Recollections from Aberdeen to Wismar 1939-45

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PROLOGUE

I am putting pen to paper for two main reasons. Firstly, Jack Anderson showed me his diaries covering the whole of his war service; they were most interesting especially the volume covering his entry into the army and his service in the 11th (Scottish) Commando because during this period we served together and became good friends.

The second reason is the encouragement Elizabeth has given me to have a record. She says that she so wishes her father had written his story because sadly so much of interest has died with him. I have doubts that the tale of my life will have much interest to my family but I did have an interesting and variegated war and perhaps those six years at least, are worth recording.

My two years in Commandos are almost covered by Anderson in his diary and I have a copy of the volume which covers the period May 1940 when we both joined up, to September 1941 when Anderson left to join the Burma Guerrillas. At this time the 11th (Scottish) Commando was broken up and the remnants, including myself, attached to the Long Range Desert Group. There may be some incidents in the period May 1940 to September 1941 which Anderson has not covered which I will mention.

G.E. – 3rd September 1992

JOINING UP

At the outbreak of World War Two I was a clerical officer in the Inland Revenue Department of the Civil Service. I worked in a large office block in High Holborn. In the summer of 1939, when a war was obviously approaching, I applied to join the RAFVR for flying duties. I passed my medical, though I was lucky to pass the eye test, and was accepted for the Volunteer Reserve and told to wait until I heard further.

This I did and in the meantime war was declared. A fire squad was formed in my office to defend the building in case of damage by fire bombs. The squad spent alternate weeks at the office sleeping on camp beds and cooking their own food for which they received a ration allowance of two shillings per day. There were a few other youngsters on the squad but the majority were older men who had served in World War One.

The first year of the war was designated "the phoney war" because nothing happened. There were no air raids on London and my fire squad duties were never more than stirrup pump drills on the roof of my office. Eventually in April 1940 I was called to Cardington in Bedfordshire, the airship base, for another medical. This time they paid much more attention to my eyes and failed me for flying duties. They offered me a position on the ground staff but I did not consider this exciting enough and turned it down.

I returned to London and, very much on the rebound, went down to Buckingham Gate where the London Scottish had their HQ and joined the London Scottish. The Scottish had no training facilities but they were affiliated to the Gordon Highlanders and I received orders to report to Brig o" Don Barracks, Aberdeen on 16 May 1940.

I do not remember very much of my first days in the army. We were chased from pillar to post by our non-commissioned officers, guarded the coastline adjacent to Aberdeen with rifles but no ammunition and guarded other spots like the Brig o' Balgonnie which was considered important. A number of London Scottish recruits arrived on the same day and we tended to keep together but I made friends with only one of them. He was a man a lot older than myself named Jack Anderson.

In my first month in the army I put on a stone in weight. Indeed, my main memory of this period was my insatiable appetite! My recreation was to go into Aberdeen on my own - but with a book - and go to the Princes Restaurant in Union Street and have a high tea which consisted of a very good first course of a mixed grill, or fish and chips, or some such and as much bread, butter, jam and assorted buns and cakes as I could eat! All this for two shillings (10p)! The waitresses got to know me and vied with each other to keep the plates on my table filled with goodies.

On Sundays we had to attend a church parade in the barracks but I had been brought up as a Christian Scientist and could claim the right to go to a Christian Science Church if one was available, and there was one in Aberdeen. Of course, a young soldier in uniform attending a church in time of war was given a lot of attention and I soon found myself being asked out to Sunday dinner. One Sunday I was driven back to barracks so late that I just got through the guard at the gate in time to save myself from being booked.

My army service at this time and for the next year was duplicated, as I have said, by my friend Jack Anderson and he kept a diary during all his war years. I have a copy of his diary from recruitment in May 1940 to our parting in September 1941. His diary is beautifully written, in great detail and I recommend reading it. However, I will set down my recollections of this period. Doubtless some of these recollections will be more personal to me than are Anderson's diary entries but they certainly will not be in as great detail nor as accurate.

In August 1940 volunteers for a special unit that was to be formed were asked for. We were not told much about this unit but we got the impression that it was intended to "take the war to the enemy". Whatever it was, it would be a change from the tedium of Brig o' Don and about a dozen of us, including Anderson, volunteered and both Anderson and I were accepted.

After seven days' leave we had orders to report to Galashiels which we duly did and found that the 11th Commando was being formed in a derelict wool mill in the town. (The next time I saw this mill was when, as a member of Edinburgh Wanderers Rugby Club, I played Galashiels on a ground that was called Netherdale. It was beside the woollen mill we occupied in 1940.) We were two weeks at Galashiels being organised into troops. My troop was No 8 and was composed of Gordon Highlanders, London Scottish and three Gordon Highlander Officers, a captain and two lieutenants.

At the end of the two weeks the whole commando marched to Ayr stopping each night outside a village where we were fed and slept. From Ayr we went to Fairlie and were put on board a boat that took us to Lamlash on the Isle of Arran. At one of our night stops, I think it was Muirkirk, John Anderson and I felt our evening meal was not good enough and we went into a hotel in Muirkirk and ordered dinner. Whilst waiting in the dining room we saw that a big table had been laid for a number of people and very shortly all our Commando Officers walked in and sat down at the big table. It was embarrassing but we sat tight and were served with our dinner and tried not to look as if we were listening to the conversation of our officers.

In Lamlash we learnt we were to be billeted in private houses in the village and were then taken to our billets. I was in a group of about six soldiers which included Anderson, who were taken to a rather run down and dirty cottage. Anderson and I did not like the look of it at all, nor of our landlady and, in spite of the fact that it was teeming with rain we started on a search for alternative lodging.

Of course, practically every house had had Commandos forced on them and no one had room for us. At last, at the furthest point of the village we came to a house where the allocated soldiers had not turned up and the owner said that he was happy to accept us instead. He was Captain McRae, the veterinary surgeon of the island, and in finding him we had a wonderful stroke of luck because he was a most generous landlord and his housekeeper was a gem.

Our training on Arran consisted of a lot of route marches over the Arran hills, many of them night marches. We practised landings from small boats and had weapon training but most of the training was meant to make us superbly fit. After little more than a month there was an invasion scare and we left the island and arrived at Brechin. There we were left to find our own digs and six of us, all "buddies" went searching together.
This was probably a rather stupid thing to do because what house could take six soldiers? However, we were accepted at a house which proved to belong to the Town Clerk. He emptied his lounge of furniture and we slept on palliasses on the floor. For meals we went to a neighbour- ing house owned by the manager of the local Co-op and his wife did not seem to have heard of ration books and we did very well indeed.

The invasion scare came to nought and we were only in Brechin for a month. The Commando left by train one evening in October. Descriptions of what we were going to do or what we had done did not lose out in the telling as we all thought of ourselves, quite without justification, as crack troops. Many friendships and alliances had been made and it seemed as if the whole city (Brechin is the smallest city in the British Isles) had turned out to bid us farewell. We marched to the station through streets lined with people. And so back to Arran!

The very energetic training started again. I was made an instructor and taught a series of cadres how to handle and use grenades. I am glad to say that I had no accidents and no one got hurt.

Entertainment on Arran was hard to come by but there was a weekly dance which had the village hall full to bursting point. The girls of course, were outnumbered 10 or 20 to 1. Before a dance the girls would be sitting round the walls, the soldiers spread over the dance floor and when the next dance was announced, there was a mad stampede to grab a girl. We did seaborne landings on Holy Island and one at Loch Ranza. At Loch Ranza conditions were so cold and wet that we actually received a rum ration. Mine was drunk by Anderson. I did not drink alcohol!

At the end of 1940 we were moved on to a one-time Irish ferry boat called the Royal Scotsman, for what purpose I know not. It was a proper "hell ship" not having been built to accommodate over 500 troops who had absolutely nothing to do. We lived and slept in the holds and spent our whole time playing pontoon. Hundreds of pounds must have changed hands in the few days we were on the ship! We sailed from Lamlash Bay up the Clyde to Greenock and after taking on stores returned to Lamlash and disembarked.

We were then sent on leave. My recollection at this stage contradicts Anderson's diary. He says we went on 15 days' leave but I am quite sure it was only 5 days. I spent a day travelling each way and had three days in Swansea. We did not know what was in store for us but I assumed some sort of action was in the offing. I said nothing to my parents about what was going to happen but they knew that my unit was something special. Little did we think that it would be more than three years before we saw each other again.

OVER THE SEAS

On my return to Lamlash I saw three large cargo boats in the bay, each of about 14,000 tons. They had flat bottomed landing craft in their davits instead of lifeboats. We soon learned that these three ships were to take the 11th (Scottish), 7 and 8 Commandos somewhere - presumably for a seaborne raid on enemy territory. New Year's day 1941 saw us still in Lamlash and Anderson and I climbed Goat Fell. It was covered in cloud when we ascended and there was a thick coating of snow. We were probably foolish to attempt the climb. However, when we reached the summit a wind disbursed the cloud and we had a magnificent view of the Firth of Clyde.

My 21st birthday [4th January] was spent on the Royal Scotsman in Lamlash Bay. I had no presents or cards because I had been unable to give my parents any address for letters or parcels. It was about four months before I received any mail. My birthday cake which Mother had made with great sacrifice of her rations, eventually reached me six months later when I was in Palestine.

Towards the end of January we embarked on the Glengyle and 7 and 8 Commandos embarked on the Glenearn and the Glenroy. The accommodation was greatly superior to that on Royal Scotsman. We all had hammocks which were rigged each evening and taken down in the morning. At this time we were joined in Lamlash Bay by four destroyers and a cruiser. We still did not know what we were going to do but we did know that the Commandos had been formed on the initiative of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes of Zeebrugge and that there were several famous names amongst our officers: Geoffrey Keyes, son of Lord Keyes; Randolph Churchill; Peter Beatty, son of Admiral Beatty; Hon J.J. Astor, son of Lord Astor and a number of Others.

One of the most important, to my way of thinking, was the Irish rugby international Paddy Maine, later to make his name in the SAS.

