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RASC
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Dear Dad & All

I'm trying to meet your request. I will do the best I can and will not go into details. I will try to cover most of the ground that I remember but I will leave out dates some of which I do not remember.

As you know I went to the Argyll's and spent a most hard no. weeks training to me then the army was difficult to understand and I am afraid I look like everyone. I have met a dislike for it due of course to my heart reasoning and not my head. What we immediately lose is our freedom. It is a strange thing that while we are in this business for all the things which we hold dear, freedom of speech and spirit, the family, and everything that made our Christian and English way of life worthwhile, we can never enjoy them while we are in the services. I wish that some of the people who are not in the forces would sometimes remember this, that It is not always an easy life to get back to the beginning.

I was then in the Argyll's about four weeks and beginning to get hard when we were asked to volunteer for special service duties and quite a number of us did. I do not think for one instant that any of us thought that we were brave but the German was getting too much of a name, people were beginning to be afraid of them and I didn't like to think I was afraid of any man.

Anyway after my leave which you will remember I joined at Galashiels what was then in its infancy the "raiding parties" which later became known as the Commandos. You will remember my address the "11th Scottish Commandos" and I think I can claim to be among the first dozen of that crowd who I believe have made a bit of history.

I have read of numerous claims as to the originator of the name Commando but I think that my old C.O. had a great deal to do with it. We turned out to be about five hundred all told under the command of Colonel Pedder a fine soldier and a fine fellow. We were divided into 10 troops of which I was to be in number 7 and of which I remained all the while. We had for our Officers two Irishmen by the name of McGonnigal & Mayne, who played Rugby for Ireland, as our section leaders and we were commanded by Captain Johnson our troop leader a fine fellow also. We were a motley crowd and came from all parts of Britain and every Regiment.

Our headquarters was the Isle of Arran where the training was very severe. I enjoyed the training though and I got very fit and hard. We had no barracks and we lived in civilian billets which was part of the training. We were trained to work alone and at the finish I considered myself the equal of ten Germans.

Our time came for our first action and my troop was detailed for Avonmouth where we boarded a ship it was a failure due to leakage of information but I believe our objective was the big guns at Bologne a job which would have suited us then. Back to Arran we went and a few weeks after we were again on the ship bound for Norway and again a failure, we began to despair of ever meeting this German. We then came off the ship and went on our leave which you will all remember.

When I left you all at the station I knew there were big moves on but I never thought it would bring us out here. It was mixed feelings that I left you all and one always feels the uncertainty of going into action. I often used to wonder if I would be a failure and it made me sometimes scared of being a failure. I sat in the train after leaving you all at the station and my thoughts were very strange. I knew we were bound for a stunt of some sorts and I wondered how long it would be before I saw you again.

It was snowing all the way up North and the hills in the Lake District were covered in snow. It was late at night when I entered Glasgow and raining heavens hard. I spent a miserable night in the Salvation Army hostel all the beds having been taken. Next morning I proceeded to Greenock and met all the usual crowd.

Our next destination was old Arran but events there were in a state of excitement, in the bay were three invasion ships the Glenroy, Glengyle and Glenearn. I was to see them for the next few months. We were in Arran only three days and my crowd was banged on the Glenroy, we knew then that things were going to happen.

The other two ships were packed with troops and we shared ours with a Guards Commando, men with fine physique. On board were a number of celebrities including Churchill's son.

The following night we slipped our anchor at midnight and by morning we were well in the Irish Sea. There was a numerous selection of rumours as to where we were going and judging by our kit it seemed like the North Pole. We were escorted by destroyers and I witnessed the power of the Navy which is very great indeed. They circled round us day and night as if saying "Don't be afraid" we'll never leave you.

We steered north for several days and were well in the North Atlantic. We were tossed all over the sea and I was violently sea sick. I lay in a corner for two days being unable to move, we were all the same and we must have looked a pitiful sight to the sailors. By the sailors reckoning we must have been close to Canada when we wakened up one morning to learn we were going due south.

