was carrying being "cocked". I saw the glint of the muzzle in the moonlight as he raised the weapon level, then just as suddenly, as if God willed it, we rushed him as one man and before anything happened we had him, and the gun, and marched him back to camp, he passed out like a light. We never mentioned it to anyone, but I shall never forget that as long as I live, in looking back I failed in my duty as an N.C.O. I should have charged him.

The strange thing about army life (but I now believe it is only in wartime) one was never told anything about anything. One day we would be in one place and the next day we would be on our way to somewhere else, but we were never told where, how, or why and that was the pattern when we suddenly up, packed and out of Iraq in the back of open lorries. A huge convoy wound its way along the desert roads of Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Sinai, Egypt and the Western Desert. Every night we slept on the open ground except in Egypt where we were put up in huge transit camps of tents. I remember in the Sinai desert, I was trying to get comfortable on the ground under a thorn bush when my platoon -commander came along and said "Corporal, you are now about to sleep at the foot of Mount Sinai". I forgot to ask how if I had the distinction of being under Moses's burning

bush. I was told by the same officer, at another time, I was about to sleep on the battlefield of the 40, 000 horsemen. I went to sleep hoping they would not start up again.

We had a very long approach "march" into the little piece of action we did have. The famous 8th Army (of which we were now part) had pushed the Germans way back into the areas beyond Tripoli before we came under "real" fire. I was still the "advance party" for my [Page 15] Company (and the only one) each company had one N.C.O to represent them, so all we had for the whole Battalion was one truck-load of men under a Sergeant. Our job was to leave early every morning ahead of the main body and pick out the next night's resting place for each of our companies. We had to be careful that when the trucks arrived each night they were not bogged down in soft ground. I felt quite pleased with myself that every site I chose was correct according to my C.O.

The last night's position was just behind the front line, and all night the guns were banging away, and no one got any sleep, partly the noise but mainly I think nerves! I was very anxious about how I would conduct myself. I know I had a long talk to my platoon-commander, and I told him that I prayed I would not be blinded, I'd rather have a limb blown off. He said No! He'd rather his sight go - do you believe me? A week later he was totally blinded by a mortar bomb. Next morning, armed to the teeth, we moved to the front line, taking over from the 50th Highland Division, and I've never seen men look so smart. I felt quite ashamed, we looked like a load of tramps along-side them, but then I can't ever know if they really were front line troops.

We were in these positions for about six weeks, and the action was typical W.W.1. We never moved forward, the German crack 90th light was bottled up in the Cape Bon Peninsula. The Navy and R.A.F did a wonderful job; the Germans couldn't do anything but throw everything at the army. They had everything to lose but they never attempted a break-out. There were of course a few skirmishes but nothing large scale. They never stopped their constant shelling and mortaring. One lovely sunny morning though, we really thought the balloon had gone up. Over 2/6th Batt had gone into the line the night [Page 16] before for the first time in their lives. We were lying in the second line of defence in an olive orchard when we heard above the clatter of gunfire. "The Jerry is coming; the Jerry is coming". We couldn't see what was happening because of the olive trees, when suddenly, dozens and dozens of 2/6th troops came rushing past our lines screaming like a load of banshees. I could "taste" the panic in my own blokes and at the same time, being aware of the feeling of terror in myself, I managed to yell at my chaps to stay where they were and after a while things calmed down. We then had orders to move up to the front and stabilise the position. I had the unenviable job of taking my section on a patrol to our right to find out who the troops were. Fortunately, they were a section of the 2/5th Battalion, but I'll never forget that nightmare trek across that open sunlit meadow. But God was surely with me, I brought all my lads back safe and sound.

I was away ahead of myself in that last paragraph, the Cheshire Regt incident came some days later and the bombing of our troops by the Americans in the Gulf war, brought it all back to me. We were in the foothills of the mountains on the Cape Bon Peninsula and the Germans held all the high ground. We had, in our position, an observation post manned by an officer and Sergeant of the R.A to direct our heavy guns on the German position. Of course, the enemy knew this, and we got more than our fair share of "flack". However, at one time, I looked to my left and on the next foothill they were having a fairly heavy pasting from shell fire, men were dashing around with stretchers and I felt something was wrong. When I realised it was our guns which were firing on the Cheshire Regt. I crawled up to the R.A officer and told him, he didn't believe me at first, but he soon gave an order over the wireless and the firing [Page 17] stopped. As they say, things like that happen in war.