Before we sailed we were addressed, in all three ships in turn, by Sir Roger Keyes. He called us variously; "the van of the British Army" and "the pick of the Army"!! We sailed on the morning of the 1st February 1941. The Glen boats could do about 18 knots and it was considered that we were reasonably safe from submarines. We sailed round the north coast of Ireland and due west into the Atlantic for some distance before we turned south.

On our first day out we sailed through a very bad gale and most of us were seasick. On the following day Anderson and I had the misfortune to be given the job of cleaning out the lavatories. They were in a truly disgusting state and I had to make frequent visits to the deck to get some fresh air. I remember very little about the details of the voyage but I do remember evenings up in the bows of the ship watching the phosphorescence and listening to someone playing the guitar and feeling very homesick. By this time of course we knew we were bound for the Middle East.

We went into Freetown and anchored in the bay where water tankers came out to us and our water tanks were filled up. Many small boats also came out and the natives of Freetown endeavoured to sell fruit and other things to us. They were very expert in diving and recovering coins that had been thrown into the sea by the soldiers on the ships.

I do remember very vividly a boxing tournament which was organised. I was rash enough to enter and found myself matched against a Seaforth Highlander who was a rough and tough Cockney. He was heavier than I and punched his weight. I took a great deal of punishment and in the 3rd round was put down for the count. Later our RSM came and suggested to me that I might like to be taken in hand by him (he was an Army boxing champion). He thought he could make something of me! With very little hesitation I managed to decline.

Our next port of call was Cape Town. The "powers that be" decided that by now we must be getting soft so every soldier was lined up on the quay and we were then marched round Cape Town. We were of course, in our tropical kit though the weather was no hotter than a reasonable mid summer day in England. We felt conspicuous in our baggy shorts and pith helmets. After this march we were allowed ashore.

I went with a group of about half a dozen and this was probably a mistake. Fellows who went singly or in pairs had a very good chance of being picked up by the very hospitable South Africans and taken on sight seeing trips or in some cases to the South African's home for a meal. However, there was one thing everyone could do and that was buy and bring back on board a selection of the lovely fruit that was on sale. Nothing else of the voyage stands out in my memory. We did a certain amount of training including musketry.

We understood that we were going to call at Durban but we never got nearer than the bay. Apparently there had been a sighting of a surface raider in the vicinity and it was thought not to be a good idea to have our three troop-laden ships in Durban harbour giving the Graf Spee or some such the chance to line up and wait for us to come out. The temperature rose to a peak and did not fall appreciably as we sailed up the Red Sea. We anchored off Port Tewfik and then entered the Suez Canal. We reached the Bitter Lakes – a large sea water lake through which the canal runs and we saw the shore line lit up with brilliant lights and we learnt that this was a Prisoner of War camp which was lit up at night so that the prisoners' compatriots did not bomb their own people.

EGYPT

We eventually disembarked and were marched to a camp in the desert near the canal at a place called Geneifa. We settled into bell tents, 16 soldiers to one circular tent. The flies were terrible and one just had to get used to them. Shortly after arriving we had a sandstorm. You have to be in one of these to appreciate them. Visibility is nil and it is the easiest thing to get utterly lost even though one is still within the confines of the camp. The food was very bad, especially compared with shipboard food, and we had to supplement our rations at the canteen.

Four of us hitchhiked to Ismailia which is a town beside the Bitter Lake. We were quite horrified by the native quarter. The town itself is mainly French and the best part was reasonable. Shortly after this we had three days' leave in Cairo.

Most stayed at the Abbassia Barracks but I decided to spend my money (as a teetotaller I probably had more of it) by staying at a hostel called the Victory Club in the city. However, my particular friends met me in the city and we did our sight-seeing together. All the troops in Cairo were pestered by children selling everything from shoe cleaning to chocolate (which purported to be Cadbury's but clearly was not) - indeed everything under the sun, including their sisters!

With Charles Lock I went to the Pyramids. We steadfastly refused all offers of a guide and managed to climb to the top of the Great Pyramid unaided. Whilst on the top a Beaufighter flew past so low that we were looking down on it. The Pyramid consists of cubical blocks of sand stone about 2' 6" or 3' high, so it was quite a climb. I think the Pyramid is 400 ft high. When we came down we wanted to go inside the Pyramid and found that a guide was obligatory. We went in and stood in the vaults in which the coffin of a Pharaoh and his wife were housed.

The coolest place in Cairo was the Metro Cinema which was air conditioned. You could stand at its doors and feel the cold air coming out. We saw a Deanna Durbin film. A great deal of our time at Geneifa was spent digging out tent sites. Though very hard work under the Egyptian sun it kept us occupied.

At last there was a rumour that we were to go into action. A map of what purported to be the coastline of some part of the Mediterranean was laid out on the desert and we then practised landing on this coast line and climbing up into the hills beyond. We were told no more than that about it. To this day I am not sure what it was we were taken out to the Mediterranean to capture. One rumour was that we were to capture the Island of Rhodes but the German invasion of Greece put paid to that. The other suggestion was that we were to capture the Dodecanese islands. However nothing materialised.

We were then marched to Ismailia and the Bitter Lake where we could see the Glenearn anchored. We were transported by ALC (Assault Landing Craft) to the Glenearn and boarded and settled in.

The next day we sailed up the Canal to Port Said and were there for a few days. We understood our 'action' had been cancelled because of German successes in the desert and in Greece. We were able to go ashore and Anderson and I visited Simon Artz store - a Middle East Selfridges.

After a couple of days we sailed for Alexandria and were taken for a route march round the town. We had a film show on board ship that evening and in the middle of it all officers and sergeants were called out of the cinema. Very soon the rest of us were told we were to make a landing and raid Bardia, not very far up the desert on the coast which the advancing Germans had recently reached. Everything now was hustle and bustle as we received our orders. My Troop (No 8) was to capture the barracks at the rear of the town so we had the furthest to go. Next morning we were at sea with No 8 Commando in the Glenroy beside us but rumour had it their destination was Torbruk.

The day was spent in preparations and we were due to land in our ALCs at 11.15 p.m. The last thing we did on board was collect primed grenades from the cabin of my section officer Lt Fraser. When I got there it was quite clear that "Skin Fraser", as he was known to us, had imbibed a quantity of Dutch courage and I thought we were all going to be blown up as I watched him jamming the detonators into the grenades. In the event my fears were unjustified. When I returned to our mess deck someone managed to fire his Tommy Gun accidentally and we had bullets flying around which fortunately avoided us all.

We had known all day that the sea was rough and some time before H-hour we were told that the raid had been cancelled. The captain of the Glenearn ruled that it was too rough for flat bottomed ALCs. It was a great anti- climax especially as we returned to Alex and there was no word of another attempt. We stayed at Alex for a few days and then, for no apparent reason went to Amriya, a camp similar to Geneifa.

We then joined a train at a nearby station. We were seen off by Brigadier Laycock. Laycock had been CO of the No 8 Commando which also came to Egypt with us on a Glen boat. (On arrival in Egypt our identity was camouflaged by calling the three Commandos - 7, 8 and 11 - Layforce and putting it under command of Laycock.) We entrained and moved off and when we reached Kantara ferry on the Suez Canal and crossed it, we guessed that Palestine was our Destination. The country changed, becoming more cultivated and much cleaner and more civilised. Late in the day we arrived at Haifa.

CYPRUS

In Haifa we had a pep talk from Col Peddar our CO, who told us we were going to Cyprus. He explained that Germany had now occupied the Baltic states and Greece and it was now expected that they would invade Crete and /or Cyprus. We were going to stop them invading Cyprus. We were put on a small coastal boat which looked as if it would sink without any enemy action at all. Fortunately the distance from Haifa to Farmagusta in Cyprus is not great and the voyage took less than a day. However, it was long enough for some Commandos to discover alcohol on the ship and very soon there was mayhem. One man had his head split open. Although men were charged, the whole affair was allowed to be forgotten.

For a few days we were in camp at a place called Salamis near Famagusta and we were able to go into Famagusta which gave us the opportunity for some lovely sea bathing. The beach and bay at Famagusta was very good. About 100 yards off the shore there was an island this was just within my swimming capacity. The sea was beautifully warm it being the beginning of May. After a few days we went to a village called Lefconico and set up camp just outside. This village was away from the coast in the middle of Cyprus's central plain. The weather was very hot reaching 100°F on many days. In order to defend the island it was decided that arms dumps should be secreted in various places and this we did. I have often wondered if all those arms and ammunition are still mouldering in their hiding places.

We made friends with some of the Cypriots. We had a siesta from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. though one did not get any sleep in a tent at a temperature of 100°F. In the evening most men went into

the village where Cyprus wine and brandy were readily available. One evening we were entertained by a fiddler and dancers and a great amount of drink was consumed. My friends, if you can call them that, felt it was high time that I tasted alcohol and eventually persuaded me to drink Cyprus brandy. I had far too much and was legless when I arrived back at camp.

Our Troop leader, Captain Glennie, was waiting for us when we arrived and was not amused. I cannot describe my state next day and it was not improved when the whole troop was taken for a route march with full kit and weapons in a temperature of over 100°F. To begin with I was dropping out of Line every 100 yards to be sick: It was probably the worst day of my life. This was May 1941. It will be no surprise if I tell you that my next alcoholic drink was at Christmas 1942.

Our life in Cyprus mainly consisted of digging defensive positions. The land around Lefconico became like a rabbit warren with all the holes that we dug. On the 4th of June without warning, we were told our belongings were to be packed into our small packs.

There were no rumours as to what the future held but at 3 a.m. a fleet of lorries arrived and we were driven to the Famagusta dockside. We slept as best we could on the dockside and next morning saw that two destroyers were in the harbour. We were hustled aboard one of the destroyers, HMS Hotspur, and were soon racing south towards Port Said at a speed of 30 plus knots. On arrival at Port Said we saw the Glengyle in harbour and we transferred from Hotspur to the Glengyle. One troop was left in Cyprus to look after our kit.

