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## COMING OF AGE 1939-1946

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### FOREWORD

Now that the Second World War is some 60 years past this would seem to be a good time to collate all the various chapters that I've written over the last few years and present them as an entity. No war can really be described as a good war especially by the families of those who didn't return or by those who returned maimed but in the sense that I went through it

from the start until the finish and emerged unscratched I suppose that mine could be called a good war.

Though I spent just under three years in the Middle East in Iraq and Egypt I was never engaged in any action and what follows in these pages describes the more mundane side of military life. I didn't start writing these chapters until about 50 years after the war and have relied heavily on memory, with some photographs but no diaries; the content is substantially accurate. Dates are included in the Contents page; the starting and ending dates are true and the intervening dates are not more than a month out.

John Cox  
Ottawa, Canada  
March 2004

## RUMOURS OF WAR

It was 1938 and the Spanish civil war was still in progress; Germany was flexing her muscles having effected an Anschluss with Austria and having out-manoeuvred Britain and France over the matter of Czechoslovakia. It was obvious that a war was coming but Britain had allowed her forces and armaments to run down and was in no position to engage in one. At that time I was 20 years old and was working as a draughtsman in an engineering firm; I believe conscription had started though I'm not certain exactly when and there was always a possibility that my job would be classified as a *reserved occupation*. To this day I don't know whether or not I would have been called up because together with my school friend I joined the Territorial Army.

With war looming closer and closer new units were being formed everywhere and No. 2 Company of the 5<sup>th</sup> AA Divisional Signals was born at *The Wayfarers Club* on Worrall Road near the top of Blackboy Hill in Bristol. My friend and I had been very interested in radio or wireless as it was called in those days and it seemed to us that a signal unit would fit in well with our hobby, we might even be of some use to the army. Many others had the same idea especially employees of the Post Office which was at that time the sole legal agency in Britain for all communications, so the recruiting hall was full of potential soldiers on the night we went to sound things out. Among the dozens there we found many of our old school friends and some of the members of our church. We didn't join up that night but thought things over for a day or two saying nothing to our parents who might have raised objections then made a second trip to enlist.

Some lads we knew were already commissioned and were to interview us before we signed on the dotted line. Our commitment to the force obliged us to attend for drill on two nights a week and to spend two weeks at camp each year; our employers were compelled by law to give us the two weeks off from work with no penalties. To start with it was a case of the myopes leading the blind, true there were a few ex-WWI veterans and others who had been members of their school Cadet Corps but we could hardly be called a highly disciplined group. We didn't enquire too deeply into the nature of our duties or what exactly we were getting ourselves into but were content to let life unfold in its own way.

After answering a few perfunctory questions the swearing-in followed with our right hands on a bible; some jokers later told us that we were not really soldiers because we had been sworn-in on a dictionary but that was a tale I heard many many times. Then came the issue of equipment, this was rather sparse, all of it being of WWI vintage or earlier, khaki tunics with brass buttons, drainpipe trousers, second-hand boots and what seemed quite remarkable brown leather bandoliers for the 50 rounds of .303 ammunition with which we were never issued. Were we then to be cavalry? A tin hat, forage cap, webbing belt with bayonet frog, bayonet and scabbard completed our equipment though later on we were given collar badges and brass letters to affix to our epaulets proclaiming us to be Royal Signals.

My parents when told of my enlistment had different reactions; father said little, probably thinking of his experiences in WWI but mother who would not let me join the Boy Scouts or the school Cadet Corps because they were too militaristic said, You're a fool! At the time I thought that was a bit hard but six months into the war and I had to admit she had a point.

One or two with recent military experience gave us rifle drill with the two SMLE (short model Lee-Enfield) rifles allocated to our unit and we did a bit of marching and saluting. Our CO, Captain Sommerville, told us that our saluting resembled that of a disgruntled taxi driver giving thanks for a small tip but we did improve. After a few weeks of desultory drilling we were told to report to The General Post Office in Small Street to get acquainted with teleprinters. Good, we thought, now we'll get our hands on some electro-mechanical equipment and learn the inner workings of the *Creed* machines only to be disappointed to find that the primary purpose of our being there was to learn to type. The *Creed* teleprinters were only capable of transmitting 66 words a minute but this was academic because we didn't advance much beyond the hunt-and-

peck stage.

About this time the regulations were changed somewhat; our two weeks at camp were extended to four weeks and I was due to go to Southsea Castle on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939. I think it was about August 28<sup>th</sup> that the Territorial Army was embodied (that was their term for mobilisation). At 4-30 am father was awakened from his slumber with a knock at the door and Corporal Reg Pinnel stood outside with the engine of his motor-bike combination still running to tell me to get up to HQ right away; then off he sped to awaken others. I dressed hurriedly, had a cup of tea and a bite and then walked up to Worrall Road, walked because it was too early for the bus service to start its daily routine.

When I got there it was a bit of a shambles really with dozens of men milling around trying to sort themselves out and generally getting themselves organised. At about 9am I walked along to the end of Worrall Road to the bank of phone boxes then existing near the top of Blackboy Hill and phoned my office to tell them that I would not be in that day nor in the foreseeable future; that was a little prophetic because I didnt return there to work for six-and-a-half years

In the first few days we learned a little of the set-up; HQ was to be the gun operations room, the GOR, from which the AA guns surrounding Bristol would be directed. Some of us would be GOR personnel, others would form the Line Section maintaining communications with the gun sites, while a few would be responsible for the Quartermaster's stores and general clerical work. How many of us there were I can only guess, probably upwards of two hundred because we also had to supply similar groups to our detachments at Plymouth and Portland.

To get some experience of aircraft plotting six of us including me were sent to the RAF at Filton where we were housed in splendid isolation in an otherwise empty vast hanger; daily we reported to the Operations Room where we became acquainted with the strange jargon of the RAF, *Angels*, *Bandits*, *Red Leader*, *Tally-Ho* and the like as mock raids and interceptions were practised. If we had been on duty for the night shift we found sleep very hard to come by the next morning because fighter planes were constantly taking off and landing, even when they were stationary their engines were ticking over. For some reason or other there was an Avro Anson attached to the station that took off and landed periodically; it once caught fire as it landed but the fire was quickly extinguished.

Guard duties were carried out when I was there by members of The Gloucester Regiment, the Glosters, regulars and we used to mingle with them in the canteen in our off-duty periods, being introduced to army songs that we joined in with gusto as a pianist accompanied us. As the beer flowed the pianist was treated to the odd pint and occasionally the lid of the piano was raised so that it could join in the jollity and a pint poured over its strings to the shout of and one for the piano. Life was exciting, we were free from parental control and we were on the verge of something big though in the background there was this little niggle of apprehension about the future.

Early on my inadequacy as a teleprinter operator was discovered by an RAF corporal whom I had last seen as a 13 year old when he lived a couple of doors away from me, but only he and I knew. On September 3<sup>rd</sup> the rumours of war changed to reality; I was in the canteen when the news came over the wireless that war had been declared on Germany and in our ignorance we waited for the bombs to drop but of course nothing really happened for a few months apart from the odd reconnaissance sortie. Winter was coming on and we still didnt have greatcoats though at great expense we had added swagger canes to our wardrobes to assist in our deportment and keep our hands out of our pockets. Something had to be done so we were issued with dark blue greatcoats that had originally been destined for the Royal Navy or Air Raid Wardens. Gloves had not been issued either so we used our own and a right motley crew we looked when we appeared in public places, khaki uniforms, blue greatcoats, black boots and brown leather gloves.

Perhaps this would be a good time to mention that as Territorials we were expected to supply some personal items of kit. If we provided boot brushes, hair brushes, comb, button stick, housewife (hussive), underclothes and some other odds-and-sods to take with us to the annual camp we would be rewarded with the magnificent sum of ten shillings. Until 1942 I was never issued with a complete kit but over that period I was given some replacements of personal items; we also changed our WWI uniforms for battle dress. We didnt lose our leather bandoliers however and we were supplied with the Royal Navys black leather gaiters. We were still not sartorially attractive.



**Len Tite**  
(minus his milk float)

But to get back to August 1938; the round-up of civilians who were now to be embodied was not without its humour, in the early hours of the morning Reg Pinnel happened to meet one of his flock in the Kingsdown area and told him of the situation. Len was on his rounds delivering milk; his milk float was of a new type, battery driven at a walking pace it allowed the roundsmen to walk by its side starting and stopping as necessary and obviating any muscular effort on his part. Len took his orders literally, left his milk float where it was in the road, went home, changed into his uniform and reported to HQ. Then he phoned his employer and told him where he could find the milk float leaving it up to the employer to mollify all the irate customers.

In December 1939 I returned from Filton to Worrall Road and for three months became a member of a GOR shift. We had no plotting table but instead a map of south-east England hung on one wall, we of course were south-west but I suppose that south-east was better than nothing. Coloured pins were used to mark the position of planes. Information on aircraft activity was given to us over a permanently manned phone line connected to No.11 Fighter Group at Uxbridge and the lucky man who was given the job of listening sat in the middle of the room on an office type swivel chair wearing a telephonists head-and-breast-set doing nothing but waiting. As soon as the ringing assailed his ears he answered, Bristol, and then yelled to the rest of the group, Operations, at which they were supposed to get ready to relay any incoming information to the gun sites by phone. While I was there I dont recall any plots coming from Uxbridge that concerned our area. The shout of, Operations was also supposed to alert the Gun Control Officer, GCO, of the Royal Artillery who then stood by his wall map, coloured pins at the ready, waiting to give some relevant information to the gun sites; however this was the time of the phony war and the boredom was considerable.



**MY GOR SHIFT, WORRAL ROAD, 1940.**

I think it was in the early days just after we were embodied that we were given our medicals, it was a bit of a joke really, a cursory once-over with the stethoscope and an eyesight test on a standard eye chart at a range of five or six feet; for a hearing test the MO stuck a pocket watch in my left ear, Can you hear that? Yes, I replied, then in my right ear, and that? Yes. OK. And I had passed. And apart from the time of my final discharge from the army when they were trying to make sure that I couldnt make any post-war claims for incapacity and the times when I was discharged from hospital that was the only medical examination I ever had.

One possible advantage of being stationed in Bristol was that I could go home when I was not on duty but home was a fourpenny bus ride from Worrall Road and this double journey together with ten *Woodbine* cigarettes cost me a days allowance (I was getting two shillings a day but was allotting one shilling a day to my mother who incidentally never spent it but saved it up for my return). I usually went home after a night shift and so was rather tired and not very good company; after a month or so of this routine I decided that I would be better off away from Bristol and applied for a transfer to Plymouth.

The war was not very old before the Post Office started to get concerned over the loss of some of their key personnel to the forces; it was one thing to have their employees playing at soldiers in their own time but quite another matter to lose some of their qualified staff on a semi-permanent basis. So just before I went to Plymouth an arrangement was made that allowed the Post Office to claim back all their employees who did not have an army trade. The army could see all their Territorial signal units being drastically reduced and took swift action. In a blanket approach army trade ratings were given to as many members of my company as possible, not only Post Office employees; I was called before Captain Sommerville.

You are?

I identified myself

I believe you've been spending your drill nights at the Post Office, is that correct?

Sah! (I was now learning the lingo).

On teleprinters?

Sah!

There was a short pause as he looked over the papers in front of him and then,

You are now a teleprinter operator class III. Dismiss.

A smart salute, about turn, quick march and I was out of the Company Office with an extra shilling a day but there was now no way my employers could claim me back even if they wanted to.

About this time a new face appeared on the scene, a real live regular soldier, Sergeant Millen, an infantry regular I believe but from what regiment I don't know and he was going to change us into an efficient military unit. He was always perfectly turned out, his uniform spotless, creased where it should be but otherwise creaseless. He was a disciplinarian and he certainly made a difference to us but one thing always intrigued me -- his facial expression. I never saw him smile or laugh, in fact I could never detect the slightest change in his expression that would denote any emotion. Later in the war I believe he earned a commission; perhaps he enjoyed life and had some fun but one could never tell.

I'm not certain how many vehicles made up our transport section, I know we had Morris and Austin utility vans, a five ton lorry and some 30cwt Bedford lorries whose gearboxes had a peculiar and distinctive whine. The Bedfords were usually the workhorses of the Line Section while the utilities were the general runabouts used for work and pleasure. We had one officer, a major, who was over-fond of his liquor, he used to frequent *The Mauritania* in Park Street; late at night he would phone and in a slurred voice demand that a utility van and driver be sent to pick him up. This happened on many occasions and one night when he arrived back at HQ he staggered into the guard room and with a drawn hand gun proceeded to hold up the guard. He was disarmed and a report made out. The sequel? I don't know, we didn't see him again.

Originally we had all signed on for home service but after the war started we were asked to agree to serve overseas, this we all did, signing to this effect. Looking back I don't suppose it would have made any difference had we declined, after all those who were conscripted were not given the choice but it was a nice gesture on our parts. Having now become reasonably proficient in those military essentials, marching, saluting and rifle drill the next step was to go on a range and fire a few rounds. The nearest rifle range was at Bristol University and a group of about 12 of us was taken there on a most unmilitary vehicle, a soft drinks lorry. This had no tailboard or sideboards to speak of and we all stood up on the flat bed, the front row holding on to the back of the cab and the rest holding on to each other. We made the double journey without losing anyone. The rifle range was indoors and we fired .22 rimfire from a standard .303 rifle fitted with a Morris tube. I believe we only fired 10 rounds each, with moderate success, but that was the only time I fired a rifle until 1942.

## PLYMOUTH

The journey down to Plymouth was the longest rail trip that I had ever taken alone and I was eager and excited about it. I was travelling with all my kit of course and I was learning how to stow it without interfering with other passengers. As we pulled away to the south-west from Temple Meads station the familiar scenes around Bristol gave way to the flatter country of north Somerset and later on to the red soil of Devon. At Plymouth North Road station I detrained but I have no memory now of how I reached South Raglan Barracks in Devonport. The barracks were typically army, grey, spartan, uninviting and ugly; my spirits sank. I was allocated quarters in a small room together with six or eight others; beds consisted of three bed-boards on two low wooden trestles augmented with three biscuits for comfort and the whole ensemble was completed with four

blankets.

I was directed to join a GOR team and shown the ropes as it were. The GOR was located on Mount Wise in the end room of Hamoaze House. A large map of the south-west of England had been painted on an expanse of dark blue linoleum, this formed the plotting table in the centre of the room; to one side a dais accommodated the GCO and also the naval anti-aircraft liaison officer (NAALO) for this was a combined operations room. We signalmen sat around the plotting table waiting for something to happen. Assorted naval petty-officers, Royal Artillery gunners and bombardiers made up an eight-hour shift.

As in Bristol one signalman sat with a head-and-breast-set permanently connected to No.11 Fighter Group at Uxbridge and the routine was much the same. Those doing the plotting made up wooden blocks with plastic chips of letters and numbers to indicate the identity, size and height of a particular plot adjacent to a coloured arrow, green for friendly, red for hostile, showing the location and direction of the aircraft. This was quite an improvement on Bristols coloured pins. There was another improvement too, the Post Office type switchboard was replaced by two wooden desk mounted units, each fitted with 10 switches and indicator lights. Every switch and light combination was connected to a gun site or a searchlight station and any combination of sites could be called individually or simultaneously. Each site acknowledged receipt of a message by pressing a button, this caused the appropriate light to glow in the GOR. In this way messages could be broadcast to all sites at once; those sites whose lights did not glow were contacted again individually and the message repeated. Frequently in the heat of the moment gunners would forget to acknowledge causing some irritation and on one occasion an exasperated GCO ordered me to reprimand the miscreant. Having got the official blessing I proceeded to do just that, translating his order into the vernacular most effectively; I was rewarded with most obsequious apologies elevating my rank to that of Sir. Later I discovered that my correspondent was a major, outranking our GCO, fortunately he didnt know who I was.

These tasks were performed in the RAF by WAAFs and we were told from the beginning that we would be replaced eventually by the ATS but by the time I left Plymouth in 1942 they still hadnt taken over. It was quite a boring job at times and most of us hoped for something more challenging.

The Line Sections work was a little better, they went out daily, running more lines and repairing those damaged in air raids; in our detachment there was no establishment for a draughtsman but the Line Section wanted a record of the routes of all their lines and so I drifted into the job. Armed with a one-inch-to-the-mile Ordnance Survey map I produced the necessary drawings; it was also alleged that I marked the locations of all the coffee shops in the area but theres no truth to it. Phone lines across the country followed whatever path was most suitable, using twisted Don8 cable that was attached to any convenient feature, trees telegraph poles or buildings. In the case of the line to Fort Tregantle I spent a day with others on a fatigue party digging a trench across the road in which the cable was to be buried. A call went out to the local populace asking for empty cotton reels; these were to be used not specifically as insulators but rather as attachment points offering less fretting to the cable than a nail alone would do.

The GCOs varied in rank but I dont remember seeing anyone above the rank of captain, on the other hand two of the NAALOs were lieutenant-commanders, a couple were lieutenants in the wavy navy and one was a Canadian, a lieutenant in their wavy navy. He was a breath of spring, light hearted and humorous and compared to our lot relatively undisciplined. Commander Bond was, I think, a serving officer but Commander Staples had been recalled from retirement; he was a gentle, polite father figure, at least thats how he appeared to me. One lieutenant was Viscount Traprairie who was responsible for producing the plotting table map. I heard of him after the war as being a member of the crew of a square-rigged sailing ship. Another lieutenant was Vivian Ellis, composer of *Bless the Bride*.

Plymouth was ringed around with anti-aircraft guns, Rame, Down Thomas, Wembury, Crownhill and Tregantle come to mind as being equipped with 3.7s, while other sites such as Bovisand and Staddon Heights were more lightly armed. The GOR had lines to all of them as well as lines to some searchlight stations. In addition to the army sites the navy augmented the fire power with the guns on Breakwater Fort and the guns of any ship that may have been in dock at the time. The cruiser *Newcastle* seemed to be in the area for an unusually long time and she had a *Walrus* flying boat, a most ungainly craft with a pusher propeller. In the early days we took advantage of the lack of action by organising mock air raids for the benefit of the Plymouth air defences. Orders would go out to all the guns, This is a mock air raid, repeat, this is a mock air raid, and the *Walrus* would be sent aloft to add a degree of realism to the exercise and coordinates would be broadcast for the preparation of a box barrage. On one occasion while the exercise was in progress the GOR received a hostile plot from Uxbridge and hastily a new order was given out to all the gun sites, Cancel mock air raid, real raid in progress, repeat, cancel mock air raid, real raid in progress, and we waited for further information to come from Uxbridge. The guns however were restive and took action on

their own, their target was the unmistakeable lumbering *Walrus*. I wasn't on duty at the time, I was in the barracks; I heard the sirens and the shell bursts and looking out of the window saw the *Walrus* high-tailing it up country. It made Roborough aerodrome safely though the real raid never materialised. Later on real raids did materialise but by that time we had moved our billets to Bowden Battery, near Crownhill though for a few months we were ferried to and from Hamoaze House by lorry.

As part of the 5<sup>th</sup> AA division our shoulder flashes, issued about that time, were about two inches square with a sky blue background; pointing downwards was a black four-engined bomber in silhouette with red flames coming from the four engines and one from the tail. Very pretty and prophetic.

## BOWDEN BATTERY

In the mid-1800s with Trafalgar and Waterloo not too far in the past and with French intentions uncertain it was decided to fortify vulnerable portions of Britain's south coast. The minister responsible for this was Lord Palmerston, also known affectionately or otherwise as Lord Pumicestone. I think it was when he was Prime Minister that he arranged for the building of strong points around Portsmouth and Plymouth. Those forts around Portsmouth are not known to me except for Southsea Castle but I'm more familiar with the ones around Plymouth. Forts were erected to the west, north and east of the city centre and the Citadel dominated the entrance to Plymouth Sound. To the west there was Fort Tregantle, to the north Crownhill, then on the east came Bowden Battery and Fort Austin, while in the Sound there was Drakes Island and Breakwater Fort.