After a while, the “brass-hats” had enough of this “static” war. The Germans seemed quite happy to sit there in their deep bunkers in the mountains, able to over-see all our position and just throw everything at us on the lower position. We were told that we were to mount an attack on a wide front and finish off the North African Campaign once and for all. The attack was to take place at night a few days later, but it never came off and again God must have been on our side. The Germans surrendered and saved us the bother and we were lucky because had the offensive gone on, the casualties would have been enormous. The officers responsible had not done their homework and didn’t know the layout of the German defence. Our Company had 5,000 prisoners to guard and when we finally shipped them back to Egypt, we then camped at Tripoli and again started intensive training but this time with an ominous difference. We went aboard landing barges in the harbours and sailed along to a lonely part of the coast and came ashore to try and make a beachhead against the “enemy” (unusually members of the Indian Army). I think we climbed every mountain in N. Africa, dug dozens of holes to “fight” from, it seemed to me to be Iraq all over again. On one “scheme” we went on in the mountain, we had to “take” a machine-gun position, the gun was on a fixed line and the gunner was firing real ammunition, about every twelfth bullet was a tracer and the start point for each of us units was about a mile away. It was a lovely moonlit night and we had to get the gun without being seen, if you were seen then a Very light was fired, and you were presumed “dead”. I must have travelled three miles with my section and coming up from behind the gunner we pressed a tommy-gun in the back of his neck and [Page 18] gave him the fright of his life. We had many adventures like that but whether it done us any good I can’t say. Oh, I forgot to mention I was now a Sergeant, having been “made up” in the front line, so I now had a platoon to look after. My first taste of a Sergeant’s life came on the first pay parade after we reached Tripoli. After the battle finished, we were paid every fortnight and my pay was £4 (I was acting Sergeant) but when I marched up for it, I got £2. I protested vigorously but was told very sharply that I was in debt to the Income Tax Office and would have to pay them off first. I never did find out why, perhaps it was a war secret.

The great day dawned at last when we had to pack up our camp in Tripoli and march to the harbour to board a ship, actually it was a cross-channel steamer, and slung from either side were four infantry assault landing crafts- well this was it! It was a really beautiful day, the sea was as calm as a millpond, and I had one hell of a cold in the head. I felt awful and it was only when the ship got too far away from the shore to swim back to Tripoli that we were told where we were going (and I am telling the truth now-it is the first time in the Army that I was ever told that). Our destination was to be the town of, or rather the bay of Salerno in Italy. We were to go ashore at 3:00 am on the 9th of Sept 1943. We were also told that we were to be the first troops to hit the beaches and we were also told that the area was defended by a heavy armoured division of Germans and by way of consolation, I suppose, were told that the afore mentioned division had 30 miles of coast-line to defend. The airfield was to be our battalion objective. I’ll never forget that voyage, I really believed I would be dead before ever I got to Italy. On the afternoon of the 8th, my chaps [Page 19] (bless them) were quite worried about me and I had to report to the navel M.O. He took my temperature and immediately ordered me to the sick bay. I refused, for one very good reason. I told him that may give the impression that I was “backing out” of going ashore, don’t get me wrong! I was not trying to be a “hero” in fact I was pretty scared of what would happen on that beach or even before, but he saw and appreciated my point of view. Had I been a private, it might have been a different matter, anyway, he gave me this small tumbler of liquid (it looked like whiskey, but it tasted awful) told me to rest as much as I could before the “event”. It did make me feel better whatever it was, but I was in a “trance-like” state when we had to embark in the landing craft.

We anchored nine miles off the coast and the noise of the big guns of the Navy was terrific, and as we took our places in the barge, we were told to do so quietly, that would have been laughable if it hadn't been so tragic, and just as we were to be lowered to the sea, the Captain's voice boomed over the tannoy, "You will be happy to know that the Italians have officially surrendered". We would have been happier still, had he said the Germans had done the same. At last we were off, and it was a real firework display. German aircrafts were overhead, and the Navy were firing a veritable storm of tracer at them and shooting them down too. I had an awful feeling that there was a very good chance of going into the next world from the fire of our own guns. We were still some way from the beach when I was given the fright of my life. We had been ploughing through lines of Navy vessels, when suddenly, rocket-carrying ships behind us started firing their deadly cargo. I had been told that each of their ships carried, and could fire at any one time, 700 thirty pound [Page 20] shells. The noise of these weapons was awesome. Suddenly though, the Germans had got our range and started to reply with 88mm air bursts. Now, in practice off the N. African coast, my position in the barge was astride the low centre platform with my back to the engine compartment, but when the real thing came, I wasn't able to sit down at all and no amount of shouting would make anyone move up. In fact, the man who sat in front of me, he couldn't even sit down, so our heads were dangerously exposed and as these air bursts continued, we kept "ducking down" and the poor fellow in front stabbed himself in the temple with his own bayonet.

I could see the beach at last and another barge was on our right when I heard a shout from that vessel "We are at the wrong beach". Then there was a huge bang. I ducked, and when I looked again, the other barge had disappeared, but just then we ground to a halt and there was a mad rush forward to get out. I remember stumbling over several bodies, then I flung myself flat on the shingle, but I knew I was on the right beach. The R.S.M was running up and down with his white marker tape. I never even got the soles of my boots wet and as we ran forward, we went over a sand dune and landed up to our waists in water, confronted also with a mass of tangled barbed wire. I reckon any fight we had in us died at that moment, anyway we struggled on and never met one enemy soldier and it was also strangely quiet. We came to a cluster of small houses and we took up position and the Scots Guards moved through us and took up the advance, as we were told to have "breakfast". When the sun was well up in the sky, we moved forward and came to what I took to be the Coast road. We were near the tobacco factory, which was [Page 21] one of our objectives. We lay in a ditch all that day, unable to move because the place was full of German Uniforms. We were also having a lot of mortar fire, but in spite of our troubles, I was filled with admiration for the crew of a 25-pounder hidden somewhere in the tobacco field who were banging away all day. Where the devil that gun came from, I'll never know, it was the only gun ashore.