THE LITANI RIVER

We still did not know what was in store for us but we eventually learnt that the High Command had decided that Syria, a French colony and under the control of Vichy France, was to be neutralised. The main attack was to be up the coast from Palestine by an Australian force. Some miles north of the Syria-Palestine border was the Litani River, a deep flowing river over which a bridge carried the coast road. The 11th (Scottish) Commando's job was to land North of the River Litani, hold the bridge and take on the French troops North of the bridge until the Australians arrived and took over. We were told that the troops opposing us were French colonial troops from North Africa and that after a token resistance they would all surrender.

That day the Glengyle steamed North through the Mediterranean until we were off the mouth of the Litani River. A reconnaissance had been carried out by the Navy and the officer concerned reported that there was a very heavy swell with breakers up to 300 yards from the shore and ALCs would most certainly be swamped before reaching the beaches. We had already embarked on our ALCs and had been circling the Glengyle waiting for the order to proceed to the beaches. We knew how rough it was without a reconnaissance. A flat bottomed boat in a rough sea is not for pleasure sailing. I was feeling dreadfully sick and was longing to get ashore no matter what was awaiting us. However, when the naval officer reported the height of the breakers all our ALCs were ordered back to the Glengyle. Hoisting the boats up to their davits in the worsening sea was a very difficult operation but eventually we were safely aboard.

Everybody was very disappointed at another aborted raid but we had little time to be miserable because we arrived back at Port Said in late afternoon and, almost immediately, turned round to return to the Litani. We were going to have another shot at landing. This time it was hardly going to be an unopposed landing. The invasion from the South by the Australians had started and they were held up by the Litani River. Our efforts to land the previous night would have been seen and no doubt they would have prepared for us to come again.

Once more we got into our ALCs and made for the beach. My troop made a dry landing unopposed, except for some sporadic rifle fire. We made for the shelter of the sand dunes, re-grouped and then in extended order started to walk to the coast road about 1 mile inland. We almost immediately came under fire from an armoured car on the coast road and two machine gun positions on or around the road. For all except those who had been at Dunkirk this was our baptism of fire. The firing became heavier and Captain Glennie stopped and took cover in the marram grass and we all did likewise.

Then on again - the bullets whizzing passed us with an almighty crack. We started taking casualties and they had to be left where they fell. Our arms consisted of rifles, Tommy guns, Bren guns, hand grenades with a rifle which could be adapted to send a hand grenade up to 80 yards.

Each Troop also had a .55 calibre anti-tank rifle. We had nothing in the way of artillery support unless you count the discharger that could be fixed on a rifle to throw a grenade 70 to 80 yards.

As we approached the coast road the enemy fire became much heavier - it was also coming from the hills - and every time we took cover it became harder and harder to will ourselves to get up again and continue the advance. We were encouraged a few hundred yards from the road when our anti-tank rifleman put two bullets into the armoured car and it “brewed up”. We reached the road and winkled out the machine gunners who had been giving us so much trouble.

Then we started into the hills and met a Commando officer who said his troops were in trouble from a counter attack. Could we help? There was one particular point from where the fire was coming. Glennie left the main body of the troop to cover us and took my section of rifle-bombers (I was a lance corporal in charge of two other rifle-bombers) and with the Troop sergeant we proceeded up the hill under cover, until we knew we were very close to the enemy we were stalking.

We were in a natural trench and knew the enemy were holed up at the end of it. I chucked a grenade and Anderson who was in my section did likewise, and then all five of us dashed forward, Glennie firing his revolver indiscriminately. The grenades had done the trick and we had a dozen or more French soldiers only too anxious to surrender. As well as prisoners, we captured five lorries filled with ammunition. They were on a road which ran into the hills from the coast road.

The remainder of 8 Troop were at the same time, having their squabble with the French and they joined us with more prisoners and wounded. We started a dressing station at this place and a medical orderly was left there. We then commandeered one of the lorries and rode down to the coast road and turned South with the idea of joining our main force who were supposed to be in the hills nearer the Litani River.

Someone then asked what about our wounded (or dead) whom we had left on the ground between the sea and the coast road. Glennie sent one of my rifle bombers (Anderson) to look for our wounded and do what he could. There was a French barracks further down the road and my troop Sergeant took me and my other rifle bomber to do a reconnaissance. I was in the lead and being potted at by a sniper who, I decided, must be in a tree. Consequently I was moving on my stomach using what cover there was but still every half minute or so there was a whip-like crack as a bullet came through the bushes and ploughed into the ground much too close for comfort.

We were now passing the barracks on the inland side and I came to a group of small trees between me and the barracks. Some mules were tethered on the other side. I thought I was behind adequate cover and stood up and waited for my sergeant to join me. As he did so I felt as if I had been hit in the chest by a sledgehammer and as I sank to the ground I heard someone say; “He's been hit”.

I was well aware of this fact and knew I had been hit somewhere in the chest. My first thought was; "Am I going to die?" I never spotted my assailant but from the bullet's angle of entry he must have been above me. The bullet went in the left side of my neck and came out below my right shoulder blade. Someone put a field dressing on the exit wound and then I had to be left. My war was over for three months or more.

Well not quite over. It was about 30 hours before the Australians helped by the Commandos broke through the Litani River defences and a forward Australian patrol in a Bren carrier saw me lying in the bushes. They thought I was French and shouted to me to come out. I thought I couldn't move and didn't and the next thing was a burst of Tommy gun fire which narrowly missed me. I then found I could move! I staggered out of the bushes and was taken into the carrier and given my first drink of water since I was wounded; then back to the CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) with the wonderful anticipation of a hospital bed and clean sheets awaiting me.

Before I was picked up by the Aussies it had not been all plain sailing. There was a British destroyer lying just off the coast with orders to give us supporting fire. They must have been given the barracks as an objective because, at fairly short intervals, a shell would scream over and land somewhere near me and the mules who were tethered on the other side of the bushes and trees behind which I was lying. The mules got more and more frightened by these shell bursts. Eventually they broke their tethering reins and came charging through the bushes right over me, somehow or other their flailing hooves missed me.

Then a French patrol of one white officer and half a dozen blacks found me. They took most of my personal possessions but left me with a pocket Bible which was in my breast pocket. The officer refused me a drink of water. (He was probably short himself: The temperature in June was very high.) Two black soldiers then found me. I saw them coming and pretended to be dead or unconscious. They kicked me in the ribs to see if there was any sign of life and then left.

Next and finally, another white officer with two black soldiers found me. The officer spoke English and asked me how many there were in my unit, who we were and did we have tanks. I told him I did not know. He then drew a pistol out of his holster, threatened me with it and asked me again. I repeated that I did not know. He took the pistol away, cocked it by sliding the top back and putting a round up the breach and placed the muzzle against my forehead. It was true that I did not know the answer to his question. We had not been told what strength the Australians had but I thought it was a brigade and no tanks. I pushed his pistol away from my head and said there were two brigades with a regiment of tanks. To my great relief he holstered his pistol and took himself off.

When I was taken in the Bren Carrier to the Casualty Clearing Station I received my first medical attention since being wounded about 36 hours before. At the CCS I was put in an ambulance and taken to a hospital in Haifa. It was full to overflowing and all the beds were occupied. I was left on a stretcher on the floor. There was an air raid warning in the evening but I did not hear any bombs. I was at this hospital on a stretcher all night.

Some time next day I was transferred to a hospital train. It was fitted out with bunks instead of seats. I think the bunks ran the length of the train and not across the train; that is they were parallel to the corridor running down the train. Lying on a bottom bunk on the corridor-side, my face was at about calf level. I think the nurses were volunteers from the British community in Palestine and I was not so ill that I could not appreciate the silk stocking legs which passed within a foot of my eyes. Nevertheless, the moment when I was carried from the train and taken into a ward of (I think) the 8th (Scottish) Military Hospital, put in a bed with sheets and have an attractive nursing sister come to attend me, was the best moment in my 20 years of life. The 11th Commando landed about 300 men for this raid and had approximately 150 casualties of whom only two were taken prisoner.

The delay in receiving any medical attention resulted in a very infected wound. At the point of entry the bullet wound was small but the exit wound was very different. Penicillin had not yet been discovered but M and B had, and I was put on very large doses of this to combat the infection.

I must say that my first experience of action had shattered me and the last thing I wanted to do was to face any more bullets or shells. There was a sailor in the bed opposite me and he had been in one of the destroyers that frightened my mules. This sailor's destroyer had been hit either by a land based shell or by a French warship but whatever it was, the sailor had lost an arm. He knew that the war was finished for him. He would return home and never be expected to fight again. I envied that sailor and his lost arm. I lived to be heartily ashamed of myself for these thoughts but I think they can be forgiven.

Other ranks in military hospitals are expected to work as soon as they are capable of it. Once you are an "up" patient you are given a particular task - making beds, brushing floors and so on. I must have been sister's pet because I got the job of being her messenger which was a very cushy number. I was prescribed a bottle of Guinness a day to build me up but I did not drink and hated the taste of Guinness but there was a sergeant in the next bed who was very happy to drink it for me. However, Sister discovered what was happening and the sergeant lost his Guinness and I was put on Marmite sandwiches. This suited me because I still had my very good appetite and I enjoyed my sandwiches.

Whilst in hospital we were paid five shillings a week. This meant that when you left hospital and probably got some leave you had some money due to you. Almost all my five shillings per week were spent on food in the Church of Scotland canteen. Occasionally I spent a piastre (2½d or 1p) on having the barber (who came round the wards) shave me.

I had two outings when I was in hospital. One to the home of an English lady who was a resident in Palestine. We were given tea and played games. The second occasion was when I was taken with other patients to a club in Tel Aviv and given tea after being to a cinema. The air conditioning in this cinema consisted of the whole roof being rolled back in the interval leaving the cinema open to the sky. I cannot remember what we saw. For these outings we had to wear trousers and jacket of hospital blue.