Our destination then became known, it was Egypt and I think it was a disappointment. As we moved towards the equator the days then became very warm and calm and after leaving Scotland in the snow in a few days was basking in the sun. It was lovely to feel the sun and we were all in a good mood. I used to lay down over the bows of the ship and watch the fish, all sorts and sizes, porpoises and sharks and what interested me most I think was to see the flying fish they would fly sometimes hundreds of yards.

We had been at sea about a fortnight when we had our first sight of Africa, it was Freetown and from the ship certainly looked tropical. We were all greeted by hosts of black boys selling fruit from canoes and diving for money a strange sight. It was only to refuel that we pulled in and the next day was again on the high sea.

We crossed the line the next day or two but we had no celebration as we started training much to our disgust but for which we were to be thankful for later. Our evenings were our own and they were very nice with lovely sunsets. I found a little corner of the ship which I used to enjoy to myself. We had little concerts by the boys and I think we were all enjoying it.

Then came the day we were all looking forward to it was Cape Town. It was morning when we docked and a midsummer day there, although we only had two days there it was very enjoyable. The South Africans have a wonderful name for hospitality and we were certainly entertained, they took us into their homes and everyone who comes round the Cape gives a fine name to a fine people. I visited Table Mountain and what we enjoyed then I think was the great show of lights, there was no blackout then.

Good things come to an end and we steamed out again in the early morning of the third day. We then were accompanied by a cruiser HMS Glasgow. We rounded the Cape but were lucky it was quite smooth and calm, something unusual so I was told.

Back to our training and routine duties and my spare time was spent in my old little corner watching the fish. We again crossed the equator and I can't say we felt the heat very much. I got a job on ship which I did not like, it was washing dishes and I must have washed thousands and from that day my sympathy goes out to all mothers and housewives.

On entering the Red Sea we were then put manning machine gun just as the Abyssinian business was still on and one never knew. Through the Gulf of Aden which we saw in the distance and the Arabian shore which we kept in sight for several days. My flying fish kept me amused I thought then a fine sight.

After just over six weeks sailing we came to Port Said the entrance to the Suez Canal. The pool was filled with shipping and we anchored close to the shore on a sandy waste after completing twenty seven thousand miles without a single incident so much for the control of the sea by the British Navy.

I mused myself on what these places were like and one always found the rails of the ship filled with starers. After a few days we entered the canal not much unlike our own ship canal. We stopped at Geneifa about 60 miles down the canal and we were to leave the old Glenroy for a short while.

Our first impressions of this Egypt was doubtful it seemed all sand. We spent a few weeks training at this Geneifa Camp which has since seen and heard the tramp of whole armies of men. The sand and the flies troubled us as then and we were soon wishing ourselves back in our dear old country with the green fields and meadows and running water. How our home looked sweet to us then. We had a few days at Cairo and although I grew to enjoy the place I found it then very disappointing. I viewed the Pyramids and sphinx and was troubled by the little shoe shine boys who spit on your boots to make you get them cleaned. They certainly try your temper.

As I said it was only a few weeks we stayed at Geneifa and we got the usual quick move but this time onto the "Glennarn" and again moving up the canal. We docked at Port Said and spent a few days there. I liked Port Said it is a nice clean place with lots of nice churches and it gave us our first night of the Mediterranean which then looks like other seas to me. We took on stores and rumour had it that we were moving into action.

We shoved out and sailed on to Alex and the usual practice we anchored in the pool. We saw the cream of the British fleet and saw them move out to chase the Italian Navy. We only had a couple of days in Alex when we all got recalled to our ship and we knew things were brewing in our discussion that night when we lay in our hammocks was to where we were going. We were soon to learn it was Bandia, the three ships of us, the Germans were pushing old Wavell's men back and we had to blow up the road.

My job I remember was to carry the explosives and I was quite looking forward to seeing the explosion and to meeting the old German. We were all prepared to go and had just finished blacking our faces when the sea began to kick up rough and the Navy would not land us quite rightly so, as they said they could not have brought us off so back we went to Alex.