Night finally came and we were off again and the objective this time was the airfield, that was vital. We had no air cover at all, only two p.34s which I think were spotter planes. They never fired any guns or such like and I only saw them once. We had to move through the tobacco, and it was like being a fly in a spider's web. Stakes about six foot high all strung to each other by wires, it was a terrible job and I was in a right state to lead any men with the way I was feeling, but in the end we reached a long straight road with a home or farm now and then along it. We moved in single file either side of this road and as we went, we heard these vehicles moving on either side of us. We passed the word that they must be tanks (we couldn't see anything it was so dark) but no one took any notice of our information. Then suddenly, right in front of our columns was a huge Tiger tank. Someone belted it with a P.I.A.T mortar and the crew jumped out. We took them prisoner but looking back I didn't think that tank should have been on the road, it should have been hidden from us. The rear section of our column were alerted by the "shindig" at the front and investigated the

noises on the left and right and all hell broke loose. The houses and farms were full of German tank crews and infantry.

It was a strange night, poor old 17 platoon at the rear had their hands full fighting all night. Us lot at the front were told to dig in, that [Page 22] was a ridiculous order, we should have tried, under the cover of darkness, to get back. It was obvious we had advanced through the German lines and they had stayed quiet for just that purpose, their tank on the road was a mistake on their part. I knew that when daylight came, we would be in serious trouble, but I felt so ill, I couldn't care less and only managed to dig two inches down in the hard ground.

When day broke, it was a bright sunny one, and instantly I could see we were at the "wrong" end of the airfield. Then came the rumble of the tanks from the direction of 17 platoon position and looking down the road, we could see them advancing towards us. I shouted to my platoon members to get to the other side of the road where there was a wide ditch and as soon as we moved, all the machine gunners in the tanks opened up and the frightening thing was they were using tracer bullets. We managed to get to the ditch, but I didn't have all the platoon with me, some of them had spent the night in the hedge running at a right angle to the road. I must admit there was real panic (I'd forgotten how ill I'd felt since landing). We had no defence at all against these huge Tiger tanks with their 88mm guns and I was wondering which way to escape when I heard a shout behind me "Get your men out of here Sergeant". I looked round and the Company Commander was standing on the high banking behind and I was amazed to see the tracers all round him. I turned back to the few men with me and shouted, "Let's get out", turned round again to ask the C.C where to and he had gone, killed in those few seconds. The blokes all took fright and were going to leave their weapons when I ordered them to pick them up and follow me. We were near a small bridge [Page 23] which crossed a kind of dyke or canal about thirty feet wide. We got to the corner of this bridge where a hedge ran along the bank of this waterway. This gave us some cover from the tank fire. I came to a concrete support for a pipe crossing from our side to the other side of the dyke, it was only about a foot wide and twenty feet above the water but in our desperation we went over it like first class tight-rope walkers (in our instance, runners). When we reached the other side, we were faced with barbed wire. I lifted it while the others scrambled underneath and off they went. I tried to get under on my own and the damned stuff trapped me like a rabbit. Finally, I got free and joined up with them when we got to a very small wood. We lay gasping on the ground and I had a chance to look back along the water-way and a huge tank was filling the small bridge but to my horror, under the bridge and looking for all the world like a load of ducks, up to their waists in water came the remains of what I took to be 16 platoon. I yelled a warning about the tank above them, but I was too far away from them to hear in the noise, but my shouting brought a whole load of fire from behind us. That was a shock, we crawled forward, out of the wood into the corner of a field and it was full of water, icy cold. There was also a rise in the ground in front of us and the firing from the Germans was coming over the top and as we lay in the water, I could hear the shot bullets sizzle as they hit the water all round us. They were using those damned tracers again. I looked back behind me through the thin wood and I could see the rest of my platoon running towards us through the open field we had come through. I again yelled my head off for them to get down, but they didn't hear, and the poor fellows went down like nine pins from the tanks on the road [Page 24] but mostly from the fire which was pinning us down. We were caught like rats in a trap and I for one couldn't think of anything to do, when suddenly all the firing stopped and I looked at the five or six men that were with me, one of them, our stretcher-bearer was waving a white handkerchief on the end of a stick. For some unknown reason I was suddenly very angry. He had taken the decision out of my hands, then just as suddenly I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. There was a dirt road at the side, and we all stood up with our hands in the air and stepped out onto the road. There at about 50 yards was a

German half-track with a lot of infantry round it. They shouted for us to advance towards them, when I suddenly realised that one man was not standing up and there on the ground wounded in the arm and leg was- Tom Gordon (PAGE 6). He hadn't been with us up till then, so God knows where he had come from, he wasn't even in my platoon.