I dreaded leaving hospital but after I had been there for nearly three months I was sent to a convalescent camp at Gaza where I stayed for two weeks. This was just outside Gaza and beside the Mediterranean. The bathing was wonderful. I almost forgot to mention my most memorable day in hospital: The day that my mail caught up with me. I had been to the toilet and in my absence my bed had been covered with a couple of dozen letters and a parcel. Until my parents received a letter from me sent after we arrived in Egypt, they had no address to which to send mail. After my embarkation leave they did not know where I had gone. They knew we were on a special mission and when the Lofoten raid hit the headlines were convinced that I had been on that and any day would bring a letter saying that I was OK. In fact they did not hear from me until May - a period of about four months during which they could only hope.

My parcel was a birthday cake that had been sent to Lamlash but we had sailed before it had reached there. When I eventually received it, it had crossed the Equator twice and when it was unpacked it fell into a heap of white crumbs! Chocolate finished up the same way. What a waste of Mother's precious rations. It made me very sad.

THE DESERT

When I left Gaza I returned to the Commando Base Depot at Geneifa, beside the Suez Canal where the remnants of the Commandos were based. ME Command had no more use for us. I returned to Geneifa in September to find that a party of 11th (Scottish) Commandos had gone on the Rommel Raid - a raid to kill Rommel in his own HQ. It failed because Rommel had left his HQ to go to a birthday party. Of the 50 Commandos who took part, all were wounded, taken prisoner or killed except for two, Brigadier Laycock and Sergeant Terry. Lt Col Keyes, who became CO of the 11th when Col Pedder was killed at the Litani River, was killed in the Rommel Raid and was awarded a posthumous VC. Sergeant Terry received a DCM.

Commandos 7 and 8 who had gone to Crete were decimated there so that when I re-joined in September 1941 there were not many of us. We were all given a number of options: ① Return to Unit but most of us did not have a Unit in the ME. ② Volunteer for the parachutists. ③ Volunteer for the Burma Guerrillas but no one knew what they were going to do. ④ Volunteer for Long Range Penetration Groups.

I volunteered for the parachutists and was accepted but I had second thoughts and withdrew my application. The parachute unit was the brain child of Major Stirling, a Guards Officer from 8 Commando and when they were formed they left Geneifa and commenced their training at Kabrit, a few miles South. We had visits from them and learnt about their training which seemed to be resulting in many minor injuries of sprains, broken legs, etc. One very bad day when they were jumping for real, two parachutes from the same clutch failed to open and two men went into the desert from 2,000 feet.

I saw my parachute friends that evening and they were, very understandably, subdued. Nevertheless they persevered and though they gave up parachutes in the desert, they laid firm foundations for what was to become the SAS.

Eventually they undertook their first raid. They were to be dropped near a German desert airfield which they would then shoot up. Unfortunately there was a 30 mph wind blowing and they landed so spread out that they did not succeed in joining up as a coherent force. The raid was a shambles and their CO, Colonel Stirling, had to go back to the drawing board. He looked at the Long Range Desert Group who for some time, based on Siwa Oasis, had been sending out patrols in 15 cwt trucks. These patrols travelled a couple of hundred miles west into the desert and then turned north to the coast. They were able to bring back details of troop movements from behind the German front line. Stirling realised he could reach enemy airfields and other installations in exactly the same way. He chose jeeps as his mode of transport. Two machine guns were mounted on each one and they carried explosives with time pencils.

Their preferred plan of action was to get on to an airfield quickly, put explosives with a timed fuse into all the aircraft they could reach or if this was impractical they charged round the airfield in their jeeps shooting up aircraft and personnel. They were extraordinarily successful.

They needed a badge and Sergeant Bob Tait, the Commando in my troop who brewed up the armoured car at the Litani River, designed a badge which was in the form of a winged dagger with a scroll under- neath with the motto "Who Dares Wins".

When the desert war finished they reverted to parachutes and did parachute actions in Europe which required special skills. They were not a parachute regiment as such but called themselves the Special Air Service. They have gone from strength to strength and have gained a terrific reputation. They won many decorations. "Skin" Fraser and Paddy Maine, both 11th Commando officers were awarded, I believe, 3 and 4 DSOs respectively. But this was all in the future.

Having withdrawn my application to join the parachutists I stayed with the majority of the remainder of 11th Commando and we were formed into a small unit. We were sent up the desert to reinforce the Long Range Desert Group which operated from Siwa Oasis. We left Geneifa early in 1942 and travelled by train to Merza Matruh which was the main British base for the desert war. We were to go from Merza to Siwa, a distance of between one and two hundred miles, in trucks.

The night before we left, a number of Commandos went into Merza Matruh and got on the wrong side of a number of Cameron Highlanders who had been relieved and were going back for a rest period. I was asleep in the back of a lorry when the two parties, Commandos and Camerons arrived at the camp. I poked my head out to see what was happening and was hit by a bottle. Eventually things calmed down. I did not know much about it, and in the morning had to find an RAP - Regimental Aid Post - to get my head seen to. I required stitches but the Aid Post did not have any, or the corporal did not feel up to putting them in, so I had to be content with a field dressing.

We travelled all that day across the desert in these 3-ton lorries with my head threatening to split open at any moment. Late in the evening when the sun was sinking towards the western horizon a wonderful patch of green appeared which we thought was a mirage. But it was no mirage, this was Siwa, used by Cleopatra 3,000 years ago for her summer holidays, or more likely her winter holiday. It was about two square miles in extent, had gorgeous water, cultivated fields, dates and two swimming pools. One pool was called Cleopatra's Pool and the other the Figure of Eight Pool because it consisted of two circular pools joined to form a figure of eight. They were both man made and we were told the Cleopatra Pool dated from the time of Cleopatra. To find swimming pools in the middle of the desert was, to say the least, an unexpected luxury.

We stayed at Siwa for a few days and then went on to another oasis 100 miles west and over the Egyptian border into Libya. It was called Giarabub. Apart from being the hottest place on earth, it had one serious drawback.

The water, though plentiful, was very, very salty. Taken in small quantities these spa waters might have had valuable medicinal qualities, but when it was the only water and you had to drink a great deal to replace the body liquids lost in the great heat, the effect was pretty disastrous. In three months I lost about three stones. We received all our supplies from Siwa so there were vehicles journeying regularly between the two oases. The driver of any vehicle that had arrived from Siwa could sell a bottle of Siwa water for the equivalent of one shilling (5p) or so.

It was difficult to know why we had been sent to Giarabub. To begin with we did nothing other than route marches to keep us fit and played football to keep us amused. The route marches were desperate affairs and separated the men from the boys. Tremendous self-discipline had to be used to ration oneself so that your water bottle would still contain some water to sustain you on the last mile or so. We had a very fine sergeant who, at the end of a gruelling 30 miles, would force us to get in step and sing as we marched into our camp - a dehydrated body of men, more dead than alive.

After we had been at Giarabub for about six weeks I and a number of other Commandos were detailed to join a Long Range Desert Group patrol which was going on a reconnaissance behind the German lines.

This patrol consisted of four or five 15 cwt trucks (I have forgotten the exact logistics), each truck crammed with petrol cans, water cans and food. Sufficient petrol for well over 500 miles and food and water for 2 to 3 weeks. The main purpose of the patrol was to obtain information.
This was done by setting up a watch on the main coast road along which all German supplies and reinforcements had to come. In the summer of 1942, until the 8th Army was chased back to Alamein, this Road Watch was in place during all the daylight hours. The main danger was to be spotted by planes or to be seen by ground troops as we approached the high ground that was on the south side of the road. This high ground had some scrub-like vegetation and gave some concealment. We were not offensive patrols unless we were spotted and then we had to be.

The Commandos joined the LRDG patrol at Siwa. The 15-cwts contained a driver and a navigator in the front seats and two more soldiers in the body of the truck which also contained a Browning machine-gun on a fixed mounting together with ammunition. Our personal weapons were Tommy guns. From Siwa we went due west into the desert which, in the main, was flat and covered with pebbly stones and sand. There were parts which had a surface of loose dry sand and these had to be avoided if possible because it was very easy to be bogged down. Generally speaking we were driving over a flat gravel surface with no features whatsoever. It was akin to a sea voyage and one navigated as if one was at sea.

The navigator in each truck was specially trained and his main aid was a sun compass. A normal magnetic compass in a truck would be wildly inaccurate because of the effect on it of the metal in the truck.

The sun compass had been developed by an Egyptologist named Bagnold who worked in Egypt before the war. His compass consisted of a small post mounted on top of the dashboard which produced a shadow in the same way as a sun dial and enabled the navigator to work out the direction the driver needed to steer. At the end of each day the chief navigator would tune in to the BBC to obtain the time signal and then work out his exact position by taking sights on relevant stars. In this way we drove west for over 200 miles of featureless desert and then north until we reached the high ground south of the coast road which was called the Jebel.

Our main danger was from the air and our camouflage had to be good. The 15-cwts were left well south of the coastal road in the Jebel where there was some cover. We then went on foot to take up a position overlooking the road. We had to be very careful that we left no evidence that British troops had been around. A meticulous search of our camp had to be made before we left. On one trip my 15-cwt truck broke down on the return journey and eventually we had to be towed. Being towed at the end of a rope over 200 miles of sandy desert with the sand disturbed by the lead truck enveloping the towed truck was an experience I would not like to repeat - especially when we found we were being chased by an armoured car. It had little difficulty in catching us up but to our relief it turned out to be a South African one! On one of these patrols we camped one night near enough to a German unit to hear a very good rendering of Lili Marlene floating across the desert.

Then came Rommel's offensive. We were well out of it of course, but by the time the German forces were held at Alamein, we had a lot of Germans between us and Cairo. We first of all evacuated Giarabub and joined the main LRDG force at Siwa. We were then joined by a large number of Free French forces from Kufra, an oasis further South. We then set out on the 400 mile trip across the desert and the sand sea to Cairo.