Bowden Battery was built on the side of a slope that fell away to Crownhill on the north; on the south side it was walled and moated but it was considered to be protected elsewhere by the commanding view it had over the valley. The other three sides were partially walled with low banks of earth. Within these confines the floor was of earth with grass sprouting in the patches not heavily travelled. The cookhouse backed on to the southern wall; it was a shed type with a corrugated iron roof and outside there were two boilers for water. All the habitable buildings were Nissen huts. Entry from the road, Fort Austin Avenue, was by way of a drawbridge, over the moat which was dry in those days, then through the eight-foot high corrugated iron gates. The drawbridge was never raised, I sometimes wondered if it ever had been, it seemed fixed.

Just inside the gates on the western side came the Company Office while a little further west was the COs hut. Three buildings that were not Nissen huts were the shed type ablutions and, at the extreme eastern end, the latrines, one for the other ranks and one for the ATS. Overhead traversing the length of the fort were the high tension cables of the electricity grid system and on damp days touching the metal parts of vehicles parked beneath them would produce a mild shock.



Cyril Smythe  
Instrument Mechanic

On the northern side two tunnels, maybe 75 feet long, had been cut, one at each end, going downwards following the slope of the hill and ending in small rooms each commanding a view over the valley. In the small room at the end of the western tunnel the Instrument Mechanics, Len Elliott, Cyril Smythe and Johnny Barker had their workshop where they repaired phones and radios and where they detected faults on the phone lines.

Nissen huts for our accommodation were dotted around. We were fairly comfortable in our upper and lower bunk beds though the huts could have been better heated; the *tortoise* stoves were not really up to it when the daily ration of coal was mainly small coal or slack. To persuade a stove full of slack to come to life someone opened the top of the stove and added a half cup of petrol, nothing happened for a moment or two as the petrol seeped down to the glowing embers at the bottom and then there was an almighty bang. All the stove apertures flew open and a bewildered soldier came in to inspect the damage as he had seen a 10-foot flame emerge from our chimney, however nobody was hurt.

I've heard it said that we had AA guns at Bowden Battery but that is not true, certainly not up to the time that I left in 1942; true there were some concrete slabs but these were bases for guns or mortars intended to repel a land based attack of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, well before aircraft had been invented. The only troops there in my time were of the Royal Corps of Signals, the odd Royal Artillery gunner or bombardier and some Royal Ulster Rifles doing guard duties. Initially the GOR shifts were taken to Hamoaze House by lorry but after a while the GOR was moved to Fort Austin though we always knew this fort as Egg Buckland Keep.

For this new location we were to have a new plotting table and it fell my lot to make it. This time we used green lino;

the main coastal features were in white paint as were the large grid squares but for the grid sub-divisions I used a ruling pen and white ink, this made fine straight lines more easily but they had to be renewed occasionally due to the rubbing of the plotting blocks. In this new location we required no transport but marched to and fro, a relatively short distance.

Shortages of many items were now beginning to make themselves felt in Britain, army boots and leather for their repairs for one thing and somebody realised that lying idle throughout the country were the shoes belonging to the men who had been called up. It must have caused a severe shock to all the Colonel Blimps but it was decreed that the other ranks would now be permitted to wear shoes when off duty. There was one proviso however, they had to be black, just in case the other ranks got confused with their betters. Another shortage concerned watches or rather watch glasses. Unbreakable types were not in general use at that time and all types were difficult to obtain. I got over this by using a draughtsmans ink spring-bows to which a snapped portion of a razor blade had been attached. Circles were scribed out on the transparent material of *goggles anti-gas* and then broken out. Since the QM and a lieutenant both had watches needing glasses I had no difficulty in getting a few *goggles anti-gas* diverted from the QM store. Nearly all of us smoked in those days and our favourite brands were not always available; matches were also in short supply so we doubled our stock by splitting them lengthwise with a razor blade. Swan Vestas were the easiest to split.

A sentry was stationed at the drawbridge; during daylight hours he was armed with a stick but at night he had a rifle and fixed bayonet, the rifle though had no ammunition. The total Signals complement, GOR, Line Section, assorted clerks, QM stores personnel and others amounted to about 80 I guess and for this number we had six rifles, two SMLEs, a couple of Canadian Ross rifles and two American .300s made in Springfield. All ammunition was very limited. However, later, probably sometime in 1941, someone at a higher level decided that we should not be defenceless and a blueprint arrived one day showing how to make raid party truncheons. There were two types, the first consisted of an 18-inch length of stirrup pump hose loaded at one end with concrete and fitted with a thong at the other. The second type was more lethal if one could get near enough to the enemy; it used an 18-inch length of electrical conduit to the end of which was welded a discarded gear, any old gear would do as long as it was sharp, heavy and pointy; in fact we were now armed with maces reminiscent of the middle ages and chronologically more in keeping with our Victorian surroundings. The blueprint had arrived at the same time as a length of stirrup pump hose and no time was lost in manufacturing type number one only to discover later that it was intended for incendiary purposes and not raid party truncheons. Too late, we couldnt put it back together again but we did have some fun out of the exercise by trying out the effect of the first type of truncheon on our tin hats; after a few blows the concrete cracked and fell out while the tin hats emerged unscathed. We didnt risk trying out the second type. A friend of mine in the RAF told me that on one station the ground crew were similarly equipped though in their case the bayonets were welded on to 5-foot lengths of electrical conduit; he said that when they came on parade it looked like the Monmouth Rebellion all over again.

I dont recall much about our meals, with one exception only. Every Thursday over a long period a new cook came to us. She didnt appear to be ATS and I would do her no injustice if I guessed her age as being between 30 and 40, older than the rest of the cookhouse staff. I found out very little about her except that she was Cornish but she made the most delicious cornish pasties, the real thing and they were so large that one was quite sufficient for any growing lad. We only ever saw her on Thursdays and we all looked forward to those days. The regular cookhouse staff came under Jackie, Corporal Jackson and she and her girls were billeted in a private house nearly opposite Bowden Battery in a road running parallel with Fort Austin Avenue. There were about eight of them I think, of whom Mary, Ginger and Minnie from South Wales, Kitty from Cornwall and Sylvia from Dewsbury are the ones who stay in my mind. Jackie was very solicitous for her charges and she meticulously recorded the dates and times of their social engagements together with the names of their escorts.

In the early days we were instructed in the various dos and donts of army life and introduced to the Army Act and Kings Regulations. We were told that barrack-room lawyers were not permitted to quote from these. Complaints could be made only through official channels and it was forbidden to contact our Members of Parliament with our gripes though of course they couldnt prevent our parents from doing it for us. Forbidden also was the singing of Irish nationalist songs or whistling *The Dead March*; likewise engaging in discussions likely to cause alarm and despondency was also ruled out. All of this together with a bit of regimental training was gradually converting us into obedient little souls.

Plymouth and Devonport were primarily navy-oriented, true there was the RAF station at Mountbatten with its *Sunderland* flying boats and there were assorted army units scattered around but essentially the navy was supreme. Being a peace-time garrison area the civilian population was used to the presence of the forces and was not particularly hospitable, a vast contrast to the friendly treatment meted out by the Scots when for a month or so I was billeted in a distillery in Wishaw.



Fore Street Devonport was at one time full of public houses and other establishments catering to the needs of sailors and in an effort to provide alternative entertainment, one, Agnes Weston, opened the premises in Fore Street known as Aggie Westons. Here one could sit and read or talk, take a bath at sixpence a time, enjoy a film or otherwise relax and unwind. It was here that having paid my dues by singing a hymn and listening to a short sermon I was given a cup of tea and a bun while I watched the film *The Citadel* based on Cronins novel of the same name.

When we were on duty at Hamoaze House and when there was little or no activity some members of the GOR shift were permitted to sun themselves for short periods on the green slope of Mount Wise, within hailing distance should air activity commence. From this vantage point near the Scott memorial we watched the panorama unfold, ships of the Royal Navy, the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* for one, steaming down the Hamoaze into the Sound and beyond while the Cremyll ferry kept up its routine of to-ing and fro-ing across the river. The summer of 1940 was very hot and many of us quickly browned, life was still unchallenging and boring, however there was plenty of entertainment available to us. At the Forum in Devonport I saw *Balalaika* with Ilona Massey and later *The Wizard of Oz* with Judy Garland. Plymouth had many cinemas but I can remember the name of only one, The Royal but I do remember the theatre, The Palace, near the Octagon, where I saw several variety shows and a couple of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. For *The Yeomen of the Guard* I could only get a seat in the second row from the front on the right-hand side and as a result got the full benefit of the big drum.



Jack Stone  
GOR member

Usually we went as a party of four or five, first to get a bite to eat, often at *Goodbodys* and then off to a show. Sometime after the air raids had started in earnest five of us went to the Alhambra in Devonport to see a strip show, the main attraction being Phyllis Dixie; I was surprised to see sailors taking their girl friends in with them, remember this was in the early 1940s and the mores were a little restrictive then. The performance followed the usual pattern for a variety show of that period, several acts in the first half, an interval, then a similar number of acts in the second half. The lesser performers would appear only once while the principals would appear in both halves. Phyllis Dixies earlier performances had caused a few eyebrows to be raised and the Lord Chamberlain who at that time had control of those things banned parts of her routine, a fact exploited by her when she appeared, clothed, in the first half and recited a little piece titled *The Girl the Lord Chamberlain Banned*. It was a clever piece really but the suspense was too great for one restive matelot who stood up at the back and yelled, Fer Chrissakes get them clothes off before the bloody siren goes. She was quite unfazed by this and continued with her patter but obliged him in her own good time, in the second half. The show was quite innocuous by present day standards, a little risqué perhaps but not sordid. That sailor probably had second sight because in a later raid a German bomb flattened the Alhambra.

During the winter months the heavy rains turned Bowden Battery into a quagmire and we all went round in rubber boots. Some intelligent being among us thought that a trench dug all along the centre of the battery would drain off all the surplus water, unfortunately the trench had closed ends and once it was filled the ground again became a miniature lake but now with an additional hazard; if you didnt watch your step you would be up to your knee in water as you put your foot in the trench. In some of the more unpleasant weather it was decided to dispense with the armed sentry at night and the high gates would be locked. To cater to those brave souls who had gone out and wished to return to the fold a bell-push was fitted outside the gates and a moveable bell installed in whichever hut the duty gateman resided and he was supposed to answer the call. Often the evenings entertainment was gambling, pontoon usually and if the gateman was involved it became a bit of a nuisance for him to have to break away from the game just to let someone in, and so one dark and rainy night, fed up with the constant interruptions, he disabled the ball and sat back to enjoy a quiet game. One returnee getting no response to his repeated bell pushing hammered so loud and long on the corrugated iron gates that somebody not on duty went out into that foul night to let him in. The returnee, in high dudgeon strode down to find the gateman and in the process put his foot in the trench. He was our CO and he wasnt very happy. The excuse given was, I believe, faulty wiring.

After an air raid the Line Section would go out to effect repairs, to get communications going again and at the same time the lads would pick up anything that appeared to belong to nobody and that could be of possible use to the army; done by civilians that would be called looting. In this way we became the recipients of bricks, breeze blocks, I-beams and other odds-and-ends. Having acquired these what use could be made of them? Someone had a bright idea and suggested that as we had no inspection pit for our vehicles perhaps we could build an above-ground structure that would serve the same purpose. The

job was given to the man who could use a pencil and who had some engineering experience, me. I prepared a design that consisted mainly of two horizontal I-beams surmounted on two low brick piers with two longer I-beams leading up from the ground level to the piers. Since the track would be fixed this would only be suitable for one type of vehicle so it was designed for our utility vans. To get down to load-bearing earth the low earthen wall on the north side was to be excavated locally where the piers were to be built down to the level of the battery floor. The design was pigeon-holed.

Many months later when this had slipped from all memories I found myself when the morning parade had been dismissed to be a member of a fatigue party. A signaller who had been a tailor in Glasgow was put in charge and we were ordered to report to the QM stores and draw picks and shovels, then we were marched up to the low earthen wall and told to dig. Exactly where and how far to dig nobody seemed to know. After a while the penny dropped and I realised that this was to be the preparatory work for the vehicle inspection structure. I told our ex-tailor, There are drawings of this somewhere. He made enquiries and sure enough the drawings were found; there was one snag however, he couldn't read a drawing and I had to explain. The work was not finished by our shift and the next day another fatigue party had the pleasure of swinging the picks and shovelling. Work on this project was stopped for a long period and in the meantime the western part of the ground was surfaced with asphalt the *hard standing* so beloved by drill sergeants and their superiors, now their charges could stamp their boots audibly instead of squelching silently in the mud.

Much later just before I left Bowden Battery work was resumed on the structure but by this time officers had come and gone and I was standing by the latest Two-pips as he surveyed the two long I-beams. Sergeant! he snapped. Sah, answered Three-stripes. These I-beams, said Two-pips, are too long, I will not have them intruding into my parade ground, get me a ruler and some chalk. Just listen to the man, he had two pips on each epaulet, he'd only been there a couple of weeks and already he owned the joint, *my parade ground indeed*. Three-stripes obliged with alacrity and Two-pips said, I want them both shortened by three feet. He took the ruler, no fool he, he knew that three feet equalled 36 inches so he measured in 18 inches from each end of both I-beams and chalked lines. Get these down to Ordnance, he said, and get them to cut off the four ends.

Whether the installation was ever completed I don't know. I left shortly afterwards but 44 years later when I re-visited the site Bowden Battery had been turned into a garden centre, the moat had been filled in and converted into a car park and I could see no sign of the excavations or much of anything else that would tell of the wartime activities.

With the fall of France Germany had access to her assets though Britain forestalled their use by attacking French naval units in Toulon and Dakar but Germany still had the use of the bases and three of her ships were in French ports. These were the *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen*. The first two were nicknamed by NAALOs petty officers as Salmon and Gluckstein after a local store in Plymouth. Germany wanted to get them back to the relative safety of a German port and Britain was equally determined that they should stay where they were, where they could be attacked. Fortunately Germany picked a day when the weather was thick and wet and under this cover the three ships, hugging the French coast, slipped eastwards past their enemy up the English Channel to find sanctuary. Though we were only onlookers we were able to follow the action to some extent as information was given to us by NAALO.

We had teleprinter links between Plymouth, Portsmouth, Bristol and Reading and apart from any other correspondence there were the daily rituals; firstly the colours of the day, given to us by NAALO were broadcast to all the gun sites so that friendly aircraft would not be fired upon, and secondly each night an ammunition report would be sent by the three companies to Reading. We were all able to see what the others had sent. Almost invariably the ammunition report would state nil expenditure but one Sunday night there was an exception; Bristol reported Bristol the subject of a heavy air attack, ammunition report will follow. As Bristolians we became very anxious; not much news filtered through that night but the next day we gleaned from various sources little bits of information. One informant said that amongst other targets they had dropped four bombs on Bristol Bridge; that was not strictly accurate but from the damage done it was fairly true. They had hit our home town, the war was getting serious. Bristol's suffering was just beginning.

We were expecting a visit from some top brass, presumably to give the place the once-over, to convince us that indeed we were not forgotten and to show us some faces to match the names that would appear from time to time on orders. In order to impress them with the skill and expertise of our Line Section it was decided to replace the twisted Don8 cable between Bowden Battery and Egg Buckland Keep with an air line, that is bare copper wire on short telegraph posts. This was finished just before the top brass arrived but when the phones were connected all that could be heard was a loud 50 cycle hum; the wires had been placed beneath and almost parallel with the overhead grid system cables. Oh, well, they said, well say it was never intended to be used, it was only done to show our ability to run an air line.

I suppose it was the same bright individual who had the storm trench dug who thought of the idea of burying a pipe to carry away the cookhouse effluent down into the eastern hillside tunnel. I found this out by accident. Having seen *Fantasia* the previous night and admiring Mickey Mouses jaunty swagger I hummed the melody of Ducas *The Sorcerers Apprentice* as I swaggered down into the dark tunnel; I stopped abruptly when the fluid was over the tops of my gaiters; my humming stopped and my language was not nice at all.

From the mess hut one lunch time, gazing at nothing in particular but looking towards the north side of the camp, I became aware of a disturbance in the taller grasses on top of the low earth bank. I wondered why as the movement was not general as one would expect with wind gusts but was quite localised. While I mused over this a loud yelling came from that spot and immediately some 20 or 30 khaki clad figures emerged carrying rifles and with their faces blackened. This armed group charged across the battery, still yelling as they went out through the gate, past the stick sentry; he watched stupefied, head turning from side to side as they disappeared into Fort Austin Avenue. He had only ever expected unauthorised entry from without, never from within. By the time we had collected our thoughts and looked outside there was no sign of the intruders and we never saw them again. This was I believe an early training exercise of a commando unit

At that time we were a fairly close knit group, our common bond being that we were all Bristolians and volunteers. There was virtually no crime apart from petty offences against military law, in fact the reverse was often the case as was demonstrated when one pay day I had to dash off from pay parade, dump my pay and pay-book on my unmade bed and rush to catch the lorry going into town to see a show. When I returned late at night my bed had been made and my pay and pay-book were placed neatly on my bed, by whom I never found out.

Military offences were few and usually petty but in the eyes of authority charges had to be laid and these were heard in the Company Office, the Nissen hut just inside the entrance gate. This hut was divided in half, the front portion being occupied by the clerical staff and their paraphernalia, while the rear part was further divided into two. The innermost portion was the private retreat of the CO and the rearmost portion, not very large, was where charges were laid, pleas were heard and punishments meted out. In accordance with military procedure a prisoner, hatless, had to be escorted in to face the CO. I was once detailed to be one of the escorts; we with the prisoner, assembled in front of the hut. Prisoner and escort, barked the CSM who was about as unpopular as any of his rank, fall in. We did, with the prisoner sandwiched between us. Prisoner and escort, shun. We sprang smartly to attention. He strode up to the prisoner and snatched off his hat and, Prisoner and escort, right turn, quick march. I was the leading escort and I could see before me the open door of the little room, in fact all the doors were open and daylight streamed in from the far end of the hut. We quick marched, the CSM following a short way behind us; there was only space enough for our trio and I knew that we ought to mark time once we were inside, however that was not what the military had impressed on us so I led our little group right into the COs inner sanctum; out of the corner of my eye I saw the bemused look on his face as we passed by. Onwards we went looking straight ahead, right through the hut; surprised clerks watched us as we emerged into the open air again. I was happy that in obeying the last order as laid down by the military I had upset the routine and what was more enjoyable I had upset the CSM. He made no attempt to follow us through the hut but ran along outside to catch up with us as we strode out into the distance. Halt! he yelled and we did; and for a while that was all he could say, his cheeks turned puce and I thought he was on the verge of apoplexy. Gradually he calmed down, berated us, marched us back to our starting point, then gave us more precise orders. In we went again. I cant remember what the charge was nor what punishment was awarded but I do know that the CO carried on as if nothing untoward had happened.

Looking over the drawbridge into the dry moat Denis Cleese saw a group of fox cubs, two or three were dead but one was still alive and the vixen was nowhere to be seen so Denis climbed down and rescued the survivor, adopted him one might say. How the cub was fed I dont recall but he lived mainly in our hut and became quite tame. He travelled to Bristol in Denis battledress blouse and was duly shown family and friends. He was still quite young and played happily with the troops though at night he used to steal our socks and shred them; he stayed with us some time but one day he disappeared and the sentry who had been on duty the previous night said that he had seen the vixen on top of the cookhouse roof so perhaps she had found her son and reclaimed him.