My blokes ran up the road to the German. I was bewildered, I stood there looking down at Tom then at the half-track up the road and the Germans were shouting at me. The next thing I found myself doing was slinging poor Tom over my shoulders and staggering up the road. I'll never know to this day where I got the strength from because he was quite a big man. I didn't think the Germans liked this. I could see them waving for me to put him down, but I felt so angry and frustrated. I kept on, when suddenly their machine gunner started to swing the gun menacingly in my direction. I put Tom down and looked at the Germans, they beckoned to me and as I ran towards them, I can hear poor Tom's cry "Don't leave me Sarge, don't leave me" to this day. When I reached the Germans, I shouted at them, "My comrade is wounded, fetch him in" [Page 25] "Yes", they told me, "we know", they never did. It was just as well, after the war, I was told he got back to our own line.

We were told to "get moving" and found ourselves in a dry riverbed and all along the banks were hordes of infantry, lying in firing position, facing a wood to our right. Finally, we came to a field and among scattered bunkers, it was then that I realised our troops were putting in an attack towards the village in which direction we were also heading. We were standing near a German half-track and I whispered to my lads that it looked as if Jerry was pulling out and to try and hang back and make a dash towards the left where there was some dense cover. An officer must have heard, or guard, what I meant and came over and pushed a revolver into my stomach and shouted, "Come Englander" and "Come" we did. In the lee of the half-track, we ran with the Germans across this field and we had to stop now and then to lift a wounded man up into the vehicle while our own troops in the woods tried to pick us off with their guns, but they only had rifles, machine-guns and tommy-guns, no heavy stuff at all, otherwise I would never have been writing about it now!- I, for one, was terrified.

We got to the village and the place was full of tanks and troops. We sat in an orchard and reactions set in and we couldn't stop shaking. Fortunately, I had some cigarettes and a smoke calmed us down. Then we had a most crazy experience, we were in three motorcycle combinations and went roaring off at great speed up the mountains. The journey would have been hilarious if it hadn't been so frightening. We stopped in a small valley where a group of German officers were sitting on the ground as if they were sat at a picnic, instead of food though, they had maps. We were asked questions such as [Page 26] "Where did we sail from?" "What Ship?" "What unit were we?" The name of our commanding officer etc, etc. Every question was answered by a "I don't know". The officer who questioned us finally laughed and said, "It's alright, Sergeant, you needn't worry, we know all the answers". We were then taken on to what I would term a back-area command, we were told to sleep on some straw and pull it over ourselves to keep warm. That was the first real sleep we'd had for four days and we were exhausted.

Next morning, we were put on a huge half-track and taken high up on a mountain road. It stopped and the officer in charge turned and said to us, "Look-your ships". We stood up and looked out over the Bay of Salerno and there scattered about were our invasion fleet and a few were on fire. It was demoralising to us and as we at last left the last scenes of battle, I felt completely lost. I know today that the whole affair of Salerno was a shambles and looking back it seemed to me that the Germans were not very concerned about it. They seemed to be amused by it all and looked on us like naughty children. Had they been more concerned they could, in my opinion, have thrown us back into the sea. They had the armour and the guns, we had no air cover, only the guns of the Navy and in spite

of all that bombardment by them, prior to going ashore, I never did see much damage. I'm not surprised it took more than three weeks to break out of that long bridgehead and the troops I left behind, to do such a thing, certainly had plenty of courage.

We at last came to a large clearing and I was surprised to see all these P.O.Ws there. Most, of course, were American, because we were attached to the 5th American Army. They were the first prisoners, besides ourselves, we had [Page 27] seen and it wasn't long before we were all packed onto open trucks and carted off northwards. The Germans had no food to give us and I remember how the convoy of prisoners was stopped when we came across some Italian women carrying sacks on their backs. In the sacks were round, hard bread loaves. The guards took these off the poor women, made some of us go into the grape yards and pick grapes (very sour) and that was our food until we were put in cattle trucks at some siding or other. We were packed up to about 40 men in these box cans, the doors were slammed shut and locked. There were only four small openings, one in each corner near the roof and then began a most horrendous journey to Germany. I sat crouched up with my knees under my chin with my back resting against the back of a Sergeant of the Scots Guards. We were, of course, perfect strangers, but as time went on, we were to become good friends. His name was Bob, and he came from Ryde in the I-O-W. The trouble with Bob was that he was such a big man, half as big again as me, that his weight bent me forward until my head was between my knees. It was nearly impossible to stand up and when you did do so, your precious space was pinched by other men stretching their legs. I also sat on a gap in the floorboards about six inches wide and I was frozen. We only had desert army uniform on, I also began to have diarrhoea.

We had very few "toilet" stops, and they were only by the side of the track in lonely places. Of course, the train was held up many times to allow more important traffic through and I remember only once stopping in a marshalling yard where we were given a meal of hot soup and black bread. We also stopped in a station in Rome and civilians waiting for their trains passed cigarettes through the small apertures to the P.O.Ws. Eventually, the train reached the Brenner Pass [Page 28] and everything changed. We heard these voices shouting and screaming and the doors of the box can being slammed open. Then the door of ours was thrown open and the Germans were different to the ones who had brought us from the South. They were S.S men and they were none too gentle. It was a good six-foot drop to the tracks and being weak and cramped, we did actually fall to the ground. We were pushed and shoved into some kind of order, counted and then banged back into the wagon. The doors slammed shut and the train was off again. It was never opened until we reached the town of Moosburg where we de-trained and marched to the prison camp. We had been two days and one night on that journey, snow was on the ground and it was very cold.