As I recollect it, it took about a week before we saw the tops of the Gezira Pyramids poking over the horizon. Many vehicles had broken down and when they did, they were abandoned after we had made them useless to the Germans. I found that the roof of the driver's cab was a good centre of gravity and that is where I travelled. When we reached Cairo, my weight had split the roof of the cab.

Whilst we were in Giarabub and it was obvious that the Commandos in the Middle East were finished, I asked for an interview with Captain Glennie who was in command of us. He had commanded 8 Troop in the 11th (Scottish) Commando and had been at Brig o' Don barracks when I joined the army. I asked him if I could be recommended for a commission and he said that he would recommend me.

Having got back to Egypt unscathed we went to Mustapha Barracks in Alexandria where we were mainly employed on guard duties. I took the opportunity of going to the Christian Science Church in Alexandria and as a result was was given a number of invitations of hospitality.

One night when I was returning to barracks after dining at an English family's house, I was accosted by two male Egyptians who, having stopped me physically, tried to interest me in females who they said they had available. Each time I tried to push past I was restrained by a hand on my shoulder or body. I suddenly realised what was happening,.. My breast pocket had been opened and my pay book which was also used as a wallet was being removed from the pocket. As I tried to grapple with them one dropped on his knees behind me and the other pushed me backwards so that I fell over the other. They then hared off down the road with me following, a very bad second. Needless to say I did not catch them.

We had been given leave when we reached Alexandria and this was my first day of leave. My pay book contained all my leave money and I was hoping to buy Christmas presents for those at home. I lost about £20 - a lot of money in 1942. [At today's values this would equate to in excess of £650.] Next day I went to the office of the man who had been my host the evening before. He listened to my story, opened a desk drawer, asked how much I needed and gave me £20 without question. I for my part hastened to telegraph home asking them to send £20 to my benefactor.

Shortly after this I was told that I was going to OCTU. I was to report to the ME OCTU which had been evacuated from Cairo to Acre in Palestine.

OCTU

I accordingly caught a train which wended its way from Kantara on the Suez Canal to Haifa and thence to Acre. This was the ME Infantry OCTU. It was staffed by Guards NCOs and Warrant Officers and the discipline was fierce. One returned to barracks at midnight having been out all day on some very strenuous exercise and you went into the washroom to scrub and blanco your webbing for inspection parade at 6.30 a.m. the next morning.

After a couple of weeks I decided I would not last the four months which was the length of the course. I formed up and asked for a transfer to the RAC. Before Alamein the tanks had taken a hammering in the desert and replacement tank officers were needed so the powers-that-be were very happy to accede to my request. I was sent back down to Cairo to be interviewed by the General commanding the RAC [Royal Armoured Corps] in the ME. He seemed to be satisfied with me so that, though I returned to Acre and completed the first two months of the course, I was then sent back to Cairo to finish my commissioning course at the RAC OCTU at Abbassia Barracks in Cairo.

This was much more to my liking. There was hardly any drill or spit and polish parades. Our lessons were mainly technical: How to work wireless sets, how to drive tanks and maintain them and a multitude of other matters which were utterly new to me. Three things of note happened to me at OCTU. I found out that New Zealanders were in Cairo and some rugby was being played. I think I managed about three games, the first I had played for three years. We played on a ground at the Gezira Club, a very smart club for Europeans in Egypt. The ground was made playable by keeping it flooded with water for a week, then letting it dry out for three weeks during which time it got harder and harder and then flooding it again in the fourth week.

The next thing that happened to me was that the season of Christmas arrived and everybody who was not up the desert managed to acquire a rather spurious cheerfulness. Perhaps "spurious" is not the word because the battle of Alamein had been won and there was a certain optimism about.

However, I had been abroad for three years and it seemed that it could easily be another three years if I lived that long. I did not drink - had not touched alcohol since that awful day at Lefconiko in Cyprus. I decided I would see if alcohol could cheer me up. And so at the age of 23 I put my teetotal habits behind me. It was a mistake. I still enjoy my social drinking and most of my friends drink but in spite of this I am very much of the opinion that the world would be a better place without alcohol.

The third thing that happened was that I went to a garrison dance at a time when the ship Queen Mary had arrived at Suez with, so the rumours had it, a few hundred or more ATS on board and we were led to believe that they were all in Cairo and would be sure to be at this dance.

Well there certainly were a number of ATS to be seen and I asked one to dance - quite literally the first time I had had a girl in my arms since my embarkation leave in January 1941!

She was a very pleasant lass and we seemed to be getting on well when I asked her what part of the UK she came from. She said; "Tel Aviv". This was hard to accept because she spoke perfect English. However, she told me that her parents were Russian and had fled Russia for Palestine after the 1917 revolution. They were Jews of course, and had made their life in Palestine and life had been good to them. Ala Bron had had a good education: She spoke Russian, French, English, Arabic and Hebrew fluently. She had joined the PATS (Palestinian ATS) not because she had to but to do her bit in defeating Hitler. We were friends for the remainder of my time in Cairo which was about three months.

I was commissioned into the RAC about March 1943 by which time the Desert War was just about won. On being commissioned I received a £50 grant to help pay for my officer's uniform. In Abbassia Barracks there was a Deceased Officers Clothing Shop invariably called the "Stiffs Shop". This was a shop which sold clothes which had belonged to officers killed in action. Proceeds were sent to their next of kin.

Newly commissioned cadets in Cairo automatically used this shop to kit themselves out. I bought an officer's SD jacket and trousers for £2. It was not until I looked at them in natural light that I realised that they were not a true match. I did not worry then but when I was on the troopship returning to Britain as a Greys officer the adjutant spoke to me and told me that when I got home I must go to Rogers the Regimental Tailor and buy a uniform of the approved design. In 1944 this cost me £16.

Now started a most frustrating period at Abbassia Garrison when I and another half dozen second lieutenants kicked their heels around waiting for a posting. It could be said that it was a most pleasant life. We had practically no duties, a servant to look after us, a very good mess with very good food and a most interesting city on our doorstep where we could get all the entertainment a man could want.

We were given honorary membership of the Gezira Club and it really was a very good life style but it was not what we had joined for! When I think of my state of mind in hospital when I envied the sailor who had had his arm shot off I wonder why I was so keen to go to war again. Cairo, however, was demoralising mentally, physically and financially, especially the latter.

I made friends with South African lieutenants also awaiting a posting and I still had my girl friend Ala Bron. She was going to friends in Alexandria at Passover and invited me to accompany her:

Not to stay with her - I stayed in a hotel. It was a very pleasant weekend spoilt only when we spent a day at Stanley Bay, a lovely beach outside Alexandria. I met some church friends from my last visit to Alex and introduced Ala who was in civilian clothes. They virtually cut her dead and showed what they thought of me for taking up with a local girl. These were not the people who had so willingly lent me the £20 which had been stolen during my leave in Alex.

The desert war had finished and Sicily was invaded and succumbed to the 8th Army without too much trouble and I and my half dozen friends who were in the same position decided that something must be done. We chivvied the officer responsible for reinforcements for a posting and we were duly put in a draft as reinforcement officers who travelled up the desert to one of the North African ports, I have forgotten which, and then to Syracuse in Sicily.

There we sat in a camp under the olive trees for two weeks with nothing to do except play lie-dice which we did from breakfast to sundown. We kept a running 'book' and, although the stakes were very low there was at least one big loser, not me!

Sicily was a poor country but we did not see much of it though we had good views of Mount Etna which was quiescent at that time. After a couple of weeks we moved again. There were altogether a couple of dozen of us reinforcement officers, all for tank regiments.

We were taken by sea to Taranto in the heel of Italy and then to Bari on the east coast. The Allied invasion force was in two parts. The British 8th Army going up the east side of the country and the American 5th Army together with the British 10 Corps landing at Salerno just South of Naples. From Bari we were taken in an American convoy over the spine of Italy to a camp near Naples where we settled down once more to wait for developments. We were not long waiting.

The first contact was the second in command of the Royal Scots Greys, Major Bowlby. He only wanted two officers and there were about 30 of us eager to get to a regiment. I was interviewed by him. When I told him that I had served in the 11th (Scottish) Commando he said, "You would have known my cousin Geoffrey Keyes?" Keyes had won an MC at the Litani River and taken command of the Commando when Colonel Peddar was killed. He was in command of the raid which planned to kill Rommel but Keyes himself was killed and was awarded a posthumous VC. I told Bowlby I had served with his cousin and that he had been a very fine officer.

This did me no harm and without further ado Bowlby asked me if I would like to join his regiment. I said "Yes" and the next day travelled North to join the Regiment which was engaged in forcing a crossing of the River Volturno.

I later heard that when Bowlby returned to the regiment he said to the Colonel, "I have a very good young officer: He served with Geoffrey [Keyes]!"

ITALY

There is a great difference between special formations such as Commandos and regular troops such as regiments. In time of war the great difference is that special formations will be ordered to take part in a particular action of the kind for which they have been trained, whilst regiments will take their place in a Brigade, Division, Corps and Army and so long as their formation is in the line they will be fighting or liable to be fighting. Up to this time I had taken part in actions which lasted about 36 hours - e.g. the Litani River; or three weeks approximately - e.g. the LRDG patrols. In between times we were not called upon to fight. Now, however, I was in a regiment that was in the front line and, although you had quiet periods, you were always in range of the enemy artillery or a target for enemy planes.

When I joined 'A' Squadron of the Greys it was having a quiet period: So much so that at reveille on my first day Dougie Stewart, my Squadron Leader, ordered me to tune in my wireless set to the Regimental Net - a job normally done by the wireless operator. I managed it without blotting my copy book.

When we were not fighting, each troop in the squadron had to do some form of exercise before breakfast. Most, if not all officers left this to their troop sergeant but I had great ideas that an officer should lead by example, so I used to lead my troop running a couple of miles over rough country. As a result and because of the unit from which I came, I was immediately nick-named "Commando Joe" and this stayed with me throughout the three years of my service in the Greys. So much so that when in 1992 my daughter Lindsey met a Grey who, for a period had been my driver and she spoke about her father being in the Greys, this man immediately identified me as "Commando Joe". I found out about this nickname during an action in Germany: A tank commander pressed the transmission switch on his wireless microphone, instead of the intercom switch to speak to his driver, and his reference to "Commando Joe" was broadcast across the regimental net!

