Memories of an Army Commando

Herbert Dixon

The Buffs and No 2 Commando

Provided to the Commando Veterans Archive

Courtesy of his grandson Tim Huelin.

EARLY RECOLLECTIONS OF AN IDLE FELLOW
BY
HERBERT DIXON

My name is Herbert Dixon and I was born on the day of our Lord 11th August 1916. Of course at the time, having no knowledge of events, by all accounts things in general were very bleak for our nation: The Somme Offensive had run into trouble on the first day with casualties numbering 60,000. One of these being Mrs.Newsteads boy, a mere lad of around 18 years of age, living at the top of our street. Conscription had been introduced and even on the day of my birth Zeppelins were in the vicinity of the Dartford area. This fact I checked up from my local library. Also strict rationing of food stuffs due to the tonnage of shipping lost and for the poorer people like our family it was very hard to overcome.
The name of our street was Walnut Tree Avenue, it consisted of 5 blocks of houses·6 houses per lock. At the entrance of the street was the public house, The Cressy Arms and two houses, one with a court yard where cattle was slaughtered. I lived at No.34 with my mother Eliza, Father Herbert Alfred, sister Jessie, who later went into service at the local doctors place, brothers Alfred, Harry, Sidney, William and Albert. My mother had also another daughter, possibly born in 1912, who only survived a few months, her name being Dollie. Later on in years when this unfortunate mites name came up my mother would shed a few tears. She was a very loving woman. My father worked at the local Paper Mills (Daily Telegraph), I think it was called then. He worked in the Power House, a large steam driven piston turned the engine which ran the 5 paper making machines. My eldest brother Alf worked then as well, starting at the age of 13. This turned out in later years as his only lifetime job and finishing up Chief Paper Maker and by all accounts, a good one he was too. My brother's small wage, plus my father's helped a great deal in providing, I expect a very meagre diet. This was also supplemented by my father doing a part time job. If I can recall what was said in later life, the Publican at the Bull in Hawley had a sort of licence to supply local hospitals with vegetable produce. My father before starting shift work and even after completing shift work would go with horse and cart to these hospitals, some of which had been converted for troops who had been wounded in France. Parts of these places were taken over by Colonial Troops (who at the time, compared to our troops, drew fabulous wages), not for them, 2 bob a day. The publican could exploit this and so my father would also hide amongst his produce bottles of hard stuff—whisky and gin. A sort of black market you see was started and helped the family income.

My earliest recollection I can recall of happenings—one night by candle light my sister Jessie took me to the outside lavatory, they weren't called toilets in those days. Hanging on the "lav" wall was a large tin tub which every Friday night was taken down put in front of the fire and we got ready for our weekly bath. Thinking back on the date it must have been late autumn or early winter of 1918. Being just a little lad and afraid of the dark my sister and I were terror stricken by violent hammering on the wall, the large tub was dislodged, and fell with a large bang on the floor and shouts from my brothers "Von Kluck is coming"! In my terror I thought it was an air raid. Then roars of laughter and we both knew that it was all a joke. In later years I wondered why my brothers used the name of a German general who was only known for a brief time in 1914 for his offensive against the British army at Mons? Later in that same year he was relieved of his command and given a lesser post. My reason for writing this—why didn't they say "Hindenburg's coming". Still my idle thoughts again. I also recall being taken out in a push chair, wearing a velvet dark hat pulled around my ears. Into Dartford we went. The smell of coffee being grounded in the shops·butter being wrapped—broken biscuits and the herds of cattle being driven on market day through the streets. The trams which terminated at the top of our street and ran to "Pump Corner" at the end of Lowfield Street was a blessing to one and all. A great help to the workers of Vickers who left off work at 12 midday for an hours dinner break and to get them back in time.

Christmas, Mayday, Empire day,—the trams were festooned in coloured paper, ribbons and coloured lights which I expect brought a little joy to some of the people. When I was just turned 3 years of age we had a lodger, a young man who I think had exchanged letters with my sister Jessie. For all I know he stayed a few months, perhaps having no kin on being demobbed and having no home to go to. His name was Arthur Law. He must have kept my brothers gaping with his exploits and tales of foreign parts · serving in India · mostly on the North-West Frontier. He had numerous photos mostly of outlying forts and such as camel soldiers and cavalry on patrols etc. He also had his bugle with all its trappings and I expect was played throughout the day by my elder brothers. Where did he sleep? God knows. In the house were two large bedrooms and a little box room. I think at that time my sister out in service at the local doctor's place. During this time my sister Kitty was born and Arthur told me I had a baby sister. It's quite true I remember these things.