When we arrived at the camp it was sheer chaos. I was surprised to find most of the inmates were "civilians", but it turned out that they were our men who had been prisoners of the Italians and had been let out of the camps when Italy surrendered (or rather capitulated). Apparently, they had grabbed what civil clothing they could and tried to make their way South to our invasion forces. Unfortunately, most of them were recaptured by the Germans. I was amazed that they were still alive. I was able to get the few men I had been captured with around me and we were able to get "beds" around each other. I was rather ill, and they were very concerned about me, but the guards had different ideas. They saw the stripes on my arms and put me in charge of the hut, making the men clean it up and generally organising the place. I'm afraid I didn't have that job for long. – I more or less "passed out" and was taken to the hospital block, suffering from diphtheria. I never saw my blokes again. [Page 29] I was not on the ration strength of the hospital for that day but that did not stop an American Air Force Sergeant from feeding me with his rations. He was a good sort and looked after me well. All the patients were mixed up, no matter what they were suffering from. He

had some illness; I don't know what. His buddy in the next room had half of his right shoulder shot away. There were cases of dysentery and yellow jaundice, war wounds and all manner of things. We even had chaps who went insane. I remember once, I passed one chap in bed to go to the toilet and he was muttering and whining about wanting to go home to his mother and when I came back, he was dead. That happened many times.

When I got out of hospital into the camp again, I met up with Bob and after a while we were sent to an N.C.O.'s camp. We seemed to be constantly hungry and cold. Life was grim there and the Germans were just as miserable as we were. We slept in huge stables which we were told were ex-cavalry. On either side were long "shelves", three high and we had to sleep side by side all along these shelves. I estimate there were 400 men to a "room". By this time, I had an ill-assorted amount of clothing and we were full of lice. I "slept" between my two mates, they were both bigger men, Bob and the other chap, and kept me warm. Unfortunately, I had to squeeze out from between them several times each night to turn my clothes inside out so I could get some peace from their constant biting and scratching. Then they would work their way back to my skin and it would start all over again, but everyone was in the same boat. The biggest shock I had in that camp was early one morning, the lights were switched on and a broad American voice yelled "Hit the deck you guys, rise and [Page 30] Shine!". I thought for one lovely moment that the American had come to release us, until I saw he was a German. Apparently (or so I was told) he actually did live in America and had been on holiday in Germany when America declared war and had been drafted into the army, but it seems like a tall story.

After a while, we were moved on to another camp and it had a compound there full of R.A.F men and with their know-how, they were able to make a wireless receiver. So from time to time we got news of how the war was progressing, the Germans must have known about it because they often had spot searches, and these didn't add to our comfort. It was a very big camp, so the Jerry had his work cut out. The Germans there were also a petty lot, they would tell us that their men in British hands in Egypt were sleeping on the ground in tents and as such, reprisals would be taken against us. They would have us out early in the mornings and we would stand on this vast parade space all day, surrounded by rifles and machine-guns. They emptied all the straw out of the sacks that went under the name of mattresses, took away half the bed boards from the bunks, cut off the electric light, turned off the water and cut the amount of firewood for the stoves. It didn't seem to register with them that Germany in winter was a great deal colder than Egypt.

In that camp, it was very rough and tough justice. A man was accused of stealing from someone and a whole crowd frog-marched him outside. He was rolled in all the mud, then he was bodily thrown into an open cesspit and urinated on. It was not a pretty sight and I was disgusted because some German guards watched it all and were laughing at the scene. I didn't feel proud to be English that day. [Page 31]

One man had a small pet dog (it must have got into the camp somehow) and he used to have it on a lead and I often wondered why the Germans let him keep it, but there you are!- Anyway someone must have thought what a lovely dinner it would make and it duly went into the pot. I know that to be the truth, I saw the skinned fur of the poor little animal, a couple of days later, a note appeared on the note board and I must admit I had to smile, it read "If the so-called animal lovers who ate my little dog call at hut number 123, they can have his lead as a dessert". Needless to say, they went without their dessert whoever they were.

Another thing that embarrassed me was to see the R.A.F men grabbing in the mud near the cook-house for old bits of cabbage leaves and peelings, also trying to reach between the boundary wire

for dandelions and such like, especially when the German guards were near that always amused them. But I could understand the R.A.F doing it, after all, they did have a fairly cushy billet to go back to after a raid (if they were lucky to get back that is) and prison camp life was hell for them, but the Army lads, especially the infantry, always did know a hard time of it, but even so, prison life for us was no "bed of roses" (STALAG 6A)

I was at another camp before the one I described above. This was at Fallingbostal and I think every nationality was interned there. We had a German Major there who had us paraded in a square (STALAG 6B) in the large hut we occupied, and he ranted and raved at us at the top of his voice. It was the time of the Arnhem Landings and I think the Germans were getting a bit jittery. One day, we were ordered to go to a special compound and make up the beds of the huts as a hospital and of course they were for the wounded [Page 32] from Arnhem. Many died there and we had the job of making up a military cortege for every funeral. I carried several of these brave men on my shoulder to their grave in the pine forest outside of the camp. The funeral procession had to go through many of the other compounds and every man stood to attention as we went through, except when we got to the Russian enclosure, most of them were Mongolian and they just lay about on the ground. The German guards didn't like this and used their rifle butts to get them up on their feet.