My main recollection of the fighting between the Volturno and Garigliano is of long range artillery bombardments, which, if they involved us, we answered in kind with high explosives from the 75 mm guns on our Sherman tanks. I remember one occasion when the enemy fire was particularly unhealthy. They obviously had a good observation post which was pin-pointing 'A' Squadron. We had had a great deal of rain and we had had a lot of trouble with tanks getting bogged.

Conditions were such that the tank commander tended to leave the steering to his driver whilst he looked backwards from his turret for tell-tale marks showing that the belly of the tank was scraping along the ground indicating that the tracks were getting bogged down.

This happened to one of my tanks when we were under heavy fire and I had to put my tank in front of the bogged one and then get out and couple the two tanks up with a towing chain. I managed to tow them out and this did something to endear the new officer to his troop!

The Volturno river was crossed by 'A' Squadron on the afternoon of the 16th October but an attack on a road junction on the north bank in support of the 2/6th Queens Regiment was put off until daylight by which time the enemy had withdrawn and we were able to advance along the famous Appian Way. The advance continued under difficult circumstances. The weather was atrocious and in the hill country between the two main rivers the Volturno and Garigliano the deployment of tanks was very difficult. At times, so much mud got into the tanks that the tank commander found himself standing on a mud bank with his head sticking too far out of the tank for comfort.

We were not involved in any large battles: It was more a question of mopping up pockets of resistance which inevitably resulted in casualties. Sadly one casualty was our CO, Lt-Col Ranulph Twistleton Wykeham-Fiennes, DSO. Whilst carrying out a reconnaissance on foot he stepped on an anti- personnel mine and was wounded. He was evacuated to a hospital in Naples but died five days later. His wife was pregnant at the time and a son was born a few months later. This son did join the Regiment but resigned to become a very famous Arctic explorer. When Col "Lugs" (Lugs because of his big ears) personal belongings were auctioned I acquired a very nice pair of shoes and shoe trees which I had for many years. The shoes eventually had to be thrown out but I still have the trees.

The Regiment were in the area east of the Garigliano until the middle of December and were told that they were going to hand over their tanks to the 50th Royal Tank Regiment and rejoin 4th Armoured Brigade (The Black Rats). The Brigade sign was a black desert rat on a white background. This and the 7th Armoured Division sign, a brown desert rat, no doubt suggested the phrase "Desert Rats" for the troops in the desert.

The 50th RTR were not available for a month and during this period the Regiment came out of the line and the order of the day was training, leave parties to Naples and sport. I recollect measuring out a football pitch and erecting goal posts. Another memory is the difficulty I had in remembering that officers in the Regiment, no matter how junior, called all brother officers except the CO by their Christian names; the CO was called "Colonel". Having had to call all officers "Sir" for the last three years and, at OCTU, even the warrant officers, it was very hard to change one's habits.

We had an ENSA concert at this time and I had to take a truck into Naples to collect a leave party and get them back to the Regiment in time for the concert. We did not have much time and I took over the driving. I hit a shell- hole in the road, lost control and finished up in a river.

I then had to find a REME unit with equipment capable of pulling us out. This was done and I got the troops back in time for their concert.

On the 14 January 1944 we handed over our tanks and moved to a few miles north of Naples. We were able to get into Naples and I managed to buy a few presents to take home. We now knew officially that we were destined for the UK.

I had a trip up Vesuvius. This was quite an experience. The volcano was grumbling a lot and when we stood on the tip of the crater small eruptions would take place which shot red hot lava 50 feet into the air. This was the beginning of the very large eruption in February 1944 which blew the mountain almost in half.

VOYAGE HOME

At last the day came and we embarked on the Dutch ship SS Tegelburg. The voyage was quite without incident except for a concert put on by members of the Regiment which was excellent and very good value. I was in charge of a mess deck but this did not entail too much responsibility.

Everybody on board had bought luxury articles to take home. Naples was an extraordinary city, it had none of the necessities of life and the poor people were starving but any amount of luxuries could be bought at a price. Silk stockings, cameras, binoculars, watches – anything was available if you had the money. Consequently, everybody on board the Tegelburg had the problem of whether to be honest and declare their purchases to Customs or try to get away with it.

We sailed to the Clyde, right up the river to berth at Glasgow. We passed many shipyards on the river and all the workers laid down their tools to give us a cheer but were greeted with cat-calls from us and told to get back to their work.

Before we left the ship all men had to congregate on their mess deck with their belongings and then a Customs and Excise officer came to speak to them. He told them that they could take so many cigarettes ashore without paying duty but other articles which they had purchased abroad must be declared. He then asked if anybody had anything to declare. One man said he had 400 cigarettes. The duty free limit was 300. The Customs officer said "You did say 300 didn't you?" He had to repeat the question twice before he got the answer he required. Thereafter everybody realised there was nothing to worry about and on being asked again if anyone had anything to declare there was complete silence! Clearly the 8th Army were receiving preferential treatment.

There was a canteen on the quay but we had all received a very generous haversack ration and most of us felt that we could supply the canteen rather than vice versa. As the bread in our haversack ration was made with pure white flour the canteen gladly accepted what we did not want to sell (or give) to the dockyard workers.

We boarded a train at the docks and this was three years and one month since I sailed from Lamlash. We stopped in Carlisle station and I jumped out clutching a message to be sent to my parents and a half crown to give to someone who would send it. Two military policemen spotted me and said to me that if the paper was meant for a telegram to "forget it, it was against orders". We travelled south on the one special train, circumnavigated London and eventually arrived at Worthing which was to be our base as we prepared for the Normandy invasion. I phoned my father at his dry dock and great was his surprise to know that I was in the UK.

A day or so later we all went on disembarkation leave. I caught a train from Paddington which arrived at Swansea at about 3 a.m. and I was met by my father, brother and neighbour whose car was being used because he had petrol. Since I had last seen Swansea it had had a three night blitz in February 1941 which I knew nothing about because my parents omitted any mention of it in their letters.

I enjoyed my leave. My brother took me out and embarrassed me by showing me off to all his colleagues at his work. He was still badly crippled from his boyhood illness but drove ambulances through the Swansea blitz. I had been allowed petrol for 300 miles for my leave and I was able to use my father's car. The leave was for three weeks and at the end of this time I returned to Worthing. Our mess was in a large private house and our sleeping quarters were in various empty houses in the area of the mess. We now learnt officially that we were to take part in the invasion of France.

We were an experienced Regiment so it was not necessary to spend time on basic training. However, our numbers had to be made up and these recruits and new officers had to be shown the ropes and broken in to army life. We had to be completely re-equipped with Sherman II tanks with petrol engines (we had diesels in Italy). Each troop had 4 tanks one of which carried a 17- pounder gun – the first British gun to come anywhere near the standard of the German 88 guns. The remaining 3 tanks of the troop had 75 mm guns which we had had in Italy. We went to the ranges at Kirkcudbright for a week to shoot in our guns which we did successfully and returned to Worthing.

We were told that we were going to be supporting the 51st Highland Division in the invasion and would be working with the Gordon Highlanders. Their officers were invited to a "get-together" in our mess. The first person I met was Captain, now Major Glennie, who had commanded my troop in the 11th (Scottish) Commando.

Preparations continued for the great day. The people of Worthing accepted us and became used to Sherman tanks roaming round their streets. There was one most unfortunate accident when one of my tanks was passing a pedal cyclist. The cyclist was far too close to the tank which had to swerve for some unaccountable reason and the cyclist was killed. Civilians did not realise that steering a tank was not so precise as steering a car and they generally did not give us a wide enough berth.

A similar accident occurred on another occasion when we were driving through a liberated town in Belgium and were being cheered by all the inhabitants who lined the pavements. An elderly man slipped off the pavement and a tank track caught his foot, dragging him alongside the tank. Eventually the vehicle was stopped and the man extricated but too late to save his foot.

Some officers had their wives with them in Worthing. The order came round that all wives had to be away by the end of the week and Worthing would become a "no-go" area for all, except residents and military personnel. By this time we had waterproofed our tanks for a seaborne landing and they were parked mainly along the esplanade. It was quite clear, if only from the tank exhausts which had been extended so that they reached well above turret height, what was intended. All tanks had to be taken into the sea to check on their water tightness. When I took my troop into the sea at Shoreham we went out until the sea level was just below the top of the turret. When I gave the command to my driver to do a 180° turn, he took it too sharply and created a bow wave which swept over the turret and into the tank. The driver thought he was being drowned!

The Greys had experience of invasion from the sea because they were at Salerno but there they took part in the initial assault. This time we were Corps reserve, timed to land on D + 1. In the early morning of D-Day we set off on the 80 mile road march to Gosport. There we parked in a residential road near the embarking point and on D + 1 embarked for France. It was a rough crossing. We were helped by the sea sick pills which had been distributed.

NORMANDY

The landing was not contested and the regiment was able to re-group on the left of the British line in the area le Fresne Camilly on the route to Caen which the forward troops had just failed to capture on D-Day.

I am not going to give a detailed account of the fighting in Normandy for the simple reason that I kept no diary and I cannot possibly remember all the villages which we fought over, but I will mention happenings which have stuck in my memory.

To begin with we expected a German counter-attack. This did not come, but they had deployed sufficient forces to prevent the capture of Caen. As a result, I sat in my tank one evening and watched 1,000 British bombers fly over Caen and drop their bombs leaving it a ruined town. The devastation was such that when it fell our tanks were unable to negotiate the rubble and drive through it.

On the 26th June we were guarding the left flank west of Caen when Brigadier Currie was killed by a shell whilst holding an order group. His place was taken by Mike Carver who thus became, at 26, the youngest brigadier in the British Army and eventually became Lord Carver and CIGS. Caen eventually fell and the thrust continued south of Caen.