We were kept busy one way or another but not always fairly. Denis Cleese complained that over the previous 10 days he had averaged only four hours of sleep per night; this was obviously due to mal-administration. The officer hearing the complaint brushed it off, saying that four hours of sleep was enough for any man. Later the duty rosters were reorganised. The army hated to see soldiers with too much spare time; whitewashing border stones or blacking the soles of boots really

served no useful purpose except as make-work projects designed to keep us out of mischief. In keeping with this idea various little schemes were thought out to keep us occupied and sometimes bribes were offered such as being excused duties or being eligible for late night passes. So it was that late night passes were offered to the members of the hut that provided



**Bert Hickman**  
( not dressed for guard duty )

the best turned out soldier for guard duty. I regret to say that our principles had sunk so low that we all entered into the spirit of this with gusto. Some polished boots to a mirror-like shine not forgetting to blacken the soles and count the hobnails before metal polishing them; others pressed trousers and brushed the uniform of our protégé. Brasses were polished to an unbelievable lustre, then, as we were about to present our man we looked outside and saw the rain pouring down and the mud beginning to form. Not to be beaten we stood him on a short plank; with a soldier at each end of the plank and another behind to provide stability we carried him to the appointed place on the parade ground and deposited an immaculate Bert Hickman ready for the inspection of the guard. We won.



**Denis Cleese**  
( without his fox cub )

I think it was in 1941 that the GOR was relocated once again, this time to Area Combined Headquarters (ACH), somewhere in Plymouth; we were driven there for our shifts daily by lorry but I have no idea where it was exactly and I couldn't find it today even if I tried.

Anticipating the arrival of our ATS replacements the military had taken over some small houses facing the southern entrance to South Raglan Barracks; these were quite empty except for quantities of bedding (the girls were to be much more pampered than we were) and of course the houses required fire-watching at night. This duty was not so onerous as might be thought. Much in the manner of the fairy story *The Princess and the Pea* we piled up mattress upon mattress upon mattress until a normal bed height was achieved and the addition of clean sheets and pillows completed the ensemble. At no time when I was there fire-watching was there ever an air raid, or if there was I slept through it. With the coming of the dawn I replaced all the bedding just in case a snap inspection was called, then I caught the lorry back to Bowden Battery where I was granted the morning off to compensate for my exhausting night duty.

There were many air raids on Plymouth, some were minor but there were also some major ones. I seem to remember four but I was never down in the centre of town for these; for many raids I was in the GOR but for two I was in a pub, *The George* in Crownhill; I recall the noise of the planes and of the exploding bombs and shells and seeing the fires over the city with the occasional brighter redder flare-ups as planes crashed. Walking back to our billets one could see some damage and some of the houses in Fort Austin Avenue were burning but the city centre and the docks area bore the brunt of the action. AA fire was credited with the downing of 16 planes in the major raids, other kills being credited to the RAF. Going into the city after a heavy raid was a rather sickening experience, smouldering ruins and desolation and the knowledge of untold deaths and misery. Before I left Plymouth in 1942 the guns at Rame and Down Thomas were either replaced by or augmented with rockets (Z batteries).



Around this period Bristol became the HQ of the 8<sup>th</sup> AA Divisional Signals and Plymouth became the No2 Company. Our shoulder flashes now changed, the red flames were extinguished and were replaced by an 8-pointed red star smack in the middle of the bomber; still very pretty and prophetic.



Of the many thousands of characters whom I encountered during my six-and-a-half years of army life most have drifted into obscurity but some are still with me; such a one was Brigadier Barbary of 55 Brigade. Without my knowing for sure rumour had it that he had a firm in Cornwall and I assumed that it was an engineering firm; I also assumed because of this that he was a Territorial Army officer. He was a shortish almost portly figure with a definite bearing. His articulation was not exactly that of the BBC but he had a pleasing Cornish accent and over the many times I saw him he never appeared to have the aloofness of rank. Occasionally he would visit our GOR and having discussed things at a higher level would exchange a few words with the other ranks. During a lull in operations I was seated at the plotting table reading a not very intellectual magazine when I became aware of his presence; I sprang to my feet. No, no, he said, sit down. I obeyed. Whats that youre reading? he asked. I gave him the magazine which he scrutinised. Whats your job in civvy street? he enquired. I told him. Then you dont want to read trash like this, get some technical magazines to read, if you dont keep up with things youll finish up with an addled brain. Then wishing to speak with Exeter he said to a telephone operator, Gimme my brigade.

In the days when our GOR was in Hamoaze House one of our signalmen, Bill Lambert, had to take a message into another room where a meeting of some top brass was in progress; assorted crowns and pips were there together with their ATS drivers. The meeting was about to break up and Brigadier Barbary picked up his baton and asked, Wheres me at? Up jumped his ATS driver and said, Here I am, Sir. No, no, not you dear, said the brigadier, I means the at wot I wears on me ead. Many years later this story was confirmed, word for word, by an ex-colonel who had also been present.

Other unusual characters often come to mind when I recall those days; one lad arrived alone one morning wearing khaki but sporting an RAF pilots wings on his chest. He had been transferred from the RAF and he told us bits of his story but never the reason for his transfer and we assumed because of his nervousness and his habit of constantly looking back over his shoulder that it was LMF. He told us that with others he had been ordered to machine-gun soldiers, presumably enemy, on the beach near Brighton and offered to bring in his log book but we didnt press the matter.

Derek was a different type; he also arrived alone. He was about 19 and this was the first time he had ever been away from home. He was a quiet retiring lad, one could almost say not quite of this world and what was unusual was that he couldnt shave himself, up to that time his mother had always shaved him; adapting to the army life was a real challenge for him but I suppose the army was happy to have another warm body.

Bob was near my age, maybe a year or so older and before the army got hold of him he was a school teacher. He found life just as boring as the rest of us but he surprised us all when he announced that he was going to apply for a commission. We enquired in what branch and he said that the only commissions available then were in the infantry. Our further enquiries elicited the following; he and his wife had a fairly large circle of friends and when they entertained their hallstand became full of uniforms, all with pips, crowns or rings. His wife pointed out that all Bob could rustle up was a standard army greatcoat without even a lance-corporals stripe, so Bob decided to remedy the situation. Well, good luck, Bob, I thought, if you dont make it, as you probably wont, your wife can always hang your posthumous medals on the hallstand together with all the bowler hats.

In the early part of 1942 in bitterly cold weather I was on daytime guard duty at the gate (what else is new?); I was bundled up in my greatcoat and a leather jerkin, one of the more acceptable pieces of equipment supplied by the army, when the duty sergeant approached Youre to go up to the GOR and take a teleprinter test this afternoon, he said, teleprinter

operators are required for an overseas draft and so far four from different units have been found to be inefficient, its your turn to try. Not having touched a teleprinter for a couple of years I said, Its no use, sarge, Ill fail, its a waste of time. He was a regular soldier and he found it difficult to understand that anyone would voluntarily drop in pay. You mean youre prepared to forfeit your trade pay without even giving it a try? Youll revert to *general duties*. An idea had begun to form in my mind, if I were to revert to *general duties* then I would be free to apply for a transfer to another branch of the services to a trade more in line with my civilian job, possibly into the Royal Engineers or the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and I told the sergeant so. He thought about it for a moment and then agreed, he went into the Company Office, saw the CO and returned within half-an-hour with the necessary papers for a transfer application.

A few days later I was at Devonport railway station awaiting a Southern Railway train bound for Salisbury. On arrival there I found my way to the private house where I was to be interviewed. I forget the officers rank, he was probably a major but it was an informal affair, one-on-one. I suppose that my answers to his semi-technical questions were satisfactory and eventually he asked, Have you ever thought of a commission? Now in this world there are leaders and there are followers and in matters concerning the life or death of others I come in the second category. No, Sir. I replied. You could be compelled to, he said. I was non-committal and we left it at that. Back in Bowden Battery I was called in front of a visiting officer, Captain Barbary, son of the brigadier. Apparently certain selected individuals were to be sent on an intensive physical training course to develop their full potential and Barbary was there to sort out those most likely to benefit from the scheme. Reflex actions and the speed thereof were checked and I suppose that a general assessment of physique was made, anyway a couple of days later I was bound for Westward Ho on the north coast of Devon with all my kit. My destination was a pre-war holiday camp, taken over by the military but the holiday spirit was gone and the conditions were spartan. However before my course really got started I was ordered to get moving once more, this time to Tidworth to take a trade test.

I had only ever heard of the place before as being the site of the Tidworth Tattoo and I wasnt quite prepared for the fact that it appeared to be in the middle of nowhere and that the railway tracks finished there; my spirits sank. The one redeeming thing was that I would only be there for a couple of days. Military personnel of all corps and regiments seemed to be there and it had an atmosphere of bustle, squads marching and counter-marching, urged on by the drill-pigs, little dictators strutting their stuff. There were military vehicles also including a few tanks, probably the only ones Britain possessed at that time and pips and crowns abounded together with some red tabs. But there was one little haven of relative peace, the Drawing Office where I took my trade test and for two days I could shut off the military world. When it was all over I returned to Bowden Battery as it was too late to re-join the intensive physical training course.

Some days later I was ordered to go to a holding battalion at Oxshott. Once again I gathered up all my kit and headed east, this time as a private in the RAOC, a draughtsman class III. I detrained at Oxshott station and plodded up the hill to the holding battalion that was in a large private house set in a very large garden on the road between Leatherhead and Esher. It was about five oclock when I got there and the first thing to do after reporting in was to get something to eat. This done I next went to the QM stores to get my kit sorted out. I exchanged my leather bandolier and black leather gaiters for webbing bren gun pouches and gaiters all in pieces and in different shades of khaki. I also exchanged my gas mask for an identical one which seemed silly to me but I still didnt have a complete issue of army equipment.

## OXSHOTT

It was Saturday. I was shown to my billet and started to get settled in, finding out the lay of the land, questioning my new companions. Were conditions very strict? No, not really, I was assured. What about Sunday, was there a church parade? Well, yes but you dont have to attend, many dont. My sister and her husband lived in Surbiton, close to a bus route passing through Esher and Esher was within walking distance from Oxshott, so on Sunday I set forth, catching a bus at Esher and spending a pleasant day with them. Arriving back just before midnight I assembled all my new webbing equipment and then slept well. In the morning my new companions informed me that there was to be a sergeant-majors parade at eight oclock, in shirt-sleeve order and I felt a little apprehensive because I now had no time to blanco my equipment; there was nothing for it but to go on parade multi-coloured. Since we were not wearing battledress blouses I had another little problem. The previous Christmas one of my sisters had given me a pair of braces (suspenders in North America), very patriotic, in red, white and blue stripes and these didnt improve my appearance either. We assembled in the roadway not far from the big house and with the rest I fell in, waiting for the axe to fall.

The sergeant-major came down the lines, inspecting his charges. When he reached me he paused for a second or two as if he couldn't believe his eyes. He looked me up and down and then launched into a long tirade concerning my appearance. He drew my attention to the lad next to me and informed me that he had come all the way from Cyprus just to fight for Britain and just look at him, how soldierly he was. Without turning my head I looked out of the corner of my eye and took in this exemplar; in all honesty I had to admit to myself that there was no comparison between us but of the two I thought I was the better looking. Mentally I told myself that I had come all the way from Bristol via Filton, Plymouth, Westward Ho and Tidworth with the same idea but I had been in the army long enough to know that it was impossible to win an argument with a higher rank so I put on my wooden soldier's expression and stared straight ahead. Eventually he ran out of steam as I knew he would; he took my name and number and charged me with being improperly dressed. Fortunately for me the officer hearing the charge was not so impetuous and gave me the opportunity to explain that as a territorial I had never been fully kitted out; he dismissed the charge.

But Sergeant-major McCullom had seen his little fish slip through his fingers and I was now introduced to one of the meaner, petty characters that the army had seen fit to elevate. I was ordered to blanch my equipment immediately in the approved khaki colour and had to treat my gas mask cover with the mandated blanch, *Pickerings khaki-green No.3*. I often wondered who were the major shareholders in these blanch companies, most units required slightly different shades, but perhaps I'm being a bit cynical. Unfortunately the new gas mask cover had a flaw, it had a large grease spot that refused to take the blanch. The orderly sergeant said, Do it again. I did. The results were the same, as were the third, fourth and fifth try. These orderly sergeants, there were two of them, now had a victim; at no time did either of them offer any suggestions or watch me as I assiduously blanched away at that confounded gas mask cover. Eventually the truth must have dawned on them and I had the cover exchanged but from then on my name was the first one to come into their little minds when an unpleasant task came up or one invented especially for me and for three weeks I had practically no free time for myself.

One other incident stays with me from those days, a sad one really. A young lad of about 19, infantry I believe, was in quite a state. He told me that his mother was a widow and that he was the youngest of three sons. One brother had been killed in North Africa and he had heard that very morning that his other brother had been killed in a training accident; he himself was waiting for a posting to Lord knows where. I believe the army has been known in such cases to discharge a lone survivor but this lad was not to be consoled. I don't know the outcome.

Oxshott does not evoke very happy memories in my mind and for a long time afterwards I harboured thoughts of meeting those three after the war, on more equal terms or on terms more favourable to me but now I can't even remember what they looked like. The future became a little brighter when on a later postings parade my name was called out and I was en route to Aldershot, to Parsons Barracks.

## **ALDERSHOT**

Accommodation in Parsons Barracks was in the comparatively new *spider* huts, six corridors emanating from a common hub terminating in our sleeping quarters. Again the beds consisted of three bed boards on wooden trestles and three biscuits; four blankets completed the ensemble. I think that we were there just filling in time before we were sent on an overseas draft and each morning we paraded in front of the Company Office for roll call before being marched off to the Ordnance Workshops, there to be split up into our various trades. Initially I was sent to a fitting bench where my main unofficial job was to convert an English penny into a spitfire brooch for my sister. Later I was transferred to the Drawing Office. I don't recall exactly what I worked on, nothing earth-shattering but this was to be the pattern of things for the next couple of months.

This was a peacetime undertaking employing mainly civilians both in the offices and workshops and supplemented during the war by army tradesmen. There were relics of a bygone age when time was not of the essence; on the walls were some drawings on thick cartridge paper of weaponry with the various metals indicated by colour washes, blue for steel and yellow for brass while some drawings were in ink on tracing linen. Current drawings however were in pencil on tracing paper.

It was not all office work because we were also given some military training including physical exercises, running around a battle course though not under live firing as some poor souls were. Additionally we were instructed in unarmed combat but it was nowhere near as intensive as infantry training. Also on Sundays we had church parades, marching up the main street behind a band to have our souls saved. With others I objected to this religious nonsense and asked to be exempt.

I was offered two alternatives, either march to the church and stand to attention for the duration of the service or opt for fatigue duties; twice I chose the former but then decided that peeling potatoes gave me the opportunity to vent my frustrations on the poor tubers, slicing them into cubes or sculpting faces on them. I thought that my best move would be to approach the padre and ask to change my religious designation. To what? he enquired. To agnostic, I answered, it means I don't know. I'm well aware of what it means, he said but the army doesn't recognise agnostics and since you say that you don't know then keep coming to church and we'll teach you to believe. I realised at that moment why so many of the soldiers' bawdy songs are sung to hymn tunes, sung quietly to themselves it let them feel that although the army had control of them physically it could not tame their thinking.

About this time, having been in the army for more than three years I sewed the *dogs hind leg*, an inverted chevron, on my blouse cuff. This lasted until one evening when on guard duty the guard commander didn't turn up. Whose the senior soldier? asked the orderly sergeant. He looked around and espied my chevron and All right, you, you're now the acting guard commander. March them off. I did. The next day I removed the chevron. It was then that I decided not to volunteer for anything, nor try to evade anything, I would let life unfold as it would. My rationale was that if ever I found myself in a tough spot I could always blame the system, never myself for being such a fool. I had volunteered twice, once when I joined up and again when I applied for a transfer out of the Royal Signals and I decided that was enough.

In the mess hall there were soldiers from an assortment of units, some being new intake; at one mealtime the Orderly Officer accompanied by the Orderly Sergeant arrived. The Orderly Sergeant yelled out, Any complaints? Yes, came a voice. The pair approached the voice and the officer asked, Yes, my man and what is your complaint? This tea. What's the matter with it? Its horrible. Let me taste it, said the officer as he bravely sipped from the far side of the mug, there's nothing wrong with tea, it's as good as I get at home. Hmm, bloody fine one you come from then! There was a stunned silence; this was beginning to look interesting. Take his name and number, sergeant, said the officer, and charge him. I believe some leniency was shown because this lad was very new to the army and the army had not yet had time to drill the lively civilian spirit out of him.

I was on three overseas drafts, for the first one I was waiting man; that meant that if any man were to be taken off the draft then I would replace him. I had seven days embarkation leave but the draft was complete without me. Again for the second draft I had seven days embarkation leave and I set off on the Southern Railway bound for Reading where I would change to the Great Western Railway. I was a bit like a Sherpa porter as in addition to all my normal gear I also had a kitbag with my tropical kit. On the first leg of the journey I was chatting to another soldier who was going on his normal leave to his South Wales home; he also would have to change trains at Reading but would be catching a different one. Seeing me struggling with all my gear he offered to carry some for me; I gave him my heavier kitbag. He got off the train before me and disappeared into the crowd and that was the last I saw of him. I searched the platforms and reported the episode to the RTO but there was no sign of my property. Disillusioned, I went on with my journey determined to enjoy my seven days at home. When I got back to Aldershot I had to report my loss which consisted not only of army property but also a lot of my personal stuff; I had to repay the army, however I was able to tell the authorities the man's unit, rank, South Wales destination, train time and date, and they traced him for me. He didn't dispute the facts but said that as he was in a hurry to catch his train he left my kitbag on a platform. He was lying of course but we couldn't prove anything and I had learned a costly lesson. The draft was cancelled.

By this time many of us had been transferred from the RAOC into the newly formed Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, REME, changing our ranks from privates to craftsmen, this sounded good but we were still at the bottom of the totem pole. Towards the end of 1942 I was on my third draft, identified as RDGFA which some wags said stood for REME draft going far away. We gathered at Ramillies Barracks in Aldershot filling in time with some regimental training under a Canadian corporal who, disregarding our medical groupings for we were a very mixed bunch, proceeded to run us around a battle course that included an eight-foot high jump. He was pretty tough himself; with one wrist in a plaster cast he led us in traversing across a gap by means of a horizontal rope.

At this time I began to ponder the future, weighing my chances of surviving unscathed, surviving maimed or not surviving at all. I had no sound data to base my reasoning on but knew that Germany, seemingly invincible, had taken over three years to advance well into Russia and North Africa and that the Allies would take at least that time to reverse the situation; surviving unscathed appeared to be a remote possibility but one could always hope.

Again we were issued with a second kitbag and tropical uniforms. Where were we going? None of us knew and with the army's art of deception we could have been going to a cold place. After a further seven days embarkation leave we



returned to Aldershot, regrouped and took a train to London. From there we boarded a troop train and headed north on the old LNER line stopping at last at a transit camp at Cottingham near Hull. Lugging our two kits around was a bit of a chore. We were due to leave again the following day so a couple of us went into Hull that evening to a cinema along with two NAAFI lasses. The incongruity of the situation struck me when we came out; it was too late to get anything to eat or to get a bus back to camp. Outside the cinema a man was selling hot chestnuts and these were our only nourishment but we went back to camp in grand style, we took a taxi.

The next day we entrained again this time bound for Glasgow but we didn't know it. At the docks we saw our floating home, His Majesty's Transport Antenor. At first sight HMT Antenor seemed to be not unlike my early childish drawings of ships, high focastle, a low forward well-deck, high superstructure, a low aft well-deck and a high stern structure. Both well-decks had raised hatch covers that gave access to the lower decks and the centre superstructure carried the lone funnel. We were told that she was part of the *Blue Funnel Line* that normally operated in the far-eastern waters carrying passengers and freight. In single file, wearing our webbing and with our kitbags slung over our shoulders we slowly mounted the gangplank. At the top of the gangplank we were directed to our quarters, draft RDGFA went aft to the lowest deck; although there were portholes on that level the actual deck was just below the water-line and the portholes were sealed shut. Mess tables covered the deck, they were all of a similar pattern with attached bench seats but varying in length to conform to the contours of the ship. Overhead was a multiplicity of hooks to accommodate the hammocks with which we would soon be issued. Kapok life-jackets were given out with strict instructions not to use them as pillows but we were not told how long they could remain in the water before they became waterlogged. Soon we settled in.