When the P.O.s came to 6B from Arnhem, we were moved to 6A after a while and it was there that the events I've described on pages 30 and 31 took place. Some time later, I was asked if I would volunteer to accompany private soldiers to a working camp because up to the rank of corporal had to work but naturally not on war-work and me as a Sergeant would be a liaison between our men and the Germans. There was, of course, the benefit of an extra ration of food for such work and I couldn't turn that down.

We arrived at this "Arbeitskommando"⁵ as there, camps were called at 2:00 am in the morning and as we were being marched from the station, great blast furnaces lit up the night sky. We didn't like that at all, we all thought our planes would bomb us all to hell. The factory was the Herman Goring Steel Works, and it was situated not far from Brunswick, the camp was just across the road from it. Anyway, we all settled in and every night our bombers droned overhead and during the day the Americans Air Force were at it. We heard them bombing the towns and cities around us and we didn't get much sleep. Every day our men were out clearing up bomb damage or digging ditches. I remember I was [Page 33] with a party and we were making breeze blocks in this shed by a railway siding, we had to carry bags of cement from wagons to the shed across the rails and of course many bags were "accidentally" dropped. The completed bricks taken off the machine were also "accidentally" dropped. We pleaded "weakness" from lack of food, the German civilian went mad and of course we soon got the "sack" but small acts of "sabotage" like that happened in all the jobs which our men were called on to do.

At Easter, I was orderly Sergeant and responsible for getting the men on parade in their different working parties. But as it was Easter Monday, the chaps decided it was a holiday, or rather some of them did. The German "feldwebel"⁶ went into one of the huts to find the men relaxing and tidying themselves up. He very quietly said "So, nix arbeit?"⁷, "No, No!", they said, "It is a holiday"- Well! The next thing, all hell broke loose, he pulled out his pistol and fired rapidly at the floor and ceiling.

⁵ English: Work Unit

⁶ English: Sergeant

⁷ English: 'So, no work?'

I've never seen men move so fast. They were out of the windows and doors and on parade even quicker than I can write the tale, they never went on "holiday" again.

Another time I was orderly Sergeant and all men were out on jobs, except the sick and they had to be passed sick by the German M.O and this same "feldwebel" came to me and said that the camp was "dirty" and had to be cleaned up, (there were a few bits of paper on the parade area). I told him that I had no men, he said I had. I told him they were "kranken"⁸ by his own M.O. Tempers started to get a bit heated and he started waving his pistol about. I knew he wouldn't use it, but I didn't feel too brave, but I would not give in. I knew I was in the right, but twenty-four hours later I was back at Stalag 6A. I must mention [Page 34] that we had one or two frights at that working camp. As the war came closer, the bombers were hitting everything, and the Herman Goring Steel Works was no exception. The only trouble was that most of the workers were slave workers from the Eastern European Countries.

Back at the old camp, life went on, but I noticed that the guards now were much older. Some old enough to be my father but we still had a fair lot of younger men who kept us on our toes. But then life changed entirely, we were told to pack up and start walking. We walked eastwards along country roads, more or less living off the land which wasn't much. There must have been a few thousand of us and we were split into groups of about 500 men. We were "on the road" for about five weeks and in that time my pals and I tried about two or three times to "disappear". First, we marched all day to get to the head of the column, so that we could get in the lead. The Germans tended to concentrate on the stragglers at the back and when we came to a bend we were about to jump into a hedge when one of the guards came up on a cycle and told us to wait for the main column to catch up. The column in front were just disappearing over the brow of a hill, we decided to call it a day. The second attempt came some days after. The column had stopped for a rest and we were near a forest and when we rested, I could see that the trees were thin with a kind of pathway so when the guards were looking one way, we went the other as fast as could be. After about 75 yards, there was a depression in the ground where someone had been digging out chalk and it was about three feet deep and from that vantage point, we could watch the men on the road. I was a little surprised to find about twenty men in that depression; it seemed ages before the column started to march again and when they did, I felt [Page 35] quite elated, but not for long. A party of German guards was coming up the pathway towards us, their rifles and machine-pistols at the "high port" positions. Things did not look too good, when I suddenly had an idea (I'm not usually as quick thinking as that) "Down with your pants lads and bare your bottoms in a crouch position". The German Sergeant-Major stood on the rim and looked down on us and said, "You shouldn't drink too much water on the march, it gives you the runs".