Another episode I remember before starting school was when my young sister, Kitty, Albert and myself were rushed to the hospital, (Livingstones) with suspected Diphtheria which luckily turned out to be Scarlet Fever. People by all accounts rarely got over the former fever. If I remember rightly I was there about 5 weeks and became so attached to the nurses I cried when they took me home. The memories of my starting school life are still with me, plenty of tears for the first few weeks. I just didn't want to go and even when the time came and school life was finished, I never really came to terms with it. A trick of mine so I was told in later life by my brothers was to put my boots on the wrong feet so I could hardly walk. After a few days I settled down and the four of us would walk together. It was just over a mile to school and so we covered · four miles per day-back home to dinner-twenty miles per week. Sometimes in extremely wintery bad weather we took sandwiches and a bottle of cold tea for our midday meal. I once added up how many miles or thereabouts I walked in my learning day, the amount astounded me. Again in very snowy and icy conditions I have been put on the bus, and on more than one occasion having to get off at the bottom of Church Hill and help push the bus to the top. You see it was a stiff gradient.

I loved holidays best, I used to think that the end of July would never come. Just imagine a five week break. When I was very young I remember having picnics in the vast field at the top of our road, making daisy chains and drinking fizzy sherbet drinks. There were hosts of children of my age, born in our street, or later came to live there. Two schools were used by the children then - seemingly the better off pupils went to the National School of Dartford - the remainder to Wilmington. Again I say-although I never liked school, the teaching for that time of day was excellent. When I first started the headmaster was to my recollection called "Gaffer" Hoares and he wore a mortar board hat and cloak. When he retired his place was taken by an ex-army officer by the name of Mr. Walker. I never did like the man but I fell in love with his wife, possibly my first love. They were housed in a building between the boys and the girls school. What a pretty woman she was, I used to wonder if she loved her husband?

My first teacher when leaving the infants was a Mrs Hunt, and what a dear lady she was. Rumours said her husband had been killed in France in early November 1918. What a jest of fate? She lived somewhere around the area of the swimming baths and of course travelled by bus. She ticked me off a few times when sitting in the top of the bus and seeing me and my pals climbing the chestnut trees. All to our good—what if we fell? Thinking back, our village was beautiful and the loveliest place on earth to me. The winters too seemed more snowy, were they? Christmas time, staying late in class to hang up the home made paper chains. Rehearsing little pieces of matter that were put in for not only the other children but the governors as well. My little sister Kitty at 5 years old acted her first part in Uncle Toms Cabin as little Eva. She was a pretty child with fair hair.

My school life at that time seemed never ending. With the advent of Mr.Walker taking over, a newer and harder discipline came into being. The cane was used more often, for even minor things. The man I expect had been given orders to sharpen things up, and he did. Even the kinder and happier teachers seemed to change under this new authority. He installed 4 classes in the boys school—Nelson, Wellington, Marlborough and Cromwell. I was in Cromwell, and in a way, in later years treasured the man next to William Shakespeare. Maybe because he put payed to Charles I, (the King, who could do no wrong). I never was a lover of the monarchy which I feel have helped to make this nation, a nation of two classes. Still that's neither here nor there. Another thing to remember in my life is that I would have known the Duke of Wellington (not like the Iron Duke, but a pleasant man, who was an officer in our unit, and he died at Salerno).

Back to early days. Our street was composed of rather a motley group of families: 4 fish mongers, 2 sweet shops and 1 green grocers. Horses were kept in sheds in the back yard, I remember at Roberts' "Old Tom" stabled two doors away—breaking wind nearly all the time that the cart was being loaded up. Fish was one of our main diets—plentiful & a far better quality that one gets today. Being young I feel I was always welcome visiting the men (Mr.Bristows) to see them cutting up the fish-boiling the cods roe and also boiling various shell fish, these made rather sorrowful sounds - fancy being boiled alive!
All this work was done in the back yards—regardless of the weather. It must have been terrible for them in the very bad icy winters. For tea, when in season my mother bought sprats - these laid on a tin over a roaring fire in the stove - lovely, tasty and we lived liked lords (during these times).