## GOING SOUTH

One of the initial joys of being aboard ship was to be supplied with soft white bread and ample amounts of butter, things that were unobtainable in wartime Britain. The ship still carried passengers and freight, the commissioned ranks were the passengers while the other ranks were freight; eggs were served daily to the former, sometimes returned uneaten but with a cigarette butt stabbed through their yolks but nary an egg was seen at our tables. We had jam and marmalade in plenty, coming in seven-pound tins, some of it from South Africa, *apfelkoos confit* that I believe was apricot jam, that's what it tasted like anyway. We were really quite well fed but being young and healthy we could always manage more; occasionally after dark the cookhouse would be raided and the raw carrots and turnips that had been prepared for the following day would be added to our diets.

It was not long before the army had us all organised into mess orderlies, guards, fatigue parties and anything else that would keep us out of mischief. Soon the engines rumbled and we were off or so we thought but the excitement was short lived, we moved down the Clyde and stopped off Gourock, in Loch Long. The wise ones among us said that we had to wait for a convoy to form but we waited there for two weeks while other ships and convoys came and went; it was a frustrating experience in a confined space.

Of the many ships around one was pointed out to us, the Queen Elizabeth (the first one), she had never seen passenger service having been completed during the war, now in the distance we could see her, painted in battleship grey, serving as a troopship. One night or early morning when we were nicely tucked up in our hammocks we were awakened by the rumble of the engines again and we sensed motion; action at last, HMT Antenor was under way, going down the Clyde. With the coming of the dawn we could see other ships in the convoy, merchant ships and our naval escort. We passed Arran and entered the North Channel and that was as far as our schoolday geography took us. Speculation was rife as to our eventual destination but there was no shortage of opinion amongst our amateur navigators who tried to calculate speed, distance and direction as we moved into the open waters. As time went by the seas became more and more disturbed and the good ship Antenor pitched and rolled with them; it would later transpire that we were entering the tail end of one of the worst North Atlantic storms of the season. Life-lines were fitted to facilitate a safe passage on deck. Down below we listened and watched with mounting concern as she creaked and strained, as she pitched the screw would come out of the water and the engines would race; all this was a new experience to us land-lubbers. At the end of each roll she seemed to pause for a second or two -- would she recover? She always did and then she took about 15 seconds to reach the other extreme and pause again. Up on deck clutching at life-lines or anything else secure one could wonder at the strength of the ship as she rode on the crest of a wave

and then plunged to the depths of a trough; crew members rated them as 40-foot waves and we didnt disagree with them.

Resulting from this roller-coaster action many of us had queasy stomachs and were not very happy though it was heartening to see that all ranks were treated equally by the elements. As the days passed the seas became less turbulent but other ships in the convoy, merchant and naval alike could still be lost to sight as they wallowed in the troughs. At intervals of time our course would change and on the third day out our escorts began changing their positions; whoop, whoop, whoop went their hooters; depth charges were dropped. What surprised me was the speed of sound in water, no sooner did we see a plume of water rise than a resounding boom bounced off our ships hull. These antics went on for some time then later things returned to normal for a while; about four o'clock in the afternoon HMT Antenor started to make smoke and fall back in the formation; not to worry advised our intelligent ones, its all part of the plan. We went below and had a bite to eat then came back on deck 30 minutes later. Where was the convoy? We looked around but all that could be seen were faint smoke smudges on the horizon and whats more we were now silent and stationary. Our intelligent ones were nonplussed and our amateur navigators determined that we were probably west of Brest off the west coast of France; that together with the knowledge of the U-boat action earlier in the day didnt improve our contentment. At six o'clock a lone plane appeared from the west, going east; it passed over us fairly low but none of us identified it. Our resident gunners took up their positions at our only gun, a four-inch, designed I imagine for naval engagements and probably unable to elevate sufficiently to engage an aircraft. We assumed the plane to be hostile and that it would report our position and static condition and we waited. Darkness came and we wallowed helplessly. I decided that I didnt feel like going to my deck below the water line waiting for a torpedo to come bursting through the side, I wanted to have a reasonable chance of getting off the ship if she were going down so I stacked out on the hatch cover of an intermediate deck and slept fitfully with my head upon my kapok pillow.

Dawn came and we were still without engines; we were told that the storms buffeting had unseated one of the boilers and that a similar event had caused our departure from Loch Long to be delayed by two weeks. In the forenoon the engines started to rumble, a most welcome sound and we limped into motion. We must have been very fortunate because we took a long three days to reach the relative safety of Glasgow at dusk, having made the return journey without seeing anything more than a couple of small fishing boats.

I forget the details but we disembarked and were whisked off to various destinations; our draft together with some others was sent to a disused distillery in Wishaw. We sorted ourselves out and bedded down for the rest of the night. Next morning, Sunday, we looked around the town and were amazed at the friendliness and hospitality shown us. Our stay lasted about three weeks or a month while HMT Antenor underwent surgery, transplants and general re-conditioning. At intervals during this period small groups of us were given a few days leave at home but all the time we were in Wishaw we were well looked after by the local population; one businessman took out parties of us for a meal (was it at Greens?) then on to a cinema show; this happened on many occasions. Some of the lads were more or less adopted and lived out most of the time there only looking in at the distillery to find out when our next move was due. In the forces I always got on well with all the Scots I met but our reception at Wishaw was something else, it stays firmly in my mind and I have a very soft spot for the Scots and Scotland.

All good things must come to an end of course and we had to return to Glasgow to re-start our travels. Waiting for us at the dock was our troopship HMT Antenor, well repaired we hoped. This time there was little delay, soon we were steaming down the Clyde to form up with a convoy; again we had a naval escort on our flanks and although the seas were not as rough as before the screw still came out of the water and the engines raced. Day followed day uneventfully and we seemed to be on the same course as before according to our amateur navigators; for many of us this was the first time we had been so far from our island home and we were quite excited.

In order to keep up our spirits and inform us of the progress of the war the BBC news was frequently broadcast. These newscasts were usually preceded by a recording of *Rule Britannia* and while joining in mentally with the remembered words I reached the phrase *Britons never, never, never, shall be slaves*; I recalled the definition of a slave as being one who received little or no remuneration for his services and who could never voluntarily escape his predicament. I made the comparison.

I can still remember my first sight of a lone palm tree emerging from the early morning mist just before we made Freetown. Some ships of the convoy entered Freetown but we lay off and paused for a while a half mile from the coast; we believed that mosquitoes couldnt make that distance but just to be on the safe side we tried out our mosquito-repellent ointment. The air was hot and very humid and soon we decided that we preferred mosquito bites to the discomfort of trapped perspiration. By this time we had changed into our tropical uniforms and this did nothing to improve our appearance; our cork

topees were reminiscent of those worn during the Boer War and were probably surplus to that conflict. There was nothing remarkable about our shirts but the shorts were something else; worn in their extended form they reached down to mid-calf, the lower hems were fitted with three buttonholes while at mid-thigh there were three buttons. The idea was that in the bright sunlight hours they would be buttoned up to let our knees feel the breeze and get tanned but in the evening they would be worn at full length to frustrate the mosquitoes. To economise in footwear the army supplied knitted hose-tops, tubes, near khaki in colour that covered the socks just above the ankle while the tops were turned down just below the knee. Webbing gaiters covered the junction of boots and hose-tops; whether the gaiters were aesthetic or functional I don't know, either way they were two more items to be blanched; perhaps they would deter an aggressive snake.

Duties on board were no different than before but there were free periods when we could indulge in the only gambling game permitted by the army, *Housey*, or *Bingo* as it is more usually called today. We spent a lot of hours gazing out to sea, I didn't find that boring, there was always something fresh to see, even when looking at nothing in particular there was the ever-changing pattern of the waves, not unlike the changing patterns in a glowing coal fire. For the first time we saw *Portuguese men-of-war*, jellyfish, with their little sails unfurled, and flying fish played around the ship. At night time another phenomenon was revealed, looking over the side the phosphorescent creatures disturbed by the ship's passage brightly illuminated the ship's hull, so much so that we thought the portholes were unshielded; it made a mockery of our strict instructions not to show any light. In this context I put my foot in it once again; seeing a flashlight beam waving about the deck on a black night I yelled, Put that light out. Who said that? asked flashlight. Who are you? I countered. I am the Orderly Officer, said flashlight, what's your name and number? somewhat chastened I obliged and realised once again that even when you're right you can't win an argument when you're outranked.

The ship carried only limited amounts of potable water and the only water available for keeping clean was salt water; true we had showers and could purchase salt-water soap but this was not very effective and rinsing off was difficult; the end result was not satisfactory particularly when trying to get one's hair squeaky clean. This fact was brought home to me when one mealtime a soldier paused behind me as he spoke to a pal on the next table; we were in the tropics and it was very warm. He was holding a seven-pound tin of marmalade above my head; engrossed in conversation he allowed the tin to tilt -- need I say more?

I had started a head cold just before we left Glasgow and after a day or so at sea I did what was very unusual for me, I reported sick. The army had three or four standard remedies to cover most situations and I was dosed with one of them, *mist.expec* seems to be the abbreviation that stays in my memory; several doses brought no relief so again I reported sick. I was now coughing badly and felt quite ill. Same medicine, same result; I really should have been admitted to the sick bay but was not. Reporting sick for the third time brought accusations of malingering; at no time had I seen either of the two doctors on board, the diagnosis had been made by an NCO of the RAMC, so I soldiered on.

I don't know how far west we passed into the Atlantic but the crew told us when we were nearer to Walvis Bay, eventually we pulled into Cape Town in South Africa, the tablecloth of cloud had settled over Table Mountain for us. Some of our convoy separated from us and docked there. After a short stop in the bay we moved on to Durban and as we came into the dock area we saw a little group on the quayside waiting to greet us. The central figure was The Lady in White as she came to be known. She was a trained singer and made it her duty to meet all the troopships; armed with a megaphone (this was 1943) she sang patriotic and nostalgic songs to cheer up the lads who were bound for unknown parts. It was a nice warm welcome to South Africa.

For our last night on board I was picked for guard duty. Why? Perhaps they thought that someone would run off with the ship. Next morning we disembarked and marched up to our new billets on Clairwood Race Course, I was quite weak and unable to carry all my kit, some of my pals carried my rifle and pack for me. I was feeling very groggy but that didn't stop me from being picked for guard duty again that night. I got the last shift and when I was awakened at 4am I rebelled and said the waiting man could do my turn. Later in the morning I reported sick once more, this time to Clairwood Hospital where I was examined by a South African army doctor. When he had finished he gave me a chit that said, Admit hospital, resolving pneumonia and I spent the best part of the next three weeks there, two weeks in bed and a couple of days up and about. I believe I slept for the first 30 hours.

It was an army hospital run on army lines but there were some civilian staff mixed in with the nursing sisters and MOs. The food was very good and I was surprised to find chicken on the menu quite often; iced water or a lemon drink was kept at the bedside in a little jug covered with a lace cloth to keep the flies off but there were no mosquito nets. At first I didn't realise

what the high pitched buzz in my ears was until I had had a few bites. I recall two nurses, one was a Canadian, an army nursing sister whose name had a Ukrainian ring to it and the other was a South African civilian, Nurse Anderson. The latter who was probably a little bit older than I was prophetically gave us some words of wisdom. The ward cleaning staff was composed of black African men and the British not being particularly racist used to talk to them and give them cigarettes, something that they didnt from the South African whites. Nurse Anderson said, You British are spoiling them, when the war is over youll be going back to your own country and well be left with the consequences of your actions. Military discipline was upheld in the wards and when the MO and his following retinue of nurses came on the rounds those who could were told to stand to attention by their beds and those who could not stand were told to lie to attention. More stupidity.

One hospital orderly amused me with his line of thinking; judging by his accent I asked him, You are an Afrikaner? No, no, he replied, I'm Dutch. Surely not, I said, the people of Holland are Dutch. No, no, he said again, they are Hollanders, I'm Dutch.

On discharge from hospital I was sent to *Kings House* in Durban for convalescence and was duly fitted out with hospital blues and a red tie. I remember being there for Good Friday and for another couple of days and enjoyed the time touring the city; it was a beautiful place, this was the end of March 1943, their autumn, the right time of the year and the vegetation was lush I was just settling down to a short spell of doing nothing; I wasnt looking too smart, I used to have my hair cut every two weeks and it was now seven weeks long, additionally the pneumonia had left me with three boils on my face. My convalescence was short lived because I was ordered to report to a hospital, not Clairwood, to be examined to determine if I was fit enough to re-join draft RGDFFA. An ambulance arrived and I occupied a stretcher on the upper of two berths, the man on the lower was going to the same hospital. Our ambulance bounced along over dirt roads, it was a very rough ride and after one huge bump my stretcher collapsed and I landed on the fellow below; he wasnt very pleased with me and I finished the journey sitting down, listening to his constant griping. After a cursory examination by the doctor I was pronounced fit enough to re-join draft RDGFA. He must have known where we were going and he must have known that troops with lung problems were not supposed to be sent there, but there, thats the military. I suppose that after the war these three doctors, this one and the two on the Antenor, were let loose on the civilian population of Britain, I'm glad I wasnt one of their patients.

Most of our group had a good time in Durban and were very well treated by the South Africans, when we expressed our thanks they said, Oh, you should have been here before the Australians came, they nearly wrecked the place.

Back on the docks we saw our next floating hotel, HMT Aronda; she was much more modern, lighter in build and with finer lines than the old Antenor. Once on board we got into our new routine. The ship had a permanent army officer, OC Troops who, I presume stayed with her on all her voyages. We also had another luxury on board, a real live bugler; his job was to sound off at various periods of the day to announce some activity or other.

As with the Antenor this ship was fitted out with mess tables and attached benches. Early on we had to report to stores and draw hammocks because the sleeping arrangements were similar as well. On the Antenor we had been issued with bottles of fortified lime juice (shades of Captain Cook) but now we were to be issued with bottles of carbonated drinks. We soon set forth, destination still unknown; we were all assigned boat stations and each morning we assembled on deck waiting to be inspected by our betters, looking a little ridiculous in our Bombay bowlers and our Bombay bloomers. The inspection was quite a formal affair as an entourage consisting of the ships captain, OC Troops and various others of decreasing rank, a lance-corporal as the caboose, traversed the ship. However leading this group and heralding its approach was the bugler; at each station he paused, stood smartly to attention, put the bugle to his lips and sounded four Gs then off he went to the next station to repeat his performance; he was a pain.

When the waters were calm and the nights were clear we sometimes lay on deck looking upwards to the heavens because in the southern hemisphere different star constellations were visible, the Southern Cross for one. As the ship pitched and rolled ever so gently the tip of a mast would trace slow little circles in the near black sky; it was half an hour of peace. We knew that we were moving in a north-easterly direction and we had a general knowledge of the local geography but we couldnt determine whether we passed to the west or the east of Madagascar. The first bit of excitement came when I perched on a box and, surrounded by a group of interested onlookers, had my locks shorn. I felt much lighter but my face still had its three boils, they were to stay with me a while longer. The Aronda was alone, not in convoy and I remember one morning well, I had gone up on deck early, sunrise comes suddenly at about 6am in those latitudes; there was the gentle throbbing of the engines but complete silence otherwise, the Indian Ocean was grey and more tranquil than I had ever seen water before or since. All around the water was flat and mirror-like except at the stern where our wake, a thin white streak stretched out into the

distance. I celebrated my 25th birthday in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

On board we had a public address system, installed presumably to impart words of wisdom like, Splice the mainbrace or Abandon ship or something but in fact it was used to play records to keep up our morale. Where the control room was situated I never did find out but whoever was responsible for the choice of records must have been a fan of Deanna Durbin; hour after hour the strains of *One Fine Day* came over the speakers, there were other records of course but even today when I hear *One Fine Day* I am transported back in time to the Indian Ocean. There are a few other incidents that stay in my mind from that period. One man put on a charge for some minor offence thought the punishment awarded was too excessive so he kicked the escort and fled; of course he couldnt get very far on a ship, a fact he should have thought of beforehand. We saw him running round the decks with three PT instructors in hot pursuit; he gave them a good run for their money but nevertheless he finished up in the ships brig. As usual the military required guards to be posted during the night and in the interests of convenience and fairness each draft took turns to supply the men. For a change my services were not required on that voyage but one night it fell upon the Royal Army Service Corps to stand guard. Since he had to be up early in the morning to sound reveille the bugler slept in the guard room to be awakened in good time. He also slept with his bugle, with the fancy cord around his neck. As I said before he was a pain and the RASC decided to do us a favour; while he was asleep the cord was cut, the bugle removed and dumped overboard. We knew something was amiss in the morning when no bugle call aroused us and we waited to see what would transpire. We assembled at our boat stations. By-and-by the bugler came into view, stopped at our station, stood to attention and Peep, peep, peep, peep. he went. The military was not to be denied, they had given him a referees whistle. That was the same occasion when the ships liquor store was broached and some of the guards were the worse for wear. We never heard any more about this episode, perhaps some were punished, we were never told.

Attempts were made to keep us occupied, unofficially cards were played and money changed hands, usually from mine into someone elses. *Housey* was often played and at times shows were put on consisting of stand-up comedy, solo singing and sing-songs where we all joined in. One lad stood on the make-shift stage and recited,

Do you remember an inn, Miranda,

Do you remember an inn?

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

And the shouts and the jeers

Of the young muleteers,

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

Do you remember an inn?

He struggled manfully to the end, ignoring all the ribald remarks coming from some quarters and when he had finished he acknowledged the sparse applause; definitely not the sort of poetry expected by the licentious soldiery.

Days came and went, I dont recall how many but the time came when the sea birds arrived on the scene and we knew that landfall was not too far distant. The brighter ones among us told us that we were nearing Bombay and for once they were right.

## INDIA

As HMT Aronda approached Bombay we eagerly scanned the coastline and almost at once discerned that imposing arch *The Gateway to India* but there was not too much time to spend sightseeing as we had to prepare to disembark. The ship docked and a little later we were making our way down the gangplank. Partway down I could see a commotion on the quayside; three military policemen were holding down a prone figure; though his face was flat where it was being pressed against the quay I recognised him as being the prisoner from the ships brig. He had attempted to escape custody once more but again he had failed; I think he didnt like the army very much. We fell into position by drafts and waited and waited; it was mid-day and getting very hot. We stood in formation for about an hour, eventually our guide arrived to lead us to our billets; he was Indian Army, somewhere around five feet tall and he set off at a blistering pace. We quick marched behind him and when I say quick I mean it, with his short legs he had a short stride and we longer-legged ones kept up with difficulty. After a mile or

so we entered Colaba Camp, this was to be our home for a while.

Now started our introduction to things Indian. The teeming masses and the number of people sleeping in the streets surprised me as did the apparent disregard for personal safety amongst the traffic. New words came into our vocabularies the origins of which sometimes go back to the many countries that British forces have garrisoned over the last three centuries. Some military personnel must obviously have become proficient in the local languages but for the most part the British soldier was and still is linguistically lazy, content to adopt and sometimes anglicise foreign words and phrases to suit the occasion. Strangely enough using some English mixed with some foreign phrases and body language the soldiers usually made themselves understood by the locals who probably thought that all the words were English. At times it led to some interesting exchanges.

However at this stage we were introduced to mainly Indian words, *charpoy*s for rope beds, *chatties* for unglazed urns, *pani* for water, *jaldi* for quick and many, many more. We met some of the regular army characters who had spent years in India and gleaned snippets of information from them. Were there any poisonous creatures around? Well, yes, scorpions for one thing. What about snakes? There are several different sorts here. Very poisonous? Yes, especially the hoop snake. Hoop snakes? never heard of them. Oh, they are very fast but if they cant catch up with you by wriggling they put their tails in their mouths and bowl themselves along like hoops. Our legs were often pulled like this until we became in turn the seasoned leg-pullers of the new arrivals.