Immediately on returning the men on the Glengyle moved out to do the job and so we told was quite a success though they had lost a number of men and an A.L.C. You can imagine our disappointment. Then our ships were needed for the evacuations of Greece and we were kicked off and sent to Amriza a camp about 30 miles from Alex.

It was there that I met some of the seasoned campaigners. It was my first touch with the Australians he sure was a wild person but he's a lively person and seems to get a great pleasure out of action. I met also the Indian it was the Sikh also a fine soldier with his long beard and hair.

We were not to stay at this camp long however about a fortnight and we again boarded a train, this time a fairly nice one. I forgot to say our previous train journeys had been made in cattle trucks and not very nice ones at that but this one was quite nice and we were interested in the natives selling their wares and the cry, eggs and bread, I was to hear for long while. We travelled all that day and passed through the Nile valley which is very fertile but to mind a little artificial it is mostly all irrigation we came to "Kantara" on the Suez and crossed the canal and after changing trains we knew our destination was to be Palestine we were all excited.

My first glimpse of it was in the early morning. I think it would be April after the bareness of Egypt it was a refreshing sight. The sides of the railway tracks are filled with orange and lemon groves and for about one piastre worth about 2½d one could get as many as one wanted.

Our journey was completed at Haifa and we made our camp in a field below Mount Carmel. It was a lovely warm night and as I lay on my bed looking at the stars with fireflies fluttering around you, I thought of the crusaders no doubt they had camped in this self-same spot it was a comforting thought.

We were not to see much of Haifa though and the next day was to see us on a dirty old boat bound for Cyprus. We heard of the fall of Greece and were wondering how our old Glen ships had fared. I was down the hold of the ship but we were not greatly inconvenienced and the Med was at its best and is really blue.

It was a nice trip and the Island of Cyprus was seen in a few hours. It always interests me looking upon land from the sea because you nearly always get a wrong impression of it.

We docked in Famagusta harbour only a small one and were surprised to find all the people speaking English and very friendly. We made our camp a few miles out of the town called Salamis. In the days of the early Christian Church St Paul and St Barnabas had stayed there it used to be a town but was now a wood and we again slept among the trees, it was good though and the warm nights makes soldiering easier.

After a few days my troop was ordered to a little village about 30 miles from where we were by the name of Cordia (*looks like*). It was a hard march and was really our first march in the heat. It knocked a few out and my feet were in bad shape a complaint that has troubled me on all our marches.

We were to spend six weeks confined in a little date and fig grove which were filled with interest. Our time was spent hunting snakes keeping fit doing a guard on the top of a tree and on the roof of a Greek church. I made friends with a German Jew doctor a refugee from Germany and I got a real insight of the German methods. He was a good fellow and served in the last war as a "Hugplan" if that is how they spell it.

A couple of weekends I had at Famagusta and there one gets the most perfect bathing but it was not all fun and we trained very hard.

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In a few hours we made Port Said and immediately went on board our old ship the Glenearn, she had been in Crete and had a few holes in her. I had to go in sick bay much to my disgust but I was certainly feeling ill. I lay in my bunk for three days when the news came that we were sailing into action then I had to get up.

We pulled out I think about the sixth of June in the afternoon and then learned of the attack on Syria at two o'clock next morning. We had our instructions made known to us then, the Australians were attacking along the coast road and we were to go in to support them my troops job was to save the bridge over the Litani after swimming the river, my job was to rush the bridge while the rest got over, when I saw the position later I knew it would have been me who would get rushed.

Final instructions were given and we made our wills and said a silent prayer. We took to our ALCs and were lowered into the water and there we stopped for two hours tossing and turning about. I must still have been feeling not too well and I was violently sea sick as I think we all were we realised plans had gone astray and back to the ship we went and we were then certain that action was not for us.