My Squadron was sent to support Canadian troops in the village of Verriers. The Canadians were dug in on the brow of a hill. The Germans were 800 - 1,000 yards away in the valley beyond. There was no cover for my tanks on the top of the hill and I left them below the sky line and went forward on foot using a Canadian trench as my observation post. I had with me a long lead which was connected to the wireless in my tank. At this time, from another direction, 6 "Beetles" (remotely controlled tracked vehicles filled with explosives) were launched against us. Two exploded and caused casualties to us: Another was destroyed.

From my position I could see activity about 1,000 yards in front of me. I engaged it with my tank by using indirect fire: That is, I gave directions over my long lead for the laying of the gun. I scored several direct hits – ammunition blew up and it could be seen that it had been an anti-tank gun. Directly to my front were hay-stacks which appeared to have men crawling on top of them. I climbed on the back of my corporal's tank and took the tank up the hill until his gun cleared the crest. Knowing that there were anti-tank guns to our front we wasted no time in shooting at the "hay-stacks" and several direct hits were scored which blew the hay away and revealed Tiger tanks underneath. We were shooting at the heavy front armour of the Tigers with a 75 mm gun and we were making no impression at all. The Germans wasted no time in getting us into their sights and after a few near misses, I withdrew below the hill crest.. There was much activity in the enemy area which I felt should be dealt with in some way.

On my long lead from my trench I directed my lap-gunner (machine gunner located in the hull of the tank beside the driver) to bring out his machine gun with a ground mounting and mount it in a Canadian trench near mine and fire on the targets which he could see. This was done to good effect. However, a German 88 mm probably spotted the flashes, opened up and scored direct hits on the trench my lap-gunner was in and also hit my trench. Kimberley, the lap- gunner was hit in the head and later died of his wound. My binoculars which I was using were hit and smashed but apart from being half buried, I escaped.

My long lead was unbroken and I heard my wireless operator reporting to my squadron leader that I had been hit, whereupon he received the immediate rejoinder; "Then get out on your feet and see how badly". I was able to break in there to tell him there was no need. Kimberley died in Bayeux hospital a few days later. I was tremendously sorry that my keenness to hassle the enemy had had this result.

On a lighter note, soon after the invasion I "liberated" a Camembert factory and being fond of camembert I helped myself to some. June 1944 was a very hot month and eventually my crew gave me an ultimatum – get rid of the camembert or get a new crew. I sent a pack home to my father and he told me that the postman came up the drive holding a parcel at arms length!

The Regiment was now approaching Falaise from the west having covered a great deal of Normandy as far as Vire to get there. We were rushing to close the Falaise Gap. 'A' Squadron was leading and we passed the very horrible sight of a cow with half of its face blown off but still standing on its feet. Michael Williams, Squadron Leader of 'C' Squadron came on the air shortly afterwards to say it had been put out of its misery. Of course, the slaughter of animals in Normandy was happening on a tremendous scale but this particular cow presented such a sorry sight that it greatly affected us.

There was some shelling and mortar fire though we were not in touch with enemy tanks. In the Regiment we never wore tin hats but always our berets. I was sitting on the cupola directing the driver when there was a shell burst beside my tank and I was hit on the head probably by a mortar bomb rather than a shell. I was knocked out for a short while but came to and a crew member put a dressing on my head. Shortly after this Troop Leaders were called for by Dougie Stewart. I scrambled down from my tank but staggered and fell. Major Bowlby who saw this ordered me to stay where I was and not return to my tank.

I was taken to the RAP (Regimental Aid Post) though I do not remember much about it. Having been seen by our MO who diagnosed a fractured skull, I was put in an ambulance and taken back to the hospital at Bayeux. This was a very bad journey. There was a stretcher above me, the occupant of which was bleeding profusely on me and to add to my misery my bladder was extremely uncomfortable but the shock of injury had made me incapable of passing water.

The journey finished at last and for the second time in the war I sank into a comfortable bed between white sheets, just two years after my previous wound. I was a different man from that of two years ago. In 1944 I was still afraid when shells and bullets started flying but not the bowel loosening fear that I experienced at the Litani River when you knew that you were the target for all those bullets that were whipping past. Now I had a lot more responsibility which took my mind off the danger around me and in addition I had men dependent upon me in front of whom I must not show fear.

To be in hospital as an officer was very different to being in hospital as an other rank. I am sure my medical treatment as an officer was no better but on becoming an up-patient, an officer was still not expected to lift a hand to help himself or anyone else. However, I had been well trained in the Palestine Hospital and in Bayeux I insisted on making my bed as soon as I was able to get out of it. This may have made me popular with the nurses but it made me very unpopular with the other officers!

When I was able to get out and about I found a cemetery near the hospital which had hundreds or thousands of neatly laid out graves. By chance I walked past the grave of my lap-gunner Kimberley. This was the first intimation I had had that he was dead.

I also went to an ENSA performance of Emlyn Williams' play "Night Must Fall". Emlyn Williams was playing the lead and the female lead was another very well known actress who I think was Diana Wynyard.

I was very peeved that I had not been sent home to "Blighty", but at this stage the Normandy military hospitals were coping with the wounded and it was only the badly wounded who were sent across the Channel. I was in hospital for over a month and then had a week's convalescence.

By the time I left the convalescent camp the war had reached Holland. I travelled in a troop train which must have averaged about 10 mph over the whole journey. I eventually finished up in a transit camp near Helmond in Holland. This was after the battle of Arnhem.

I went into Helmond and was sitting in a barber's chair having my hair cut when I heard tanks and looking through the barber's window I saw a Sherman tank that unmistakably belonged to the Greys CO. I dashed out of the barber's and Michael Williams, 'C' Squadron Leader was just passing. He stopped and I told him that I was in a holding unit nearby. Later in the day a regimental vehicle came to pick me up and take me to 'A' Squadron.

THE ISLAND

The Regiment had just gone into what was called "The Island". This is the territory between the two lower branches of the Rhine: The Neder Rhine in the north and the Waal in the south. When the attack on Arnhem failed, large numbers of British troops were caught in the Island with other troops coming from the south who were trying to reach them and relieve them. When I rejoined my Squadron I was temporarily "surplus to requirements" so I was given a job to reconnoitre the Island up to the Neder Rhine, the north bank of which was held by the Germans. We wanted to know in what strength they were on that bank and what armour they had.

I set off on my feet and was appalled at the casualties we had suffered in those few square miles of the Island. It was littered with bodies of British soldiers, all in an advanced state of putrefaction. This was now about three weeks after the battle and the Island was still No-Mans-Land. No burials could be made. I obtained the information I thought was required without stirring up a hornet's nest and returned to our lines feeling sick at heart at the wastage I had seen.

At this time we were steadily moving forward. In the Island we supported the American 101st Airborne Division and subsequently were involved with 12 Corps in clearing an area which included 'sHertogenbosch and Tilburg. We then cleared a village called Rijen. There were Germans in the village and their shelling suggested that they had a good OP from which they were directing their guns.

There was a church with a tall tower and steeple in the village. I decided that this was most likely the OP. A couple of HE shells with a delay fuse sliced the top off the steeple and shortly afterwards we

entered Rijen with no more opposition. We leaguered there overnight and in the morning the locals told us how there had been little damage to the village until the Germans withdrew and turned their guns on the church. We kept a diplomatic silence.

Next morning when we were "brewing up" a salvo of heavy mortar shells landed near us and one officer, our sergeant-major and a trooper were killed and 12 others wounded. Shortly after this we came out of the line and spent December 1944 and January 1945 at Zomeron in Holland. It was a very cold winter and we were lucky not to be fighting. We were on stand-by when the Germans broke through in the Ardennes but nothing came of that.

I had a 48-hour leave in Brussels with another officer. I had been transferred to 'C' Squadron: My Squadron Leader was Michael Williams. He lent us the Squadron 15-cwt truck and on the way back when I was driving, I hit a donkey and cart and our truck finished up upside down. I was a most unpopular officer when we got back to the Squadron having destroyed their only transport vehicle.

After our rest period we remained in the Tilburg area until we moved up to the area between the Maas and the Rhine where we took part in the second phase of clearing the region between the two rivers.

During this period we took part in two night attacks against well prepared defences. They were originally planned to take place in daylight - tank operations at night are very difficult indeed and normally avoided. We were supporting the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry - quite the most difficult operation in which I took part during the war. We were in close contact with the enemy but could not see them and there were many false alarms.

The main objective was Udem and 'C' Squadron of the Greys were supporting 'D' Company of the KSLI in attacking a village on the railway line south of Udem, code named "Carriage". We had artificial moonlight, that is searchlights reflected off the clouds, but we met with very strong opposition from self- propelled anti-tank guns in "Carriage" plus small arms and machine gun fire and a barrage of mortar fire. There were casualties and the infantry were held up and appeared reluctant to go further.

David Callender who was acting 'C' Squadron Leader spoke through the wireless in my tank, to the infantry company commander who gave a pessimistic report and then Callender spoke to me. The situation was somewhat confused but we had to get on and I thought my troop and John Althorp's troop which was to my left, could provide sufficient weight of fire to neutralise the self-propelled guns and said so to Callender who was in overall command of 'C' Squadron and 'D' Company of the KSLI. Callender accepted my opinion and ordered our advance to continue. With every gun that we had blazing we continued towards "Carriage" and entered the village taking many prisoners.

We captured the four self-propelled guns and three Mark IV tanks. I left my tank to reconnoitre and try to make sense out of a confused situation. The self-propelled guns had lights on in their turrets and I climbed on each one and fired my pistol through the hatches but they had been abandoned. The guns were still hot. There was very heavy shelling of "Carriage" but none of my tanks were hit though I felt I was fortunate to get away Scot free as I roamed about on my feet.

By early morning "Carriage" had been firmly secured and 44th RTR passed through us. At first light we withdrew from "Carriage" and leaguered on the edge of a wood. Having placed my tank in the position I wanted it, I was on my feet directing my corporal to where I wanted him. I stood where I required him to stop and as his tank rumbled towards me, put up my arms in the "Stop" signal. The tank jerked to a halt and there was a tremendous explosion. I was blown a distance of about 10 yards.