The camp CO used to ride around on a white horse and occasionally he would give us a pep talk; to those of us who were getting a bit too boisterous he said, Most of you before the war were law abiding citizens but once youve put on a uniform and moved away from home you think youve become licensed buccaneers. Behave yourselves. There was a fair amount of spare time before we expected to move again and we spent a lot of it looking over this main port of The British Raj. *The Gateway to India* that we had earlier glimpsed as we steamed into dock was the first thing to see and we were duly impressed. Then there was the centre of Bombay, we wandered along Hornby Street to the Kodak shop where I bought a film for my vest-pocket Kodak. Unfortunately the camera had developed a pinhole in the bellows and most of my pictures were spoiled. A couple of evenings were spent at the cinemas, watching Hollywood films that were about two years old. We also visited a zoo (Victoria?) where strangely, amongst other creatures, we saw in captivity English sparrows. Other unexpected sights included cows wandering unhindered through the streets and carts drawn by camels. In one of the main streets my attention was caught by the sight of a turbaned Indian who was sitting cross-legged putting on a show, pitting a cobra against a mongoose. I didnt feel like staying for the finale, I guess he had to separate the combatants or else go looking for a new snake.

Our stay in India was not very long, a matter of a couple of weeks or so but long enough to give us a feel for the country. Under the British Raj there didnt seem to be much evidence of the inter-religious hostility that would result in such a blood bath at Independence and partition in 1948. Political struggle there was and some anti-British sentiment but it didnt seem pervasive to us. Little booklets were issued to us that outlined the history and customs of India, (the term India was all-inclusive in those days, both Hindu and Moslem) and listed population densities together with a glossary of useful words and phrases. Other words and phrases not in the booklet we picked up from contact with the older and more experienced soldiers. At that time we also learned that the Indian Army was entirely separate from the British, with its own Viceroy commissioned officers whom we did not have to salute, and the ranks of Subahdar, Jemadar and Havildar were added to our vocabularies. During our short stay draft RDGFA suffered its first casualty, Cfn Love was whisked off to hospital and later succumbed to a brain tumour.



Our accommodation was in long huts that in memory appeared to be permanent; we found the charpoys quite comfortable and the bell-shaped mosquito nets that dangled from the ceiling gave us uninterrupted nights. Food was sufficient, plenty of rice in various guises and frequent curries that despite the warm weather seemed to cool one down. There was also the usual NAAFI store and fresh fruit could be purchased daily.

Too soon the time came to move on and we rejoined HMT Aronda; we got aboard and were assigned our places, immediately I was given some task to perform, I forget what but while I was so engaged the stores were opened and everyone drew hammocks; by the time I had finished the stores had closed. Ah, well, I was now used to roughing it so I elected to sleep on the bench seat of a mess table, a plank about one foot wide; again my life-jacket became my pillow and I slept like a babe. I never did draw my hammock.

The seas were calm as we steamed away from Bombay on a north-westerly course, we lost sight of land but now we had an idea of where we were going. The skies were cloudless and the sun blazed down on us for 12 hours every day; thick canvas awnings were erected over the passageways on each side of the ship. Keep wearing your topees, we were told, harmful rays can penetrate the awnings. I believe we took four days or more to reach our destination passing from the Arabian Sea into the Persian Gulf; the journey was quite uneventful, we spent the days doing very little, looking at the water, playing cards, eating, dozing and listening to even more of Deanna Durbin over the intercom. With faint memories of maps in our minds we tried to identify Bandar Shapur and Bandar Abbas on the starboard side with uncertain success. In the afternoon of the last day we entered the Shatt-el-Arab and headed for Basra; now there was a little more to see. The waterway was relatively narrow and we passed through the dense groves of the palm trees that lined both banks, however at intervals we came to small inlets intended no doubt to give access inland and here the effect of water upon plant life became apparent. The tall palms at the rivers edge gave way to more stunted ones further inland and a couple of hundred yards from the river the desert began.

It was past midnight when we docked at Marquill, we disembarked and got ourselves sorted out. Then we loaded our bits and pieces and ourselves on to waiting lorries and set forth towards our new temporary home, No.15 Reinforcement Transit Camp, a tented camp. We were now members of PAIFORCE, the Persia and Iraq force.

## IRAQ

Our arrival at the transit camp was in the early hours of the morning and we didnt try to get organised but being young and tired we slept well, nevertheless we woke with the dawn at about 6am and then surveyed the scene. There were a dozen or so bell tents including ours set in the middle of nothingness, flat vacant desert all around us; true there was some sign of activity a quarter of a mile away that turned out to be the local brickworks but otherwise nothing. We asked the name of this God-forsaken spot and were told *Shaiba*.

It was still May and the days were getting hotter. We had to be initiated into the ways of desert life; topees to be worn at all times in the sun, shirt sleeves rolled down and slacks to be worn after 6pm when it was the mosquitoes turn to be around and about, copious amounts of water to be drunk and two salt tablets taken daily.

To get us into condition after the inactive period at sea we were exercised gently. Small groups were marched along to the brickworks, a somewhat over stated term, where some Arabs were mixing up a dough-like slurry that was then put into wooden moulds, something that had been done by their forbears for the last three or four millenia. The moulds consisted of four sides and a bottom; the open face of a filled mould was smoothed off by hand and the brick turned out to dry and bake in the sun. I never measured them but they seemed to be near enough the same size as standard English ones. Bricks made this way were called *plano-convex* because five faces were flat and the sixth convex; each bore the imprint of a thumb on the convex face, formed as the brick was ejected from the mould. Similar bricks were used in the building of the Sumerian city of Ur several thousands of years ago.

From a pile of bricks we each had to pick up two and march back to the camp, dump them then return for two more; 10 or 12 such trips gave us the exercise we needed and acclimatised us to the dry heat. What was unexpected was the blowing sand that seemed to get everywhere, in ones eyes and ears and sticking like a film to any exposed sweaty flesh; some relief

came by eating ones food in the relative shelter of the tent but even so sand could find any chink to gain entrance. Ignorantly after dinner one day, mindful of instructions, I swallowed the two obligatory salt tablets; later I felt a little strange and then discovered the emetic properties of salt. Ever afterwards I took my salt in small quantities with plenty of water.

As its name implied the camp was only intended to hold troops until they could be dispersed to their various units; there were no recreational amenities available though we could purchase a local brand of cigarettes called *Red Bird* in packets of five for five fils (about one farthing each, old currency). We slept 10 to a tent, feet at the central pole and bodies radiating outwards; early on without being taught we learned how to dig a recess for our hips and over this area we spread our groundsheets. Though a bit firm our small packs served as pillows. After dark the only source of light came from a hurricane lamp, this was not always effective in which case it was swapped for a useable one from another tent when nobody was looking, standard army practice.

I forget how long we stayed there, maybe a week but then the draft was split up and dispersed and I was posted to *Al Musayyib*, some 40 miles south of Baghdad. However before I started the army wanted to get some useful work out of me and so with three others I acted as escort to an ammunition train going up as far as Mosul near the biblical city of *Nineveh*. We were supplied with canned and dry rations sufficient for the journey and joined the train in the evening with rifles, some ammunition for them, side arms and all our kit. An empty wagon served as our mobile quarters, empty that is except for straw or similar material to soften the hard wagon floor and we slept uncomfortably in shifts. On the first morning we awoke itching, sand flies had feasted on us as we slept fitfully; I think they really enjoyed fresh caucasian blood and we spent a while scratching and slapping.

With the start of the day deficiencies were discovered in our equipment, while we had tea, sugar and dried milk we hadnt any water or the means of containing or boiling it. One difficulty was overcome when we bartered cigarettes for a petrol can from some railside Arabs. Funny really because it was once part of British stores; it was a tall square-sectioned metal can from which the top had been removed; at the top a wooden bar stretched from side to side to form a carrying handle; it appeared to be clean and we assumed that it was. The problem of boiling water was solved when we asked the locomotive driver to blow some out from his steed. I learned years later that this was definitely not recommended healthwise but thats what we did many times and we survived.

The train stopped at various towns and villages on the way, As Samawa, Ad Diwaniyah, Baghdad, Samarra and lastly outside Mosul. At no stop did we venture far from the train we were guarding. The journey was interesting; except for the towns the land was light brown and mostly barren; in the open country flocks of sheep roamed with their attendant shepherds and this presented an almost biblical scene. To our western eyes there was one noticeable difference however, in the west the shepherd would be behind his flock, driving them but here he was in front, leading. Perhaps in this land of sparse vegetation the sheep relied on him to find the best grazing. We reached Mosul in the evening and our train drew up alongside an army camp, the lads there were enjoying a movie; the translucent screen lay between us and the audience and from our wagon we saw one hour of *Mrs Miniver*, back to front and soundless.

Discharged from our escort duty we boarded a passenger train heading for Baghdad and enjoyed the luxury of slatted wooden seats. I was quite excited with the anticipation of what lay ahead and could hardly wait to see more of the mystic land of the Caliphs. The train drew into Baghdad and as it slowed we could see more of the city, fine buildings mixed with mud brick homes, the *Ishtar Gate* and the minarets of mosques, the strange clothes, music discordant to my ears, porters bent double with unbelievable loads on their backs and the smells. At that time I had to be content with a passing impression because I was bound for Al Musayyib, to No.5 Advanced Base Workshops. That designation in the middle of Iraq puzzled me and it was not until many years after the war that I discovered the reason for it and the reason for my being there.

The workshops were some 40 miles south of Baghdad and a mile or so from the Arab town; the town was out of bounds to us but a metalled road from there passed between our camp and the workshops; we only ever saw military traffic on it. Both camp and workshop compound were separately surrounded with barbed wire, *three coil dannert and apron* was the official name for it. Individual shops were scattered within the compound, seemingly haphazardly and they contained equipment for which any contemporary British engineering firm would kill for.

Accommodation within the camp consisted of huts similar in design to Nissen huts but were built of local materials with low brick walls and pre-cast arches supporting curved roofs of straw reinforced baked mud. The floors were of course bare earth. Outside the end doors of each hut stood a large urn of unglazed earthenware, a *chatty*, kept full of water laced with salt to make sure we took our daily dose to ward off heat exhaustion. The water was cooled by the evaporation of the small quantity



of water that seeped through to the outside of the chatty and it was very pleasant to drink. Non-potable water for ablutions and laundry was brought in through underground pipes from a source unknown to me, the river Euphrates perhaps, anyway the pipes could not have been buried very far beneath the surface because in the summer the water was quite hot. Again, using local materials, the screens around the unroofed showers and latrines were made of woven palm leaves

We started work early in the morning, reveille was sounded by an Arab bugler (we didnt have one) at 6am, we marched off to start work by 7am, finishing at 2-30pm to take advantage of the cooler part of the day. Most of us were classed as tradesmen though we were constantly reminded that we were *soldiers first and tradesmen second*. Except for mounting guard at the officers quarters we were exempt from guard duties, these were carried out by Indian troops within the workshops compound and by the Royal Sussex Regiment around the workshops and camp environs. At night they patrolled the streets in lorries equipped with twin Bren guns. One report had it that they once fired on one of their own corporals, hitting him in the legs. Often we would see them in the morning marching back from their duties whistling or singing *Sussex by the Sea*. Venturing into the workshop compound at night in pitch darkness as we were sometimes required to do was a different matter, quite an eerie experience in fact; the Indian guards were silent and one never knew exactly where they were though their presence could be detected by the faint clinking sound of the chain that attached their rifles to them. To ensure that we were not mistaken for intruders we tended to announce ourselves by whistling. One would think that with all these guards the place would be impregnable. Not so. Frequently at night when we were at the mobile cinema sounds of gunfire would be heard coming from the workshops and sometimes there were bodies.

Heat I think was our greatest problem followed by sandstorms. The highest official shade temperature I remember seeing was recorded in Baghdad, 121°F, though inside the workshops Ive seen the mercury register 128°F but this was enervating and little work was done then. In severe sandstorms we protected our eyes with goggles but exposed flesh was stung by blowing sand; although the lenses of the goggles were not tinted it was like viewing the world through the yellowish amber of *Golden Syrup*. In 1943 or perhaps it was 1944 I saw the nearly total solar eclipse through a sandstorm, with goggles but with no other eye protection.

During the summer months the prevailing winds came from the north-east, sweeping in over the Iranian plains, by the time they reached us they were bone dry, this was a good thing really because we sweated profusely in that heat and were rapidly cooled by evaporation. Occasionally for a couple of short periods in the summer humid winds would blow in from the Persian Gulf and then it was most uncomfortable, shirts would be sodden and dark with sweat and if they dried before being washed they would be stained white with salt. We had our laundry done twice a week by the *dhobi* but that was inadequate so we did our own in between times; in the bone dry air a pair of slacks could be worn 15 minutes after washing. One of our lads, mimicking the *dhobi* by bashing wet laundry on a flat stone was put on a charge for damaging government property; he was acquitted after enlightening the officer who obviously had never done his own laundry.

One piece of equipment supplied by the army for which I was very grateful was the *chargul*, a water bottle made of a coarse canvas similar to fire hose canvas that worked on the same principle as the chatty. Drawn new from the QM stores it would not hold water but had to be soaked until the canvas had swollen; filled with water and hung outside in the air it provided a beautifully cold drink in a fairly short time. This evaporation principle was also adopted to lower the temperature inside ambulances by means of a *cuscus tatty*; this consisted of a four-sided wooden frame with chicken wire front and rear, the cavity was filled with what we called camel thorn. Water was pumped up from a tank and sprayed over the unit; air passing through the moist camel thorn was then directed into the body of the ambulance to cool the interior.

## **No.5 ADVANCED BASE WORKSHOPS**

The compound covered quite a large area the exact size of which I cant say but it was spread out over a vast expanse of desert with the various workshops located in no apparent order. There were no metalled roads but between the buildings a hard travelling surface was obtained by putting discarded engine oil over the loose sand and traffic soon firmed this up. For heavier loads a two-foot gauge *Decauville* track was laid between the main buildings and trucks were hauled by a Lister powered locomotive. For off-loading really heavy equipment within the compound a metre-gauge spur line branched off from the main line linking Turkey with Basra.

When we first arrived the conversation centred around two topics, firstly there was the recent flea infestation that

fortunately for us had now subsided; apparently this had occurred quite suddenly, lasted for a brief period and then unaccountably it was over. Perhaps Keatings had something to do with their departure. Secondly there was the tyre scandal. I was told unofficially that with the shortage of tyres amongst the Iraqi civilians some had been diverted from the British stores in exchange for cash and sentences had now been pronounced.



Time out from surveying  
Al Musayyib 1943

In those early days no master plan existed showing the layout of the installation and to remedy this deficiency I was quickly instructed in plane table surveying, a subject in which I had no previous experience. Jim and I spent weeks and weeks out in the sun wearing the pith helmets that had now replaced our cork topees, getting browner by the day as we toiled away with plane table, tripod, sighting rule and chain (well, we didnt have a chain but we managed with a 100-foot steel tape), gradually building up a map of the camp to our superiors satisfaction. Just before this project was complete I was taken off for some other drawing office work. Not a great deal of real engineering work was done in the DO, mainly modifications to drawings to implement changes to armoured equipment; the six wheeled *Staghound* seems to be the one vehicle I recall. But one must not forget the other onerous duties, keeping up to date all the pretty coloured charts and graphs in the Company Office so that the clerical staff could see how many soldiers they had, where they were and how many were sick. We also had the task of addressing the parcels that the

commissioned ranks sent home to their families as we could print more neatly than they could and anyway it was beneath their dignity to do anything so menial.

I suppose that now would be a good time to explain the reason for our existence in that area. Between the two world wars Britain had been awarded by the League of Nations the mandate to govern Iraq and had military forces in the country, notably the RAF in its permanent station at Habbaniyah; naturally some Iraqis objected to this arrangement and caused a bit of trouble but their big chance came when Britain declared war on Germany. Under their leader Rashid Ali they tried to drive the British forces out. A major engagement occurred at Habbaniyah but the RAF personnel successfully resisted them. The early part of the war had not gone too well for the Allies and by 1942 Germany had advanced in North Africa to the borders of Egypt and in the east was on the road to Tiflis (now Tbilisi). It seemed that unless these advances were stopped which at that time appeared doubtful the two armies would join somewhere in northern Iraq and drive southwards taking control of the oilfields of Persia and Iraq. This would have had serious consequences for the Allies.

There existed at this time in Shaiba a very large ordnance establishment, No.1 Base Workshops which besides being well equipped to service tanks, guns and other military hardware also stored vast amounts of everything else an army required. For this reason it was decided to interpose No.5 Advanced Base Workshops between Shaiba and the advancing Germans. Thats why I was there. Fortunately the German armies were halted at El Alamein and Stalingrad so the personnel of No.5 ABW were later relocated.

Anyone who has worked in an engineering shop will recognise some of the sounds associated with various operations, for example a bench grindstone on being started up has a peculiar whine, very high pitched when top speed has been achieved; this is followed by a clatter as metal is presented to the stone. I heard this whine and then nothing. Why? I went over to this grindstone and saw a man grinding away at the sole of his gym shoe. The QM had issued an edict to the effect that no gym shoes (or *shoes, canvas*) would be replaced unless the soles were worn through. These shoes like so many other pieces of army equipment had been stored over a long period in the open air in the blazing sun and consequently their uppers had rotted. This lad had been left with a pair of fairly good soles but hardly any useful uppers and not wishing to fight the stupid edict, knowing he could not win, decided that he could beat the system.

The workshop compound was fairly deserted at night but the Company Office stood within it so night time pickets had to be supplied. The duties were negligible apart from lowering the REME flag at dusk and raising it again at dawn; there must have been a reason for this but it escaped me. The hours before bed were boring and lonely but looking around the place and viewing some of the documents was interesting. Apart from Army Council Instructions (ACIs) there were other papers printed on yellow paper, applicable to Paiforce, whose title eludes me now. One item caught my eye, I cant recall the exact wording but in essence it said, If a soldier were to be executed then his next of kin should be informed that he died while on active service. Technically correct I suppose but why not tell the truth? To spare the family pain and disgrace? Or to protect he system and avoid answering awkward questions? As Churchill remarked, Truth is the first casualty of war.

Drinking water supplied to the cooks was brought in daily in the evening in a two wheeled trailer that was then parked

adjacent to the cookhouse ready for their early morning chores. Breakfast and evening meals were taken in the mess room in the camp but the mid-day hot meals were delivered to the various workshops by lorry; they were kept hot by being stored in hay boxes forerunners of the present day coolers and these too were kept adjacent to the cookhouse. I mentioned earlier that there was a severe shortage of tyres among the Iraqis, many civilian lorries could be seen on the roads, well loaded and carrying as many Arabs as could possibly hang on, with only one tyre on what should have been a twin wheel. The British had tyres and the Iraqis were envious. Arriving early one morning the cooks discovered a hole in the perimeter fence and the axle of the water trailer resting on two hay boxes. The two wheels and their tyres were missing. The hay boxes had been placed under the axle of the trailer and the sand scraped away beneath the tyres until they could be freely removed. We knew where the intruders came from because there was a small Arab settlement a quarter of a mile from our camp.

The gap in the fence was repaired and a watch kept; some days later another gap appeared and expecting another attempt at stealing an ambush was set up. Two REME personnel (I was one of them) armed with our SMLEs and two privates of the Royal Sussex Regiment armed with Bren guns got into position after dark and waited for the intruders to appear. I wasn't too happy about this because it could be the first time I had a human target in my sights. Fortunately for me and the possible intruders the Orderly Officer and the Orderly Sergeant came along in their jeep, stopped by the gap, illuminated it with their headlights, then got out and inspected it, thus warning any watching Arabs that we were expecting them. I was very glad when daylight came and I still had five unused rounds in my rifle.