Back to Port Said but we had thought too soon and were again out at sea. This time we all knew it was do or die. Plans were changed and this time our job was to take machine gun positions and trench mortars in the hills with orders to shoot all Germans.

It was dawn when we were landed on to the beach and everyone was shooting at us. I hit the earth quicker than I have ever gone down before. The moon was sinking below the horizon and I wondered if I would see it again. After gathering our scattered wits we advanced forward and took our first objective a machine gun post. We lost a few lads on the beach and one poor fellow was shouting for his wife. He was lying mortally wounded in the side and I realised then the foolishness of war.

We then attacked into the hills my other section of the troop going one way and we the other, we were the lucky ones the other chaps walked into an ambush and only a few came out. We accomplished our mission and took the whole trench mortar platoon with about eighty prisoners thus clearing the river for the Australians.

We only lost one man I did not see him go he must have rolled down the hill poor chap. He was only young and very brave. I was close myself once or twice and I remember lying behind a small bush and the bullets were snipping the tops off and were falling on my cheek. "The Mother of God" must have heard me because I was able to get over the hill without being seen.

The job was now to take back our prisoners this we did after spending about 18 hours in the hills I never was more glad to see a diggers face as I was then. I then saw the Aussie in action and he is a fine soldier. We then learned about the fate of our friends and learned of the death of our CO who got killed on the beach. The lads started to come in and some had had gruelling times and lost their friends.

Next day we were all withdrawn we had done our job and it had left us all a bit sick. It was considered a fine piece of work which were the acclamations of the Australians. Everybody had done his job well except me I was a failure. It is only the young who can kill and shirk responsibility. It is not for me.

I could tell you tales of valour and courage you would not think possible but it would take a book. I shall leave it for a later date. A word for the French. Do not believe that the French are bad soldiers, they are not. Their heart was with us but they fought and died as soldiers and I have no need to mention the "French Foreign Legion" their reputation speaks for themselves.

We returned to Cyprus after a short stay in Palestine but we were not the same crowd. We hardly spoke and our thoughts were for those who had not returned, for myself I was disturbed mentally and I am afraid I said harsh things about the leaders of nations who are responsible for these affairs. We did not do as much work and spent most of our time swimming and trying to get fit. I made friends with a Greek fellow who gave me some nice times.

We then learned that we were to be broken up and after a few weeks we were returned to Egypt and back to our spot Armriza where we spent six weeks with frequent visits to Alexandria. At this time the Germans had started their nightly offensive and every night we had fireworks. I did not know whether to go back to the Argyll's or what but this is where my driving came in and by chance I came into the RASC.

I was sent back to Geneva on the Suez and from there to Cairo where I joined this unit and have been with it ever since. This part of soldiering is more to my liking. I like to be alone in the wide open spaces and one regains that old independence. I went up the desert at the beginning of this 1941 campaign. I think I have said most about that and from there to Syria and I have been knocking about here ever since.

Now and again I see a few of the old crowd but there only a few left. They were good fellows with I suppose all the human weaknesses but they had courage and they proved themselves beyond all doubt as good soldiers. They took about twelve months of my life. I could have spent it much better I know but it was an experience.

Having read this letter I know I could have written much more but it would have taken a book so I will have to leave it for a more appropriate time God willing & until then

With most affection for you all

Yours Tommy

P.S. The Rosaries are for Mum Dad Gordon & Mary and no one else.
"Show this indulgence paper to the Rimmers"

Dear everyone

I hope you like your rosaries and it is up to you to decide on which ones you want.

The medals: Give one to Father Murray and if you wish Mr Hines and John Carr. That leaves two. I suggest Dan and Nora. Give a holy picture to Alice Grimshaw who often writes me with the rest. I leave it to you but only give them to people who appreciate them and make it clear to them that they have touched the spot where Our Lord was laid in the grave and that they in turn must only give them to people who can obtain the special indulgencies that you will find on the little piece of paper.

The larger medal is for Mary. The sea shells all are from Galilee and are just novelty.

Affectionately Tommy .