The third and final try, was also at a rest stop near a wood. We were through the hedges and about 50 yards when we ran out of wood, we could not go across an open meadow. We lay down and tried to see the men on the road, but the trees were too thickly covering the view. I was also aware that we had more company than we had bargained for. More men had done a "runner", but it nearly all ended up in tragedy and it also made me make up my mind that I would wait until the war ended. We were lying there when we heard a lot of shouting, then the bullets started to fly, and one must have just missed my head because with a real "thump" it hit the man's knapsack who was lying next to me. I was up with my hands high in the air, as were every other escapee. We couldn't understand why the Germans were in such a temper, they rounded us all up and with a lot of pushing with their rifle butts, we got back on the road. All that day, while the column rested, we had to stand. We were

⁸ English: To suffer/ be sick

given nothing except a lot of pushing and shouting at. We found out though, why we had such a hard time, some fool had taken a rifle off one of the guards and hit him over the head with it and escaped. I was a good little boy after they allowed us to re-join the column. They had taken our identity discs and had we been able to reach a [Page 36] permanent static position, we would all have had to face the music. But it was not to be, a week later our own troops overtook us, and we were freed.

We were at a farm when our troops caught us up, but a few days before, it was my turn to try and get some potatoes and there was a huge mountain of them in one of the barns. I approached the barn, and I couldn't see any of the guards around and so I ripped in and was filling my cap when I received a terrific kick up my backside which sent me halfway up this huge stack of potatoes. I lost my temper instantly and whipped round to find the biggest German I had ever seen. I was just about to swing my fists when he pulled out his revolver and stuck it in my stomach. I was so scared. I cooled my temper very quickly. Strange thing was he just shoved me out of the barn and walked off. I never saw him again, on reflection, I reckon he had known that our fighting troops were near. Another incident at that farm, which I have never forgotten, concerns one of the P.O.Ws lying on the ground under the blanket in full view of everyone, no doubt he was preparing to settle down for the night, and there was one lone chicken pecking around him. He lay very still. When the chicken got near his head, an arm whipped out from under the blanket and the bird disappeared in a flash. I'd never seen anything so quick in my life.

We were told that we would have to find our own transport and make our own way back to Luneburg Heath. We had orders to take anything we could find, but not any transport which contained any German wounded. My friend and I set off to find a main road and walking along the country track, we came across thousands of rifles and machine-guns thrown away by the Germans, also piles of ammunition, and when [Page 37] we arrived in the village, it was packed with German troops. We were a little apprehensive (we didn't arm ourselves which I now consider to be a mistake) but then again none of the Germans were armed either. As we walked through the village, they all parted to let us pass. I never saw any British troops at all, but one danger we did meet and that was a drunken Russian. He wasn't a soldier, but he carried a sub-machine pistol, a load of cigarettes and a large bottle of drink. He was laughing and calling us his comrades, but we soon got rid of him. When we finally reached the main road, we were amazed at the amount of people streaming along it because we were right out in the country and there were no big towns in sight. There was also a fair amount of traffic and they were all fleeing towards the West. Everyone wanted to get away as far as they could from the "Russkies" as they called them. It was on that road too where my mate and I got our first army job. A huge American tank came along and the chap up in the turret shouted "Thank God! A couple of Limeys" and asked us to put up notices telling all civilians to get off the main road and take to the side roads. We started doing that when we thought "blow that we want to get home". We then got down to looking for a lorry or something to take our mates on to Luneburg. We stopped a mobile field workshop, it only had 3500kms on the clock, told the German troops to start walking and drove to the farm, picked up all our mates and started on our journey and I was glad when that was over. The chap who was driving hated the Germans and the people on the road pulling their pitiful belongings behind them had to jump out of the way. In fact, he hit one cart but didn't bother to stop, he was a maniac.

When we reached Luneburg Heath, it was an amazing night, there was every type of vehicle you could think of abandoned, right, left and centre. Military police told us [Page 38] to dump our van and proceed on foot. We were eventually housed in huge blocks of flats, crammed in like sardines. No furniture of course, there must have been thousands of P.O.Ws and I must be some kind of an

idiot (or looked like one) because at the place where we had to report to the Army Interrogation, I was told that I would be responsible for finding out the names of 24 men scattered around all these flats. I was given the list of names and flat numbers and told to get to it. It was up to me to let these men know where to find me when the time came to move home-wards. That took me three days to track down the 24 names, simply because they were all strangers to me.

Eventually, we started to move, but it was a kind of pipeline, moving from transit camp to camp, either each day or every other day. Those men stuck to me like glue and they were always asking me stupid bloody questions I couldn't answer. We did finally get to the last camp and a few days later we were loaded into lorries to be taken to the airfield. Everyone was singing their heads off as we drove up the airfield and we couldn't understand why the lorries were turning and coming back again (no singing in those trucks) but we understood when our lorry got near to the group of Transport Officers. One was bellowing like a demented bull, "Take these bloody men back again".

Naturally, we did get home, 25 men loaded onto a Handley Page Lancaster⁹ bomber. I was fortunate to sit in tail-gunner's position just as we crossed the South Coast and we actually flew over the John Dickinson Factory where I had worked before the war. We landed at Wing, not far from Aylesbury and I was most embarrassed to fall out of the plane into the arms of a very pretty nurse. I was filthy dirty, filthy uniform (of sorts) and lousy. Tea and food was served to [Page 39] us in a hanger by all the girls of the WAAFs and they were very kind and cheerful, but I was glad to escape to the cleaning station and start getting the filth off myself. It was a lengthy and complicated business with M.Os, nurses and orderlies bustling about. Then we were kitted out and some days later we were allowed home.