Not all nights passed so uneventfully however. One unlucky guard on the last shift of his duty going from the guard room to awaken the cooks interrupted a robbery that was taking place in the cooks hut. He was set upon and stabbed several times, he survived but the robbers escaped.

We were allowed leave on occasion, the nearest site for any sort of entertainment was Baghdad and we could take day trips there but could not stay overnight. When I first arrived there was still some residual hostility towards British troops and we were instructed to go around in twos and to wear side arms but this rule was later relaxed. A lorry was made available each Saturday and Sunday to make the somewhat uncomfortable journey into town.

Adjacent to our camp a mobile cinema put on films twice a week, these were mainly old ones that we had seen at home; with only one projector there was a pause as the Arab operator changed reels. Often he had difficulty with the numbering of the reels and this led to some interesting results, sometimes a murder would be solved before it had been committed. When such a mix-up occurred the restive audience would yell, Get yer money ready, Shafto, harking back to similar situations in WWI. Waiting for an audience to arrive an Arab stood with his wares, beautiful green grapes that he sold at 50 fils a pound, about the price of ten good cigarettes. Someone had obviously instructed him in Imperial measures and, One pow-und. he shouted as he weighed them on a primitive hand held scale using a railway spike as the nearest thing to a pound weight.

Besides being able to buy English cigarettes we could also get Canadian ones, *Sweet Caporal* but not all favourite brands were available at all times. The army issued a free ration of *Victory* cigarettes, a nondescript brand that were just about acceptable as a last resort and which were often given away to Arab civilian employees. We could get Palestinian beer and Canadian *Black Horse* but I never saw any British brands. Beer was rationed of course, I think it was two bottles per man per week and non-drinkers often used their rations for barter or for cash.

## **DESERT LIFE**

The days passed slowly and routinely and the sweltering summer gave way to winter. Winter could not be described as being very cold but after the high temperatures the contrast was palpable. On six or so nights the water in the chatties would freeze and then we piled everything including our greatcoats on our beds and even then we sometimes shivered. Our huts were unheated but in some of the work huts primitive fireplaces were made. These consisted of two low brick walls 18 inches high, three feet long and about one foot apart. On top of these was a steel plate that carried a funnel at its front and a flue pipe at its rear; the funnel was fed through small pipes from two cans, one containing water and the other containing discarded engine oil. The two fluids dropped through the funnel on to a piece of pipe which caused them to splatter; oil soaked rags were used to start the combustion and then the flames quickly roared along under the steel plate and up the flue pipe. The heat was controlled by adjusting the flow of the fluids in the cans. Our small Drawing Office was so heated.

The office was also home to ants (small, medium and large) and red ants, mice, termites and temporarily to visiting

hornets and scorpions. The termites built their tunnels of regurgitated wood fibre up one wall, along the insulated electrical wires and down the central wooden roof support to the nest that housed their queen. She was a bloated white creature. They were constantly building, repairing and enlarging the tunnels and nest. Red ants contested possession of this area and we watched the perpetual battles unfold.

Arab incursions into the workshop compound were a bit of a problem and in order to combat them the sergeant-major announced that the perimeter fence would be mined. The mines were really hand grenades, not the No.36 or Mills bomb but the No.69, a plastic cased type. I suggested to him that if he were to record their position then we could add the information to our map of the camp or record it on a separate map. He agreed. Off he went, several hours passed and then he and a couple of his accomplices returned. Gimme the map. he politely requested and I did so. Now the scale of the plan was such that the whole area covered a sheet measuring about four feet by three feet. He looked at it for a bit and then stabbing at it with his stubby forefinger he said, We put one or two here, some about there and a few in this part ---- . Relative to the scale of the plan his stubby forefinger spanned about 20 or 30 feet so his information was useless and we never did have an accurate record of the disposition of the mines. Presumably after the passage of more than 50 years they have been discovered, probably to the disadvantage of the discoverers.

Our OC had an unusual name, Bonallack that was often mispronounced as bonny-lack and to remedy this gaffe a notice appeared on Daily Orders to the effect that, The Colonel wishes it to be known that in the pronunciation of his name the accent should be placed upon the penultimate syllable. Uncomprehending soldiers stood around the notice-board saying things like, Wots ee mean? or Wot the ells a penultimate syllable? The kinder more knowledgeable types explained it to them. Of course this lesson was purely academic for as far as we lesser mortals were concerned we never had occasion to address him as other than Colonel or Sir.

It fell my lot one moonlit night to stand guard on the Officers Quarters and I clicked for the 6-8 and the 12-2 shifts. The first period passed uneventfully and not much was happening on the second shift; I was wandering about, looking at the moon and counting the grains of sand and longing for my bed when I heard shots nearby. Duty called and I hastened to the spot where I believed they came from. In front of me stood, or rather swayed, a Scottish lieutenant; I assumed he was Scottish as he was wearing trows but in the British army one can never tell. In the hand that he was slowly waving around was a smoking Smith and Wesson. Whats up, Sir? I enquired He continued to sway and wave. Shnakes, he said, shnakes, theres shnakes in my bed. and he pointed. I followed his gaze to his bed that was out in the open since it was a warm summer night; his batman had made it nice and comfy for him complete with a tent type mosquito net. With my bayonet I gently raised the edge of the mosquito net and prodded the apparent corpse of the serpent; there was no movement; gaining confidence I approached closer to solve the mystery. The snake was in fact one of the tapes of the net, carelessly coiled on the pillow and he had put three bullets into it. I dont think he believed me as I assured him that all was well, I left him gently swaying and went back to looking at the moon and counting the grains of sand.

There were some lighter moments in the desert life, near Easter time a days entertainment was usually organised, not quite a fairground atmosphere but something approaching it. A few more talented types showed of their skills on army motor cycles, some in trick riding and others in racing. One such fanatic was Johnny Lockett who after the war rode briefly for the Norton team until a crash involving a head injury persuaded him to retire from racing. The main event of the day however was the *Donkey Derby* where steeds were hired from local Arabs to take part in a series of races. A sort of auction was held in which bids were asked for various mounts; the successful bidders became the jockeys. Some sort of prizes, I forget what, went to the winners.



### THE DONKEY AUCTION

Humorous situations occurred as inexperienced soldiers tried to persuade their mounts to greater efforts or in some cases even to start. The outcome of one race manifested itself when that good old standby of military law Section 40 of King's Regulations was invoked; Daily Orders informed us that one, No.732 Craftsman Smith, was charged with 'conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline in that on the occasion of the Donkey Derby he did wilfully and cruelly goad his mount with a railway spike. Needless to say he didn't win on either day. The day's festivities were often rounded off with a concert given by the Band of the Royal Sussex Regiment. A civilian lady singer appeared so frequently with the band that she was made an honorary sergeant.

We were more than a little incensed to read a report in one of the British newspapers of one of the infrequent visits of an ENSA show. A female member was quoted as saying that bacon and eggs are no luxury in Paiforce. Poor dear, she obviously had been a guest of the Officers Mess and didnt know any better.

Fairly near Al Musayyib was the ancient city of Ur of the Chaldees, the reputed birthplace of Abraham. It had been discovered and excavated in the 1920s by Sir Leonard Woolley; as with most deserted habitations in that land it first appeared to him as a *Tel* or hill, rising up above the surrounding flat land. I visited the site with a group led by our padre. Woolley excavated one half of the site down to below ground level, carefully preserving and documenting all he found; below ground level he found a layer of silt that he thought could only have been laid by water and thus he concluded that it was evidence of the biblical flood of Noahs time. I believe this theory has now been discounted. Below this silt layer were pieces of broken pottery and I picked one up. At that time it was quite a large part of the bottom of an unglazed earthenware urn but due to an unfortunate accident when my kitbag fell off a lorry I now have only a very small fragment. We wandered along the excavated streets that were bordered by low walls of sun baked *plano-convex* bricks and marvelled at the state of preservation. Although the Romans are generally credited with its introduction there was, dating back to a much earlier period, a semi-circular arch still existing. In places one could see, outlined by bricks, the formation of the rooms of houses. In the nearby museum were plans showing how the city was believed to have been laid out, dominated by the *ziggurat*.

A second trip of similar ancient historical interest was made to Babylon, again organised by the padre; the excavations here seemed to be on a much larger scale and had been made by German archaeologists at a time when Germany was extending her political interests in the area. They carted off quantities of the better preserved relics and displayed them in the Berlin Museum; whether or not they survived the bombing of WWI I dont know. Again we were amazed at the skills of the ancient artisans, building blocks fitting together with scarcely any visible joints. Bricks here were a bit different from those at Ur, they were about one foot square by four inches thick made of sun baked straw reinforced mud and in their centres many carried an imprint in cuniform characters that I was told translated into *This was built by King Nebuchadnezzar*. I have a portion of such a brick, not in this case purloined by me but given to me by another member of the group who got tired of carrying it. The site had its own interesting museum and the whole was guarded by some smart Arab soldiers, members of the Arab Legion that had been formed after WWI by the British and that was under the command of *Glubb Pahsa*, an officer seconded for the job.

Iraq was a monarchy and the king at the time was a young boy, Feisal but because of his age the *de facto* ruler was a Regent; both were to be assassinated in the 1950s. In the interests of public relations our workshops made a model of an armoured car suitable for riding in and also a model of a two wheeled water trailer; these were presented to Feisal. He was not over-pleased however because the armoured car was not powered.

Quite a few Arab civilians were employed by the army in various capacities, some clerical and some labouring depending upon their abilities. In general we got on well together though early on I learned not to offer cigarettes from an open packet as ten would be accepted in one grasp with profuse thanks, rather I found it more economical to hand them out one at a time in which case I would have some left for myself. There were Iraqis who showed an aptitude for our type of work, some indeed who were smarter than we were and where possible they were trained as tradesmen. Some difficulties were encountered such as when a sergeant-instructor was told by his pupil that there was no such thing as the law of gravity, it was the pressure of air that kept things on the earth. Generally however the training was successful. Life was not without its humour, one trainee was given for his trade test two pieces of green wood to weld together, and he tried. After a minute the instructor said, Howre you doing, Johnny? Thik hai, Sahib. replied Johnny as clouds of acrid blue smoke enveloped him, smiling as he went about his impossible job. After a while he realised that he was being teased and took the joke in good humour. He was then given the real test which he passed easily.

Eventually the time came for No.5 ABW to disband. There were no special farewells but an informal parade took place at which we were thanked for our services; after that we dispersed but not before we set fire to the officers latrines and enjoyed the sight of some tardy members fleeing the flames. I forget the actual details of our departure, we were split up to some extent and I together with others boarded the train, southward bound, heading for our new home, No.1 Base Workshops, *Shaiba*.

### **No.1 BASE WORKSHOPS**

The name *Shaiba* covered an area in southern Iraq to the west of Basra, of indeterminate boundaries as far as I could tell; in fact although Ive tried hard to locate it on several maps it doesnt seem to warrant a mention but it was the address for our tented transit camp, for an RAF station and for No.1 Base Workshops. Again the army establishment was in the middle of nowhere, flat empty barren desert all around; we knew where the RAF station was located because we could see the planes just as they appeared or disappeared below the horizon but we could not see any of the buildings. We did at times go across there by lorry if a visiting ENSA group was putting on a show, or to see a good film; I remember seeing a production of *No, No, Nannette* on one occasion but I didnt go there frequently.

The area covered by our workshops and accommodation was vast; I heard but never verified that the perimeter fence exceeded four miles in length. The buildings, both workshops and billets, were much the same as those at No.5 ABW but there were many more of them and they were equipped to deal with the assembly and repair of all types of fighting vehicles, guns and transport or any sort of engineering problem with which we may have been confronted. Working hours were set to coincide with the coolest part of the day, reveille at 6am, marching off to start work by 7am and knocking off at 2-30pm by which time the days temperature was at its highest. Most sensible soldiers then stripped off and lay on their charpoys doing nothing for a while to cool down but there were some athletic types who decided to play soccer even though the temperatures were well above 100°F and they didnt seem to suffer from it. This period of our doing nothing appeared to upset some of our superiors who decided to put the concept of *soldiers first and tradesmen second* into practice and inaugurated regimental training sessions that took place later in the afternoons. There was some resentment over this order and this revealed itself in the reduction of workshop output, some vehicles having GO SLOW chalked on them. The hint was taken, regimental training ceased and production returned to normal.



**MUD-BRICK AND STRAW HUTS, No.1 BASE WORKSHOPS, SHAIBA, 1945**

Of the vehicles sent to us for repair some were too far gone to be put back into service though they were still driveable -- barely, and these were used for internal transport, delivering hot meals for one thing. Borrowing the word from India we called them *gharries* and Johnny Lockett removed from his skilled occupation of precision grinder was able to master his to the extent that he could drive around almost clutchless.

Our drawing office was six strong, one from an architectural firm, four from engineering firms and one, a sergeant, a free-lance artist. We had ample supplies of drafting materials and were generally well equipped though we had no print machine, only a glass frame for sun exposures and a lead lined tank for the water developing and fixing of prints. Besides cartridge paper and tracing paper there were plenty of rolls of tracing linen that were rarely used for the designed purpose, once the starch was washed out it made very nice bedsheets, a little narrow perhaps but quite useable. We had two types of print paper, one a standard blueprint and the other a brown line; these were called in army parlance ferro-prussiate and ferro-gallic respectively.

Insignias of rank do a lot to inflate egos and the Company Office WO came in full of his importance and the superior status of clerks, he demanded immediate attention and three prints of a particular drawing.

What colour dyou want? asked the sergeant.

What dyou mean?

What colour dyou want?

What choice is there?

Ferro-prussiate or ferro-gallic.

Eh?

Dyou want ferro-prussiate or ferro-gallic?

Whats the difference?

Brown lines or white on blue?

I think it had better be the ferro-whatsit, white on blue.

And he departed, a little wiser and somewhat chastened.

Drafting skills and the associated engineering knowledge were not generally appreciated; an Indian corporal, a Company Office clerk, a *baboo*, looked in one day, viewed the work being done and said with an air of complete confidence in his abilities, You show me sergeant -- three days I do your job.

The DO was supplied with a bike, an army version, heavy and unwieldy. Most bikes we were used to in Britain were equipped with two hand brakes but this one had a coaster brake, trying to pedal backwards would apply the brake to the back wheel. Riding a bike in Iraq presented some difficulties, the terrain was a mixture of hard ground and loose sand, not always easy to tell apart, and loose sand would quickly bring you to a halt. One day before the hot weather began I was wearing

battledress but not gaiters; I rode off across the desert; almost simultaneously my trouser leg got caught between the chain and the sprocket, the bike found some loose sand and I fell off. Lying on the ground attached to the bike I tried to disentangle myself but with the coaster brake I couldn't reverse the direction. There was nothing for it but to wind my trouser leg right around the sprocket, not an easy task when you're lying on the ground attached to a heavy bike. The trouser leg was not badly damaged, some minor perforations but a lot of black grease. Usually after that I walked.



**DO STAFF No.1BW, SHAIBA, 1944**

Jim Parks      Jack Walker  
Jock Pulsford    John Village    John Cox  
And that bike

As the warmer weather began we had to start sunbathing, for the first couple of days stripped to the waist we spent five minutes in the sun; the time in the sun was gradually increased until we eventually acquired a healthy tan.

Near to our establishment was a prisoner-of-war camp housing Italians who had been captured in the Western Desert battles; when Italy capitulated they became, overnight, co-operators and were allotted billets within our compound. We fraternised and they were allowed to use our facilities but could not buy beer which was rationed, though occasionally a non-drinkers bottle would be surreptitiously diverted. Over the bar was a sign that read *Vietato per soldati Italiani* the translation having been provided by one of our cooks who had been a chef in pre-war Italy. Before the war a DO member had started to teach himself Italian and had with him a vocabulary; this we used to bridge the communication gap. We supplemented this by recalling as best we could our schoolday French and substituting what we believed to be a corresponding Italian accent got along fairly well.

It was decreed that the mobile cinema showing old films would be replaced by a permanent theatre that would also show old films. It would not be an Odeon but would be a more posh theatre and the design job was given to the DO as we had some architectural experience at hand. It was to have a sloping earth floor bounded by brick walls with a little enclosure for the projectionist. When the design was completed the actual building task was given, using standard army intelligence, to a pre-war cinema projectionist. The sand was bulldozed up to a wedge shape and then the brick walls were added but instead of the bottom course being laid on horizontal footings and stepped at intervals to obtain the required increase in height the bricks were laid on the sloping floor with the courses following the same angle. How they managed the coins beats me.

With the cinema in full swing the Italians naturally wanted to share in the entertainment and to the army this presented a slight problem for although they were regarded as co-operators complete integration was not yet an official policy, memories of hostilities were still fresh. As a compromise someone thought up a great idea, the cinema would be divided into two parts separated by a rope cordon, the front one third would be for the Italians and the rear two thirds would be for the British. I think the Italians would have accepted this arrangement even though they had been allocated the worst viewing positions had it not been for the actions of a couple of Brits who started a call of Baa, Baa, Baa. This was soon taken up by the rest of the Brits until the place sounded like a farmyard at shearing time. One by one the Italians got up and walked out and the Brits thought they had scored another victory but two nights later they found that the cinema was still divided by a cordon which this time ran from front to back so that the two groups now sat side by side each having good, intermediate and poor viewing positions. Peace reigned.

As might be expected in the army, government items that should be within the QM stores often found their way into



other hands. Authorities found that the easiest way of dealing with this problem was to announce that on a particular time and day a kit inspection would be held, but that on the previous night the QM stores would be open and all illegally held items could be returned with no questions asked. The kit inspection would still be held but it would catch far fewer people and fewer charges would be laid. One fateful day the lieutenant and sergeant appeared at my bed and turned out my kit. Ah, ha, said the lieutenant as he extracted a steel rule, government property. Well he didnt actually say, Ah, ha, but I gleaned that from the expression on his face. I assured him that it was my personal property but he would have none of it. I pointed out that it bore no bench mark or other mark identifying it as being government property but he said, No, -- take his name and charge him, sergeant. They both passed on through the hut and later the sergeant came back to take particulars; in the meantime a thought struck me, I went through my wallet and as luck would have it I found what I wanted. I presented the sergeant with a bill of sale from a shop in Aldershot registering the purchase of a steel rule complete with its serial number. He viewed this, mumbled something and disappeared. Did I ever get an apology for being accused of stealing? Pigs might fly.

Due to the very hot sandy dusty conditions in the country we were not supposed to spend more than two summers in Iraq and to ease things for us the army arranged that everyone would, at some time during that period, be sent on a two week compulsory leave to Beirut. Imagine, compulsory leave! The journey was taken in four stages and the transport was a small convoy of army lorries with Indian drivers and co-drivers. We drove only on metalled roads and our first overnight stop was at a place called *Wadi Mahomadi* where the only signs of habitation were our huts. After a good nights sleep we set off the next morning for *Rutbah* which lay on an oil pipe line guarded by Military Police but which seemed just as deserted. We stayed there for the night. Our lorries held about eight of us and we lolled around in the back; for comfort it was agreed that our army boots should be removed. Lafferty declined. Ingram, a member of our boxing team insisted. Laffertys boots came off. At this point as our lorry started weaving we discovered that our co-driver was missing, there was only one man in the cab, the driver, and he was dozing off. Perhaps it had been this way ever since the start of the journey but we werent very happy about the situation so we made the driver keep whistling; whenever the whistling stopped someone would lean out and reach round into the cab window and poke the driver to bring him round.