I picked myself up and realised that the tank's gun had gone off and a 75 mm High Explosive shell had whizzed past my head to explode about 300 yards away. The corporal had forgotten to clear his gun when we came out of action and there was a shell up the breach. A box of Browning ammunition had not been properly replaced in its rack and as the

tank jerked to a stop, the box fell from the rack on to the manual firing trigger of the gun which thereupon fired its shell. It must have missed my head by a very small margin. The blast destroyed my hearing for a time but fortunately not permanently. I was livid with the corporal and jumped on to his tank to give him a tongue lashing such as he had never before experienced.

However, I discovered that the unexpected recoil of the gun had caught his leg and his thigh was broken but I was still very rude to him. He was evacuated to the RAP and I did not see him again. When he recovered he was probably demobilised. It would have been rather sad if my successful night's work had ended with my accidental death, as it so nearly did: I would not have received my MC - posthumous ones are not awarded!

We then took part in another night attack supporting the KSLI. It was another attack with fierce fighting but these night attacks were very successful against an enemy with well prepared defences and supported by a heavy concentration of artillery, tanks and anti-tank guns.

Being in a tank may give you some feeling of security from rifle fire and shrapnel, but in a tank battle the shells coming at you are high velocity armour piercing which, if they hit your vehicle in any place except the front armour, will penetrate and kill all the occupants and usually “brew up” the tank. After a battle the sights which one saw did nothing for tank crew morale and I did my best to prevent my crews from inspecting brewed up tanks.

A typical example was a Sherman tank which had been hit by an armour piercing shell at the precise point where the sighting telescope for the tank gun penetrated the frontal armour. The gunner must have had his eye at the telescope when the tank was hit and he was decapitated. The tank commander who sits or stands behind the gunner, then received the shell, together with the gunner's head, in his midriff. The remaining three tank crew were horribly mutilated by the splinters resulting from the shell's penetration. The Pioneers had the task of clearing tanks which had been destroyed and burying the dead: This was not a task for tank crews.

NORTHERN EUROPE

We remained in Belgium for two or three weeks and returned to Udem in mid-March to support the 15th Scottish Division in the assault to cross the Rhine. It was clear now that we were winning the war and that the end was not far away. This did make for a tendency to play safe and not get oneself killed at this date.

A very large proportion of the Greys had been fighting a war for a number of years and they did not relish another bloody assault. An order to scrub webbing and polish brasses for the benefit of a visit by the Divisional Commander the day before we were to cross the Rhine did not help morale. Because my servant had been wounded and hospitalised and I had not bothered to acquire another one, I scrubbed my own equipment. I was caught at it by my Squadron Leader who told me that that was not officer's work, and to get a servant at once!

Spirits did lift a bit next day when a colossal air armada flew overhead and we saw parachutists and gliders landing on the other side of the Rhine. We felt we were not alone and we had all the support we could expect. The crossing turned out to be relatively straightforward. It was made on rafts and we made it to the eastern bank without difficulty. Our advance into Germany continued and the main obstacles were mines and demolitions which delayed the advance.

I was sent on leave in April and this was a welcome break. The day before I returned to Germany I bemoaned the fact that I was going back and a friend said that there was not much to worry about - the war was nearly over. I pointed out that Germans were still firing guns and as long as that was happening, there was plenty to worry about.

When I arrived back at the Regiment, as far as I remember, we were approaching Bremen. There was a nice letter at HQ from the Brigadier congratulating me on the award of the MC for my actions in the Reichwald Forest battle.

I have no clear recollections of the fighting in the period April - May. The advance progressed without too many hold ups, tanks still were blown up and men killed but these were skirmishes rather than battles. A great deal of the opposition came from pockets of Hitler Youth troops who were still prepared to die for Hitler. A bazooka fired from a cellar was more dangerous than an 88 mm anti-tank gun fired in the open. One such skirmish had resulted in infantry casualties and one soldier was still lying in the open and any movement to bring him in was met with machine gun fire. I could see no sign of anti-tank guns so I was able to use my tank as a shield and bring the man back under cover, though all I then managed to do for him was to give him a morphia jab.

My troop was held up at a bridge over a small river. There was a jeep on the bridge with a couple of bodies in it. There were Germans in the buildings on the other side of the river and I was waiting for artillery and infantry support. A jeep with two war correspondents with cine-cameras arrived and I was asked to lay on some gun fire which they could capture on film.

So, for a couple of minutes all four tanks of the troop blasted away at the far bank of the river. Whether this piece of film appeared in the newsreels at home I know not.

The advance to Bremen continued. We were detached from 4th Armoured Brigade and joined 52nd Lowland Division to clear the route to Bremen along the north Bank of the River Weser. On the 21st April we took Baden after heavy gun fire and sniping. One hundred and fifty prisoners were taken. This was now the pattern, desperate resistance and then surrender of large groups. By 24th April we entered the south eastern suburb of Bremen but not before two tanks - John Althorp's and another had been knocked out by panzerfausts and two men killed and another two wounded. Althorp was OK.

After helping to capture Bremen, the Regiment left 4th Armoured Brigade and came under command of 6th Airborne Division. A bridgehead over the Elbe was established and at 5.30 a.m. on the 2nd May, 'C' Squadron picked up a company of the 1st Canadian Parachute Regiment to carry them on the backs of their tanks. We were given orders to get to Wismar on the Baltic before the Russians reached it from the east. My troop was to be the lead troop - we did not have infantry on our tanks.

To begin with I moved in bounds with two of my tanks ready to give covering fire whilst I and my corporal's tank went on ahead, leap-frogging in this way. However, no opposition was met though we did meet many Germans. All they wanted to do was to surrender to us rather than to the Russians! We were held up at a level crossing by a train and amongst the traffic coming towards us was an open Mercedes with four high-ranking German officers sitting in the back. My wireless operator jumped out of the tank, ran to the car, jumped on the running board and whipped off one of the general's hats. He brought it back to the tank in triumph, leaving behind a very irate general.

My troop reached Wismar early in the afternoon. There was still no opposition. In fact we were welcomed as liberators - better us that the Russians! From the time my troop stopped advancing in bounds, we travelled at the maximum speed Sherman tanks will do, about 30 mph on a good road. One of the airborne soldiers being carried on the tanks further back was heard to remark; "I never realised a Sherman could do 60 mph".

We achieved our objective, that is, we entered Wismar before the Russians having travelled about 70 miles since setting out at 5.30 am. I took my troop to the east-west road running round the Baltic coast and in the evening a Russian scout car arrived, commanded by a woman who was well armed with a pistol at her belt. She might have been a political commissar but we welcomed each other. She then turned round and, in the scout car, led her troops the way they had come. That was the end of fraternisation with the Russians. Nevertheless I had had the privilege of commanding the first British troops to link

up with the Russians. Indeed, I was the very first British soldier to meet the Russians.

There were no celebrations that night - we were all too relieved to be finishing the war alive and well and it was impossible not to think of all those who had given their lives.

The next few days saw us rounding up remnants of the German army who were doing their best not to be captured by the Russians. We had a victory parade in Wismar when Major Gen Bols, Commander of the 6th Airborne Division took the salute. We picked up a number of good horses and a riding school was started. Then we moved to Rotenburg and were there on Waterloo Day when the Greys celebrate their taking part in the victory at Waterloo. On this occasion we celebrated with a gymkhana using the German horses we had captured.

PEACE

After Rotenburg we moved to Kreffeld in the Ruhr and it was here that I organised a Regimental football team who went on to win the championship of the Division. Our peace time duties were fairly light and there was ample time and opportunity for socialising. I remember driving 170 miles one evening to dine in the mess of another regiment as the guest of a fellow officer whom I had met but of whom I now have no recollection at all. I fell asleep driving the jeep back and was lucky to get away with it.

As soon as peace was declared, we sent a lorry to the Moselle valley from whence it returned with a goodly selection of Moselle wines for our mess. The main leisure time activity in the mess was poker. No money changed hands: All wins and losses were entered in the mess gambling book and, at the end of the month, your mess bill was adjusted accordingly. The senior officers were thus given the opportunity to keep an eye open for any excessive losses by officers who could not afford it. Local leave was available and I had a weekend in Hamburg with Ian Redman, brother of our Commanding Officer.

Those who had been decorated were summoned to an investiture at Buckingham Palace and my Mother was to accompany me. Most unfortunately I became involved in a contretemps in which I was falsely accused of striking an "other rank". Whilst the matter was being investigated I was confined to the Regimental area and therefore unable to go to London. I finally received a reprimand but the real punishment for me was the knowledge that my Mother had missed a visit to the Palace. Little did I think that in 30 years' time, almost to the day, I would receive the OBE from Queen Elizabeth.

For a period we were stationed in Schleswig Holstein, near Flensburg. I was now a captain and second in command of a Squadron and I was responsible for the administration of a POW camp where the prisoners were Poles who had been forced to fight for Germany in the latter days of the war. The inmates were male and female - indeed two of them were married and I was invited to the wedding. I took the precaution of taking a driver with me and also a brother officer. At 4 a.m. when I decided to return to my Squadron, both my driver and my fellow officer were incapable of doing anything. I bundled them into the jeep and got them safely back with a black mark against both, especially the driver.

I met up with an RAF officer who was in charge of the local airfield. He was a Swansea man with whom I had gone to school. He gave me my first flight in an aeroplane, a very exciting one in which he looped the loop and performed other aerobatics until my tummy rebelled.

We moved to Munster and then my number came up and I was recalled to England to be demobilised. A very different kind of life began.

The best that can be said of my army career is that it gave me experiences which must have had some effect on my character. For good or bad I cannot say. I very much doubt that it did me any good at all but, having the good fortune to come through it, I have memories to last me for a lifetime.

I wish that my imagination and vocabulary were such that I could do greater justice to them.