It was a very emotional homecoming. My father running down the road in his carpet slippers to meet me, but things settled down and as I was on indefinite leave, I had plenty of time to go and visit all my friends. However, in July 1945, we had news that my Father's mother (my lovely Grandmother) had died in Sunderland. My father, Stepmother and I went up for the funeral. My Sister from Altrincham was there too so after it was all over, I went back to Altrincham with her and while there, I went out one night, August bank holiday Monday in fact, and I met the girl who was to become my wife. After about a couple of weeks, I had to come back home to Hemel Hempstead because I had to report to Penn Street near High Wycombe for duty. It was a kind of "get fit" course after my period as a P.O.W.

I was astonished after two or three weeks to find myself posted to the C.T.C camp at Inveraray in Scotland. I was the only man at Penn Street to be sent so far away and when I got there, I found that there were a mere handful of troops in the camp to act as caretakers. It was built on the Duke of Argyle's estate on the shores of Loch Fyne and during our long war it had trained the brave men and women of the S.O.E- Commando S.A.S Para-troops and every other elite force one could name. It was a lonely spot and I always felt the spirits of all those brave people. We had one laugh there though, an old, untidy man came in our quarter one morning and he was told to "get off" Army property. He went without a word, and it [Page 40] wasn't till later that we found out that it was the old Duke himself.

In January 1946, I had to report to the barracks at Dartford for my discharge from the army and so once more I became a civilian, in fact, we had never been "real" soldiers. I had always maintained that we had only been civilians in uniforms. In 1939, I had registered as a militia man for six months and that turned out to six and a half years.

⁹ Handwriting Unclear

I started back to work in John Dickinson's at my old job, but I was not happy because I had become engaged to my girl the previous November when she came down South for a holiday to meet my family. I could only see her on rare occasions, I was desperately looking round for somewhere to live when we got married, getting a house was out of the question. The local council didn't want to know in spite of the fact the "Pre-fabs" were meant for ex-servicemen (or so I had been led to believe by the army). I found one room at last and gave my wife and my Sister a fortnight to arrange the wedding and it was a really lovely wedding on the 10th June 1946. I really don't know how the two women managed it. We did not have a honeymoon and coming back after the wedding we were all alone in this vast empty Pullman car on the train from Manchester. I said to my new bride "Will you be able to manage on that till payday, darling?" and just 19/- in her hand, all the money I had left.

We moved from room to room in different people's houses, always getting something a little better but always at the mercy of grasping landlords (gone had been the wonderful spirit of the war years). Till at last we saw a house which we were able to afford to buy. The price was £395, and it was in a terrible condition, right on the main railway line and gas-lit with no bathroom, but [Page 41] we worked hard on it. We did have some professional help but everyone who came to visit loved it and we were happy there for nearly 28 years. It was a terrace cottage and as the years wore on, the occupants of the others died off and in the end they all fell into disrepair and the local council bought them and we who were left were moved.

Unfortunately, my wife and I never did have any children and so she took on a full-time job, so we were able to have a fairly good social life. Also, I was a keen cyclist, she could not ride a bike, so I bought a tandem, but she was not so keen on the peddling. However, early on in 1950, there were small petrol engines one could fit to bikes and as time went on, we started to go in for proper motorbikes. Finally, we bought a motor-cycle combination, spending many nice holidays with it. In 1958, we travelled through France and Spain, but in 1959 we decided to take it to Salerno, and we set off. It was a long journey by motorcycle but in the end it was worth it.

The airfield which we were supposed to take on the invasion of Salerno was now one vast cemetery. 3,500 of our men are buried there and it was a very moving experience. My wife and I were the only people there and as we walked along the lines of graves in the lovely Italian sunshine, the faces of the men, as I read the stone inscriptions, came clearly before my eyes. I have never forgotten that visit, even the tobacco factory where we were held down by sniper fire was still there.

We went on another trip by motorcycle in 1960 to Austria and Germany, then after that we started going more comfortably by coach and air. We have covered every country in Europe with the exception of Portugal. We spent our 25th Wedding anniversary on a cruise in the Med, covering Greece and all the Greek Islands, including Lebanon [Page 42] and Israel. We have been to North Africa a number of times and Egypt, once to Russia, twice to America, once to Canada, twice to Bulgaria, twice to Yugoslavia. Also, to Spain several times, Majorca, Ibiza and Tenerife, also to the only part of Portugal, Madeira. We have covered the British Isles including the Isle of Wight and the Channel Isles, also Southern Ireland and this year in September we are spending a holiday in East Germany where we will have the opportunity to visit Prague for a day.

We now live in a self-contained flat on a small estate, especially built for the elderly and I must say it is the best home we have ever had. We are very content with our lives. We are both lucky to have fairly good health, we still have a good social life, and we don't want for much.

I will now finish and as I finish, I must say that it is nice to be able to write that I finish on my 73^d birthday and I want to live to my 100th.

Yours very sincerely

Edward. A. Adcook

Transcribed by Lauren Shirley

(One final thing to say- live to 100 he did)