We passed through Dara in what was then called Trans-Jordan and our third nights stop was at Damascus, one of the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world and here things were much more civilised. On the forth leg we crossed over the mountain range into Beirut. The road was serpentine; when we started out it was quite a hot day and we were in tropical kit, we were told that at the crest, some nine thousand feet up, we would feel the cold; I was a little doubtful about this but at the higher points snow lay on the roadsides and I certainly did. Mount Hermon was pointed out to us in the distance as we drove. Descending from the crest Beirut and the curve of the Mediterranean spread out before us, it was a wonderful sight, the beautiful blue sweep of the sea contrasting with the brilliant white of the houses set in the green of the trees. However our attention was soon drawn away from this scene as we realised that instead of changing down to negotiate the winding road our driver either from ignorance or inability stayed in top gear and drove on his brakes, and no amount of shouting or banging on his cab persuaded him to pay any attention to us. We got in to Beirut without any further incident but I guess his drums and linings were in a bit of a state.



Beirut 1944

Until this time right from the beginning of the war we had never been allowed to wear civilian clothes or go about untidily dressed, there had never been any respite from the feeling of being controlled, but now within the camp we were allowed to spend the day in swimming trunks even when going into the mess tent for meals though of course we dressed to go into the city. What a feeling of relief, we were human again.

It was a wonderful two weeks, thoroughly refreshing; most of the days were spent on the beach swimming and breasting the breakers but we went into the city as well. It is sad to compare the beautiful Beirut of those days, a most civilised place, with the devastated Beirut of the 1980s. Civilised it was but they were also prepared for the influx of rowdy soldiery; in one bar a wide shelf about seven feet off the floor was fronted with chicken wire and on this shelf behind the chicken wire a three piece band played away, protected from missiles hurled by inebriated pongos.

This was the life; we could have got used to it but the day came when we had to board the lorries again and head back to the desert. The trip, otherwise uneventful, was marred by an accident; one of the lorries in the convoy carrying the cooks and their utensils took a corner too fast and overturned. Two Indian cooks were killed.

During the next two years I was twice detached from *Shaiba* for short periods. First of all I was posted to Baghdad where I was billeted in a camp but by day I was employed in a large private house in Mansoor Street. Military and local civilian staff worked there. It was interesting to see the Arab girls arrive daily in western dress and watch as they left for home in the evening to not very attractive accommodations where they changed into non-western dress. My original task was not very important but as they now had a tame draughtsman on hand other work was found for me and one whole day was taken up with making small prints of some publication or other. This involved taking a print frame out in the sun for very short periods and because I would only be exposed to the sun for seconds at a time I didn't wear my pith helmet. However during the course of the day the time spent in the sun was cumulative and later I had to report sick. Obviously I didn't disclose my foolishness to the MO and so I was diagnosed as having sand-fly fever, that good old stand-by when they didn't know what was really wrong with you and I was sent to hospital. I remember having a temperature of 104°F and I vaguely remember going into and coming out of delirium. A few days later I started to improve but then contracted dysentery and so spent another while in hospital. After discharge it was decided to send me away for a couple of weeks convalescence; I hoped it would be to the RAF at Habbaniyah where they had air conditioning but no, I was sent to the YMCA in Baghdad and eventually returned to *Shaiba*.

The train trip back was interesting. Theoretically I was on my own but there were many other soldiers on that train and in order to keep ourselves supplied with cool drinking water we all had our filled charguls hanging outside the carriage windows using the trains movement for quicker evaporation. After many miles we came across an unusual sight; there had been a derailment and rolling stock was strewn everywhere, blocking the line. A new track had been laid by-passing the obstruction; as we slowly made our way along this loop most of the passengers moved to the right side of the train to get a good look at the damage. When things returned to normal it was discovered that all the charguls had been removed from the left hand side of the carriages, railside Arabs knew that we would be occupied gawking and took advantage of our distraction; they found charguls useful too.

My second posting was to an army assembly plant at *An Nasiriyah* where the main job was the uncrating and assembly of those vehicles from the USA that were to be forwarded to the fighting areas. My task there was insignificant and lasted only about three days. The boss man was a Colonel Dalbuquerque and he had arranged something that I thought novel for the army; he set a daily quota for the output of vehicles and when that target was reached then work finished for the day. A window in his office was fitted with a *cuscus tatty*, a poor mans air conditioner similar to the units fitted to the ambulances; water had to be sprayed over the unit and whenever his office became a little too warm he would summon an Indian soldier and using the universal mixed language would shout, Pani, Pani, Pumpee, Pumpee, whereupon the Indian would grin and start pumping.

While I was there a shortage of small springs became apparent and some assemblies were held up; now the crates invariably held every last item required to build the vehicles so a kit inspection was ordered; nothing was found. On further investigation an unusual bed was discovered; the owner had decided to improve his creature comforts and had diverted the springs and linked them together to provide a more luxurious charpoy for himself; his pleasure didn't last very long however, the

colonel saw to that. I left before I could find out what punishment he got.

It was generally accepted that in the army a batman, an officers servant, was a volunteer who wanted a softer life and a little more cash. Not always true. We had an officer who was so unpopular that nobody wanted the job and since it was infra-dig for a commissioned man to look after himself one soldier was ordered so to serve. If you doubt this then you should ask the aforementioned Lafferty who did his best to get out of this chore but without success. He tried to refuse to take the cash but was ordered to accept it; he held this job until someone else could be persuaded to take it on. Of course Lafferty should have thrown the money away or else given it to a deserving Arab.

At times we were taken off regular duties and given some military instruction and exercises. Various weapons were discussed, some were demonstrated and others we had to practice with. One which we only saw intrigued me, it was a mortar that went by the name of *Blacker Bombard*, it had a limited range and fired two types of bombs, smoke and high explosive; what seemed strange to me was that the lethal range of the high explosive bomb was greater than the distance that the bomb could be hurled. We didnt fire that one. We did take our turns at firing a two-inch mortar, both smoke and high explosive and when we all had had a go there were a few bombs left over. The sergeant asked if anyone would like to finish them off and the offer was taken up. Theres always one in every crowd and this lad set the mortar as near vertical as he could and dropped in a high explosive bomb. The rest of us didnt wait around but radiated outwards faster than we ever thought possible. Fortunately near vertical was not really vertical and no injuries ensued.

My rifle which in Britain had been extremely accurate was no longer so when I retrieved it in Iraq, perhaps it had had a bad sea trip, got banged around or otherwise warped but it was so much off that I checked the serial number to be sure; it was mine. To complete the course we hurled a few Mills bombs, fired a Bren gun, marched around a bit and behaved as soldiers were supposed to do and then we returned to our more sedentary duties. The commissioned ranks had also to be kept up to scratch and a series of tactical exercises was introduced. An assorted collection of craftsmen, NCOs, a sergeant-major and a lieutenant was assembled one day together with their vehicles and other paraphernalia; they set off across the desert to a location that I believe was only a map reference. After two days the lieutenant had to admit that he was completely lost and so were they all. He was somewhat upset and said, I feel terrible, I ought to shoot myself. and the sergeant-major enquired, Then why dont you -- Sir? The suggestion was not taken however and a search party later led the group back to base.

Attempts were made to keep us occupied and clubs were formed. There was the musical appreciation group with its portable gramophone and limited records, the photographic club again with equipment scarcities, a current affairs program that naturally kept clear of politically sensitive subjects, while anyone interested could learn to drive an army lorry. One enterprising officer tried to revive an interest in calculus and actually collected a few members though how long the course lasted is anyones guess.

Attached to us were some Indian Army troops under British officers; the make-up was a little unusual, many of the soldiers had been temporarily released from prison on the understanding that if they served for the duration of the war they would then become free men. Most of their crimes were of a political nature, some included murder. They seemed to have an intense loyalty towards their officers and I encountered them in the following way; for our sports minded colleagues just kicking a soccer ball around wasnt sufficiently satisfying, they wanted a regulation sized pitch marked out. The hard baked sand didnt take paint very well but discarded engine oil could be used instead. Since I could measure with a steel tape and knew how to construct right angles using the *three, four, five* principle and could count beyond 50 I was given the pitch proportions and told to get on with it. For help I was put in charge of six Indians who would hack out the narrow shallow channels with their picks along string lines that I had laid out and these they would fill with oil producing very dark lines. There were six of them all armed with picks and only one of me armed with an empty rifle. However I was told that they were quite harmless and could be persuaded to behave under the threat of confiscating their pay books which would have the effect of breaking their contracts resulting in their going back to prison. I had no trouble at all, in fact they were a cheery group quite happy to work.

In the army I came across quite a cross section of humanity, running the whole gamut of characters. I am reminded of a sergeant-major, a peace time regular, who discovered one day that things were missing from the Company Office; he decided to do something about it. In the office there was a large wicker basket used for laundry and into this he contorted himself pulling down the lid nearly shut so he could peep out and identify the thieves. He waited and waited but nobody came in because the word had got around; eventually he emerged very stiffly, defeated. Early one morning he had occasion to phone the captain; it was a wall mounted instrument, he took the receiver off its hook and stood rigidly to attention facing the mouthpiece; when the captain answered he snapped a perfectly smart salute and said, Good morning, Sir -- I am now saluting

you. And then he carried on with whatever else he had to say.

I forget exactly how it came about but one time when I was in Baghdad I got roped in for guard duty, this time it was to watch over a prisoner. The prison was only a tent top surrounded with barbed wire and there was only one prisoner. It was all very informal, we chatted a bit and he didn't seem to be at all concerned with his predicament. I asked him what he was doing there and he said that he was being charged with theft. Of what? I asked. A jeep, he replied. Apparently he had acquired a jeep and sold it to an Arab. For how much? I asked. Four hundred dinars, he answered. At that time the Iraqi dinar and the British pound were at par. He seemed to be quite happy, perhaps he had the money stashed away somewhere.

A new item was now added to our kit to improve our lot; to alleviate some of the discomfort and soreness around our shirt collars due to perspiration we were issued with *scarves puggree*, squares of light cloth, khaki coloured. This was the same material that was wound around the crowns of our pith helmets; some lads, fashion conscious, decided not to wear them in the accepted manner and this led to an order being issued to the effect that Scarves puggree will be worn loosely around the neck and not in a triangular cowboy fashion.

Most of us were classified in one of many trades but there were a few who were not tradesmen and they were classified as *general duties* and they could be given any task not requiring any special skill. Three of these were attached to the Company Office where their main duty seemed to be making tea. A vacancy occurred in one of the workshops for a clerical type and I was ordered to take this job on a short term basis, for about three weeks. I didn't jump at the chance, actually I didn't think much of the idea but I went. The work was simple, checking parts in and out of the shop and took in total less than 30 minutes a day and it was boring, boring. The three weeks stretched into six weeks and eventually into ten weeks. I complained several times that the job could be easily done by a *general duties* type but was constantly fobbed off. After a while I asked to see the colonel and then the bureaucracy slowly slipped into gear, my request went upwards from rank to rank until at last an appointment was made for two weeks hence. The very morning that I was to see the colonel I was told to get back to the DO again. When I approached him after going through the rigmarole of marching in, saluting smartly and agreeing that I was indeed the soldier he thought I was he said,

You have a complaint?

Yessir.

You want to return to the Drawing Office?

Yessir.

But I see you are back there already.

Yessir, this morning

Then there doesn't seem to be any complaint now does there?

No Sir.

Now don't think that your return has anything to do with your making a complaint, it's purely coincidental.

No Sir, certainly not, Sir. I lied.

Dismiss.

I did so, inwardly fuming at having to take part in this farce that could have been settled weeks before at a lower level and which would have saved the colonel from looking so foolish.

Opportunities sometimes allowed us to do something out of the ordinary and two of us asked if we could spend our two weeks leave in Teheran, in Iran. Strangely enough permission was granted and we set off in the evening crossing into Iran at Ahwaz. The journey took about 20 hours passing through Dizful, Khorramabad, Arak and Qum and countless numbers of tunnels through the mountain ranges before reaching Teheran. It was an interesting trip carried out in upholstered luxury. We were billeted in an army camp but were left to our own devices day and night. After *Shaiba* Teheran was a lively bustling city; we did some window shopping looking at the Russian made Leica cameras that were much cheaper than but inferior to those made in Germany. There was a plethora of uniforms about of various branches of various forces of various countries not counting the wonderful uniforms of the cinema doormen -- quite confusing; I was saluted several times by Russian soldiers who were probably just as uncertain as I was.

I was caught out by a British major when I failed to salute him; he asked me where I was stationed and when I answered *Shaiba*, he enquired, Don't they salute officers there now? They used to when I was Provost Marshal. I had not worn my greatcoat for ages when I was in *Shaiba* and had not polished the brass but it was much colder in Teheran and I was now wearing it. He eyed the green brass buttons of my greatcoat with disapproval but let me off with a warning as he realised that

I was on leave from that God-forsaken spot; I think he felt sorry for me.

We went to a cinema to see *Bambi* which I had seen before in England but this was different; the sound track was in English with French sub-titles and to one side a separate screen about seven feet square carried the dialogue in Farsi. It was just as well that I had seen it before because those who could read explained the film to those who could not and I could hardly hear the sound track for the constant babble.

Compared to *Shaiba* the air was cool and crisp and my friend who was a bit of an amateur astronomer said that under the right conditions the planet Mercury could be seen with the naked eye and sure enough under a cloudless sky just after sunset we saw it quite close to the sun's edge; I've often looked for it but I've never seen it since. The reason for our choosing Teheran as a vacation centre was that another couple of members of our group had gone there not long before and spoke of it approvingly; they had stayed a little longer than we and had climbed, or partially climbed, Mount Demavend that was about 19,000 feet high. We had no desire to copy them but spent the best part of a day walking northwards from Teheran seeing the wide open spaces apparently uninhabited apart from the occasional local who viewed us with interest and suspicion as to our intent. In the city one of the main sights was the railway station, an architectural gem that had been built earlier by the Germans. Being a carpet weaving centre there were all shapes, sizes, colours and patterns on display and also for sale, many laid out on the sidewalks to be walked upon by passers-by which surprised us. I wasn't too certain about the sanitary arrangements but on many streets I saw open gutters running between the sidewalk and the road and there seemed to be ample water run-off from the northern highland. All good things have to come to an end and after two weeks we caught the train back to Ahwaz and thence to *Shaiba*.

For entertainment we had radio programs relayed from Britain but we also picked up programs emanating from Ahwaz which was under American control. *Rum and Coca Cola* sung by *The Andrews Sisters* was pounded out at least three times daily. Occasionally boxing was arranged between ourselves and the Americans to what we would call amateur rules, three three-minute rounds with a two-minute break between rounds, no referee in the ring but with the contests being controlled verbally by an officer at ringside. The styles of the two countries differed and we considered ourselves lucky if we won three out of the ten bouts. Naturally we cheered for our own boxers but were appreciative of any American who adopted the more upright stance rather than the American crouch. There were frequent cinema shows and sometimes ENSA parties visited us on their tours of army bases; twice I recall going to shows given by touring Russian groups; though the language was unintelligible to most of us the types of turns given did not require any great understanding of Russian and their performances were first class. I usually went along fairly early to grab a reasonable seat and was frequently annoyed when I was dispossessed by late arriving superiors; on such occasions I sometimes returned to my billet to read a book or to go to sleep; I was fairly content in my own company.

The army would not be the army if we did not have visitations at times by the top brass. I don't remember and I don't think I ever knew who the officer was who came to inspect our installations; I wasn't much interested. However the Machine Shop was set up to display our talents and virtually every machine was to be working, operators were called in from other jobs where necessary and Johnny Lockett was one such lucky one. Although he was a skilled man he had been put to work driving an internal *gharri* around the base on trivial errands but now he was called in to stand by a machine that was honing the bores of cylinder blocks and he was doing just that when the top brass came by. The machine had been previously set up.

And what's going on here? asked top brass.

Honing cylinder bores Sir.

I see, and how much metal are you removing?

Don't know, Sir.

You don't know! then what are you doing here?

Watching, Sir.

What's your trade?

Precision grinder, Sir.

Precision grinder and you don't know how much metal you're removing?

No, Sir, I was just told to come here and stand by the machine. I don't think it's cutting anything.

Johnny Lockett was not very popular with his superiors after that and I believe he went back to driving the internal *gharri*.

I think it was about July or August 1945 that I was transferred to Egypt, anyway while we were in transit we read that the Americans had dropped a super bomb on Japan and the consensus among us was, There they go, bragging again, and we

put it out of our minds.

We travelled in style this time -- to start with. After WWI two Australians, seeing the potential, had acquired some vehicles and started a company, *Nairn Transport*, to carry passengers and freight across the Middle East and our party was put on two of their air conditioned coaches to travel from Baghdad to Damascus. The routes had been well established by this time and the coaches left the metalled roads and went across the desert in a fairly straight line from point A to point B. I was in the second coach following the leader and for a while all went well; we kept a reasonable distance between us because our passage stirred up a whirl of loose sand. Of course it had to be our coach that eventually broke down; our driver honked and honked until he got the attention of the leader; consultations followed. By-and-by a tow chain was hitched to one of our front spring shackles and off we went. With no power we had no air conditioning and the heat became unbearable so we opened the windows. This was not a good idea because we were following close, a tow chains length, behind the other coach and we were in the minor sandstorm of its wake. Soon our sweaty bodies were caked with sand and the only respite came when the front spring shackle gave way and we ground to a halt. Repairs were made and the tow chain was re-attached, this time to the other front spring shackle. Many miles farther on this one also gave up the ghost and there were no more spare parts available for repairs, fortunately a small Arab settlement was close at hand. It was now night and we waited and waited until a relief coach reached us and took us uneventfully into Damascus. The next day we boarded the metre gauge railway train bound for Dara. My memory now fails me; I remember passing the southern end of Lake Tiberias and arriving at Haifa but I dont know how I got there. From Haifa we took a train along the coast into Egypt, crossing the Suez Canal at El Qantara, finishing up eventually at another desolate spot, No.2 Base Workshops at Tel-el-Kebir.

## **TEL-EL-KEBIR**

I remember my father telling me when I was a youngster that the battle of Tel-el-Kebir was one of the last battles in which the British fought in red coats. I suppose that it stayed in his mind because it would have been still in the news when he was a child, the battle having taken place in 1882. No.2 Base Workshops was in that general vicinity but as usual it was in the wide open spaces; it was similar to Shaiba in size and content and served the same purpose. On one of my trips to Cairo I passed through the town -- or was it too small to be so called -- and I paused at the cemetery where the British dead of that battle were buried and my thoughts went back to my fathers tales.

The European war had finished and the American claim to have a super bomb was no longer bragging, it was a reality. The debate over the use of the atomic bomb rages on but my opinion then and still today is that it was justified in that it shortened the war and saved many 1000s of lives, Japanese as well as Allied, maybe even mine. It depends on whose ox is being gored. We were going in the right direction and demob was in sight.

British forces in No.2 BW included quite a number of Jews who had every reason to want Germany defeated; initially they were integrated with us, they said they didnt want to be isolated in ghettos but as time went on and as they absorbed more and more of military training and organisation they felt large enough and competent enough to warrant separate status. When I arrived at Tel-el Kebir S camp, the Jewish camp, was an accomplished fact. I imagine that Haganah was born or nurtured there; maybe Irgun also.

The DO staff was larger than that at Shaiba and included several Jews one of whom became my friend; his parents had sent him to Palestine before the war when things looked threatening in Austria and by the time I met him all his family had perished in Dachau. He was alone in the world and he joined the British forces. I sensed hostility on the part of two other Jews, one male, one female; I dont know why, I hadnt done anything to them, perhaps they thought the British were standing between them and the creation of the Israeli state.

The office work was much the same as before, nothing very exciting; one of the lads, Craftsman Edlin wishing to upgrade his draughtsmans rating applied to be trade tested and was told to design a lawn mower for the officers quarters.

Since the lawn at the officers quarters boasted about 50 blades of grass per square foot this was a little silly.



**DO STAFF No.2 BASE WORKSHOPS TEL-EL-KEBIR**

Back row (l to r)

George. Sgt Madders. Cfn Grey. Cfn Pulgram. Sgt Wassel.  
Cfn Brewster. Cfn Edlin. Cpl Johnson. Faris

Seated

Sgt Simon. S/Sgt Tudor. Herta Weiskopfova. Lt Hackman. S/Sgt Rollason

Squatting

Tony

To control traffic in and out of the compound barriers were placed across the roads at suitable places; these followed standard army design, probably unchanged for a couple of centuries, a pole spanning the width of the road, pivoted at one end and counterweighted. Alongside the installation an Arab sat on a cushion on an upturned petrol can, waiting for customers. I don't believe he had any means of identifying friend or foe but when he was satisfied he raised the pole to allow a lorry through. There was one drawback to this system however, come quitting time he would pick up his cushion and off he would go, back to the wife and kids, often leaving the pole neither vertical nor horizontal but at about 45°. An unsuspecting lorry driver coming in after dark and seeing no horizontal barrier would charge straight ahead and that would mean vehicle repairs and a replacement pole. To overcome this shortcoming design ideas were solicited and I got busy with a matchbox, a penholder (the wooden rod type, then current), paper clips and a light spring that I wound out of some fine wire. The principle I used was not original. Simply put, the operating lever in this case the bent paper clip due to spring action would only stay in one of two extreme positions and the pole, in this case the penholder would also only stay on one of two extreme positions. I gave the model to the sergeant who seemed impressed and it was passed up through the ranks, everyone trying to beat it. Eventually it finished up in the hands of Brigadier Butters; he seemed satisfied and gave the go-ahead to modify one of the existing barriers. The most suitable one was close to the DO and this we decided to modify. At this stage it should be pointed out that design ideas are transformed into finished products by means of engineering drawings, these really have the status of legal documents to be followed precisely. This is at variance with the beliefs of some people who think that a drawing is only a pretty picture of something that has already been made; more than once I've been asked, Where do you get the model you've copied? The barrier was duly examined and drawings prepared showing exactly what had to be done to modify it to the new design and the drawings were issued to the machine shop.

In charge of the machine shop were two Polish officers whose names to me were both unpronounceable and unspellable and they oversaw the modifications. I believe their hearts were not in the job, they resented being told what to do even via drawings by a lowly craftsman but since the brigadier had ordained it they had to comply. Why don't we do like in the old country? they asked, meaning that they wanted to make a barrier operated by a pinion and quadrant, like in the old country that could be similarly be left up in the 45° position. They took matters into their own hands and decided not to work on the existing barrier but to start from scratch; they didn't even build it across a road but selected a spot near the machine shop. A steel tube was used for the pole and metal strips dangled from it to simulate a solid barrier when the pole was horizontal. To balance the extra weight of the strips the counterweight had to be increased and then the tube began to bend so they rammed a solid bar inside the tube. Two channel sections were concreted into the ground to support the tube and the pivot rod was beautifully mounted on ball bearings; the only thing was the thing didn't work. Ignored were all my design instructions particularly

regarding the relationship of the centre of gravity to the pivot point that were detailed on my drawings and that had been approved by the major in charge of the DO. The springs and shock absorbers that had been salvaged from scrapped vehicles were also not mounted where they should have been. In short the Poles had created something of a dogs breakfast and they awaited the brigadiers inspection with some concern. He was not pleased. The project was abandoned and when I left to be demobbed some five months later it still stood in isolation in the desert, a stark monument to false pride and stupidity.

With the end of the European war conditions had eased a little and I took advantage of this to spend a couple of days in Cairo; I did the usual tourist things, viewing the Sphinx and climbing a little way up the Great Pyramid at Giza. Coming down to earth again I found some Arabs with their camels gathered at the base of the pyramid waiting for people like me and of course I couldnt resist being photographed aboard a static camel. Another half day was spent in the Cairo Museum where Tutankhamans historical artefacts were the main attraction. We could also go occasionally to a spot on the Suez Canal, Lake Timsah, for a weekend where the army had established *Ferry Point Leave Camp*, where tent tops were situated amongst pine trees and where discipline was relaxed. The trip by army lorry took us by Zagazig and the Sweet Water Canal where to fall in meant a series of unpleasant injections by the MO. We lazed and swam and ate and sun bathed and for the first time saw little sea horses I found that I could float in the canal whereas I never could in fresh water but I also found that there were leeches in the water and a couple attached themselves to me.



**DO & CLERICAL STAFF No.2 BASE WORKSHOPS. AFTER VJ DAY**

Sometimes we went into Ismailia, a nearby town for a change of pace, perhaps to the open air cinema or to buy something to send home; I remember sending packets of Jordan almonds and dates back to Britain. The war with Japan was now officially over but mopping-up would still take some time and troopships of pink Brits were constantly passing; we used to cheer them up by yelling, Get yer knees brown, Pinky. or, Yer going the wrong way. Many of the old stagers among us were fried to a deep brown and could easily pass for natives and some used to swim out to the troopships and emulating the natives dive for pennies thrown by the unsuspecting pink Brits.

The army had spent a lot of time over the years teaching us to do the most uncivil things and now they attempted to re-humanise us; for this purpose members of the Army Educational Corps were sent out to lecture us on several subjects dealing mainly with the practical side of living, buying houses, mortgages, how to deal with uncooperative neighbours, a little applied psychology and the like; quite useful really.

With my Jewish friend I took the opportunity to go to Palestine; we stayed in Haifa in the *Hotel Mizpah* on Hadar Harcarmel. We did the rounds there and then split up for a while as he had friends in the area, later we went on to Jerusalem staying at the YMCA. On my own I wanted to see a bit of the city and as I was wandering around trying to decide which way to go I was accosted by a self-appointed guide who insisted on showing me the sights. I said, No -- no -- **NO** but I couldnt shake him off, whichever way I turned he was there chatting away and pointing out things that he thought I should see. Actually he spoilt my day and when the tour was over I felt obliged to give him something, he told me his fee and I gave him half; that didnt please him but he might have learned that no means no.

I went on to Tel Aviv where I booked in at Toc H, *Talbot House*; wanting to see as much as possible I parked my



belongings on my bed and off I went into town. I don't remember too much of the place, I wasn't there long enough. It was a lovely sunny day and the brilliant whites of the buildings stay in my mind -- and of course the beach. Going back to my room I discovered a letter on my bed, it was addressed to *A British soldier, somewhere In Israel* and bore at its top right-hand corner what purported to be a facsimile of an Israeli stamp though of course Israel didn't exist at that time. The gist of the message inside was to this effect, *If you are ordered to open fire on Jews, disobey the order.* I carried this letter around with me for ages until after I was demobbed when I put it aside with other memorabilia and although I've hunted and hunted it has unfortunately disappeared. After my stay in Tel Aviv I returned to Jerusalem for a few days, looked around again, this time without a guide and got set to go back to Haifa. This was on November 11<sup>th</sup> 1945 and there had been some Israeli terrorist bombings. The bus company decided to go on strike but I managed to flag down a jeep and hitch a ride all the way. Arriving at Haifa the Military Police stopped me from returning to the *Hotel Mizpah* as more bombings were expected and I was forced to put up at *The Union Jack Club* near the waterfront. The accommodation was dormitory style, one floor up and my companions for the night were all Jews, about six of them, members of the British forces. The conversation naturally turned to the unrest in the country and I was given a comprehensive and detailed account of Jewish history and of their aspirations. I was told with some exaggeration of all the famous people in the world who were Jews, some claims I knew to be true, of others I was uncertain but I didn't argue. After three-quarters of an hour of this one said, *Were wasting our breath, he doesn't believe us.* and the conversation turned to more innocuous subjects before we drifted off to sleep. The next day I went along to the bus station feeling a bit peeved to think that I was the owner of an unused return half ticket and was prepared for a minor confrontation but to my surprise the bus company offered me, without the slightest murmur, half the cost of the original fare. The Military Police allowed me to go back into my hotel to collect my belongings; I bought some Christmas cards that had pressed flowers inside labelled *Flowers from the Holy Land* and then with Louis I returned to No.2 Base Workshops.

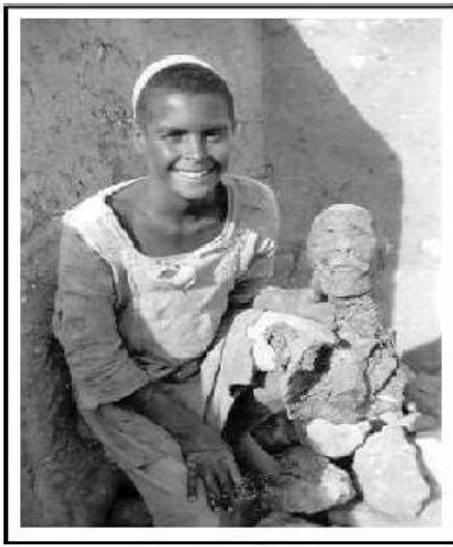
Now that the war with Japan was over the steady homeward flow began of those British civilians who had been their prisoners. Some were to pass through our area. Our work was tending to wind down and thinking mainly of the children one workshop was turned over to the manufacture of toys; these were fairly simple ones generally in wood and although we didn't have exactly a production line going we certainly made large quantities and lots of wheeled ducks were painted by me.



**PAINTING THE DUCKS**

The other main sights to see long before the creation of the Aswan Dam and Lake Nasser were Luxor, Thebes and Karnak and together with Jock Grey I went to Cairo and booked up a trip at the YMCA. Our train companions were an American, Howard Sorrel and an ATS girl whose name now eludes me. We stayed at the *Hotel de Famille* in Luxor on an upper floor. In the afternoon, hearing an unusual sound of human voices we looked out of the window and saw a procession approaching at a jog trot; this was an Arab funeral and the women were wailing. The coffin was carried shoulder high by six or eight bearers who changed places frequently, it was open topped but covered with a green baize cloth and the occupant was having a rough ride, bouncing around in keeping with the jog trot.

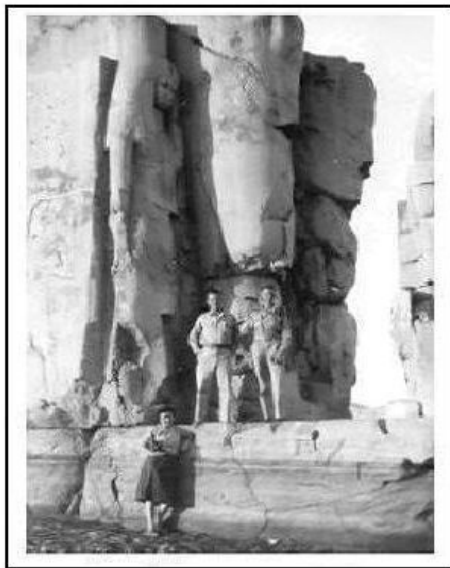
Later we were given an extensive tour around the antiquities of Luxor and Karnak; then crossing the river by dhow and going overland by estate car we reached Thebes and *The Valley of the Kings*. There we toured several tombs including that of King Tutankhamen.



**Mummified head**



**Jock Grey**



**The Colossi at Memnon**  
Unknown ATS, Sorrel, Grey



**Howard Sorrel**  
U.S. Army

### **THE VISIT TO LUXOR, KARNAK AND THEBES. NOVEMBER 1945**

A small boy approached us surreptitiously and in return for a few piastres offered to show us a mummified head; this was strictly illegal of course but we paid and took some photographs. Our guide took us back to his house and showed us some of the antiques he had acquired; he gave us all mint tea and then brought out more modern items for sale. I bought two small alabaster vases, others bought mementoes also but one lad after asking the price of a particular object started to haggle not realising that in his own house the guide felt obliged to sell for the lower price. Seeing the look of consternation on his face we tumbled to his dilemma and made up the difference on later purchases.

Rummaging through the relics of those days I recently came across a letter that I had sent to my mother back in 1945 and amongst the scribble I found the corpse of the mosquito I had swatted in mid-blood-suck and sent home; there was still a red stain on the letter.

Life drifted on. Just before Christmas I had a cable from father telling me that mother had had surgery and was seriously ill; I applied for compassionate leave and travelled to Cairo for an interview in the *Hotel Semiramis*. The officer said that it could be arranged but since my demob was imminent I would probably get home quicker if I let things take their course. I did.

Before we were demobbed we had to undergo a medical examination to ensure that we couldn't make any post war claims for incapacity due to our service; at the same time we were asked what medals we were entitled to. I said that I didn't want any medals, being only too glad to be getting home again. We were never actually discharged from the army but placed on Z reserve and were instructed to report any change of address to the authorities. In January I was on the homeward

stretch, first to Qassassin by lorry then by train to Alexandria. We assembled at the quayside; Right, lads, said the sergeant, pick up your monkeys and parrots and get fell in facing the boat. We wasted no time boarding the *Colorado Springs Victory*. She was American, a welded *Liberty Ship* and naturally had an American crew. The sleeping arrangements were not hammocks like the British but were double decker steel framed beds. The route taken was known as Medloc; we steamed across the Mediterranean between Italy and Sicily, passing a smoking Stromboli as we headed for Toulon. Being an American ship we didnt have oatmeal for breakfast but were served what they called *farina* which many years later I discovered to be cream of wheat. The dock area of Toulon was a bit of a shambles, bomb damage everywhere and sunken ships. On our way through the town we came across many roadside graves, bayoneted rifles stuck in the ground surmounted with the German helmets of those who didnt make it.

It was bitterly cold in Toulon and what was unusual for the south of France there was snow everywhere. Three of us filled in time by taking a walk to the east of the town and when we had had enough we hitched a lift back to camp. A French jeep came by with two French sailor types, they stopped for us and we jumped in the back only to find that it was already partially filled with four Chinese and one dead sheep. We headed quickly in the direction of Marseilles where I think they were going to board a ship and we were passing our camp at high speed; thinking that we may be shanghaied we kicked up a rumpus and were dropped off a couple of hundred yards west of the entrance. Next day our train journey took us up through a snow covered France to Dieppe where more devastation was visible. One more night in a camp, then on to a ferry, *The Maid of Orleans*, to Newhaven. It was not a smooth trip, we were kept below deck and three hours later we emerged somewhat queasy but glad to be back in Britain.

We went by train to Aldershot but I have no recollection of the journey nor the name of the barracks to which we were sent, I was just happy to be so close to freedom again. Niggling thoughts about what I could expect when I got to Bristol worried me. I hadnt had any news since I had fathers cable but there was nothing I could do. The morning after our arrival we were sent in groups by lorry to Woking to get fitted out with civilian clothes; we were allowed to keep our greatcoats, boots, socks, tropical shirts and shorts and then we were let loose in this large army clothing store. There was a huge selection to choose from and I collected a raglan-sleeved overcoat, a brown two-piece suit, a shirt, socks, a trilby hat and I believe some shoes, though I'm not certain about the shoes. Once I was outfitted I lost no time in collecting a travel warrant and caught the trains for Bristol, changing from the Southern Railway to the Great Western Railway at Ash.

As the only hats I had ever worn were those at school and in the army both being compulsory I later gave the trilby to my uncle and the boots also because things were still scarce in Britain and the boots came in handy for work on his allotment garden. The tropical kit I gave to my neighbour as I vowed never to wear khaki again.

## IN THE END

Father met me at the front door and the news was not good, perhaps I was still naïve but I had never thought of losing any of my family, not even during the air raids and I was shocked. All the family rallied round and mother was looked after at home, whatever could be done was done but there was no future; she had awaited my return and gave me my prized possession, an *Omega* watch, on Valentines day; she died two weeks afterwards.

The world now looked very different and the jubilation with which I had anticipated my return to civilian life faded. I decided to take stock, contemplating the future and looking back over the past. What difference had the last six-and-a-half years made to me? I believe that the army life had hastened or indeed was responsible for my conversion from a youthful naïve romantic into a mature cynic. The grateful country offered university education to its returning servicemen but I was coming up to 28 and didnt fancy another four years on a meagre income. I was not earning much before the war and although I had trade pay and an overseas allowance when I left the army, I was far from wealthy. Some firms made up their employees pay to the level of their civilian pay but mine didnt. I opted to continue working initially with my old firm and let the future unfold as it would but I was already thinking of that beautiful country still in my memory, South Africa. I applied for a job there and was given an interview and a medical and I was accepted. However I was told to wait until a future date when I would be contacted again with travelling arrangements. Funnily enough the representatives parting remark was, I hope youre not like that other Bristol chap I interviewed, when we contacted him he didnt reply. However history did repeat itself, I met my future wife, changed my address and forgot to advise him of the new one.

In the aftermath of the war I got to thinking and wondering; I had never been in a tight spot and tested; true I had been in the Plymouth and Bristol blitzes but so had 1000s of civilians. I don't think I was any more or less scared than others, probably I was average. I would like to have known just how I would have measured up had I been in a more military action but fate decreed otherwise. I shall never be certain now but if I consider myself to be average I can always be persuaded that I would have acquitted myself as well as anyone else. I got to wondering too why I had survived six-and-a-half years in the army and emerged unscathed and in one piece when so many others who had joined the forces long after me were now dead or maimed. This has often led to slight feelings of guilt, particularly at armistice-day parades.

My country had been at war with three adversaries but the first Italian I saw was a prisoner-of-war in Iraq; the first German I saw was a prisoner-of-war in Alexandria just prior to my demob and I have never yet seen a Japanese soldier. However I did have some enemies, a few real and many potential; anybody adorned with stripes, pips crowns or rings could make trouble for me and a few did. This does not mean that I was anti-authority because I did encounter many whom because of their leadership qualities I would have readily followed but there were others on whom power did not sit well. I didn't have much to do with RAF personnel and can't comment on them but most of the Royal Navy types of all ranks that I came across seemed to be rational beings. Of the army the peace-time regular officers with some years of service appeared to be the most considerate of their charges but the wartime intake of people unused to exercising authority produced some very objectionable characters.

What had the army done for me and what had I done for the army? I don't really know. I had gone where I had been told to go, done all the things that I had been told to do, (with some minor glitches) but I cannot assess what contribution I had made to the war effort. Being part of a team I was probably indirectly responsible for some enemy deaths, even making the plotting table may have contributed but I'm not aware of any and have no worries on that score. Perhaps the army knows, I don't. Then what had the army done for me? When I left I was as physically fit as anyone had the right to be, I had a short fuse and was perfectly capable of looking after myself, very different from the lad who joined the Territorials in 1939. What skills had the army given me? Well for one thing I had demonstrated that on a lucky day I could, unarmed, overpower an opponent charging with a fixed bayonet (the bayonet in a scabbard of course), three times out of five actually, theoretically I knew how to split a mouth from ear to ear (the lips tear like paper I was told) and I knew that hobnailed boots rubbed down an opponent's shin would stop him temporarily from whatever he was doing. There were some other party tricks too. Additionally I had had some experience in plane table surveying but none of these attributes had a place in the kind of life I envisioned. What the army had given me was a tour around many parts of the world that I probably not have achieved otherwise but this had to be paid for in loss of earning capacity and wasted hours. I quite enjoyed the camaraderie and I also appreciated the opportunity of living communally 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for six-and-a-half years. Nobody can keep their guard up for that protracted period and I was able to study uninhibited human behaviour first hand. The group I studied was almost infinite in number and thus I acquired an ability to judge character that has stood me well over the years even if I did become a little cynical.

Inevitably I suppose the question has to be asked, was it worth it, would I do it again? And although I fretted at times under the discipline the answer has to be a resounding Yes, I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

To end this tale we now pass on to 1952. The Korean war was still going on and I suppose that somebody thought of Z reserve. A small package addressed to me arrived one day by registered post; inside was a Territorial medal duly inscribed with my name and the words *For Efficient Service*, complete with a length of the appropriate ribbon. I suppose I should have been pleased but I had already said that I didn't want any medals. A week or so later I had another letter, not a particularly friendly one, berating me for not having advised the authorities of my change of address; actually I had moved twice since leaving Aldershot. By getting my signature for the registered package my latest address had been confirmed. Hurrah for military intelligence, they had triumphed again. I have moved three times since those days but as I'm well into my 80's I don't imagine that tracking me down again will be worth their while.



\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COMING OF AGE: 1939-1946 \*\*\*

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