I still recall a time before I went to school of being taken up to a large meadow in the village (now the park, but of course then a vast field with mansions built here and there) Here the cavalry put on a sort of Tattoo. Large tents were erected and fine ladies and officers sat around tables to watch the troops perform. Lancers galloped doing I expect a form of pig sticking, races over lattice hurdles, sword waving and jumping through fire. Wonderful!!

My father was a good gardener, having an allotment along Hawley Road, close to the local public house The Bull. In the summer, especially at pea picking time · runner bean, gooseberry times he would take me along with him. One of my jobs would be carrying buckets of water from a stream running along the back of Vickers, to water the plants. Wild rabbits were the scourge in the allotments and young peas seemed to be their favourite repast. After an hour or so we gathered our crops, loaded up the wheel barrow and headed for the Bull. What wonderful times, my father helping behind the bar, I drinking glasses of ginger beer.

Myself and mates favourite sport was to make a clumsy sort of toboggan and slide down the slopes of the abandoned sand pits or else climbing the trees on the summit. From one of those trees on a very clear day we could watch the shipping going up to the port of London and could discern Tower Bridge and St.Pauls Cathedral that at a range of perhaps I6 miles plus. I have spoken to people about it in later years and I'm sure they thought I was pulling their leg, I would swear on a stack of bibles that this is true. Also when I was very young I used to chop up box wood on wash day, stocking up the copper fire for my dear mother. I loved doing this. Meanwhile my mother would sing ·she liked to sing. One of her songs, I think was called "Oh that mistletoe bough" a song about Christmas and the rich family playing games of hide and seek. It appears in the song that the mother is blind folded and the children hide around the house-the youngest girl clambers into an old large trunk which closes on her. It appears that they never found her—this used to make me and my sister cry. We were I expect a happy family, contented with our lot. Going back to singing, only Albert (Snowy as he was called on account of his blond hair) and myself seemed to voice the airs. Later as a young man with my pals and taken drink would burst into song; later on in my army days being egged by my comrades to sing funny songs.

Reverting back to the street where I lived, life then in the 20's was in some respects like at the present- I don't mean the extreme poverty then but family life. In my knowledge there was at least 3 wife beaters and the least said the better about those. Two fellows deserted their wives one leaving the poor woman with six children. Today in these circumstances the state would assist, but not then, I'm afraid these people were left to get on with it-the governing classes didn't know or seem to care how the poor classes lived. One of these six children, a boy about l2 was sent away to a reform school for his consistent playing of truant. A certain Mr. Fox, a School Board man was his undoing. All of us children hated him. Sunday evening in the summer was a time to look forward too. All the family except my eldest sister and two brothers would go for the usual walk. Off to South Darenth and stop at The Chequers Inn-round the water cress beds-out through the farms by footpath and a final stop at the Bull. Getting home very tired but happy.

Us children always went to Sunday School whether we liked it or not-every 4th Sunday off to church. There the preacher was a very old man, Rev. Cole Greenaway, his wife was an old tartor. The sermons were never full of fire and was apt to send one to sleep. I continued going to Sunday School up to the age of I5.

Our street was full of children and we seemed to have formed a strong union, especially the boys and kept this with us into manhood. The rest of the local streets were very wary of us. At that time I became strong friends with a newcomer, an adopted boy from Somerset, taken under the wings of Mr. and Mrs.Lamb. His name was Don Dix. He was big of stature, fine looking and afeared of no one. Living in Dartford was his cousin whose parents had left Taunton to make their life in Kent. His name was Alex Stock and we three became firm friends. He went to the Grammar School. Later on in life he played professional football for two noted London clubs and later managed Arsenal and an Italian side-finishing up with Bournemouth.

We had some notable sporting types in the street: Quilly Mills, a bare fist fighter and a very nice wife perhaps in their eighties-at one time stabling their donkey in their front room. Down at the bottom of the street lived the Hobbis family, a very quiet sort of couple who kept to themselves - having one son, Harold. He was perhaps 3-4 years older than I and was doted on by his parents. He was a gifted footballer. After leaving school he joined Charlton Athletic and delighted the vast crowds with his dribbling down the wings. I remember that in one season he scored two goals direct from the corners. I'm sure that if at that time of day he had played for Arsenal or Spurs he would have been capped many times. He did represent the English League side on one occasion. This side with Sam Bartram in goal must have been the best ever Charlton XI. For poor Harold, tragedy struck one Saturday afternoon during a F.A. Cup match, (I believe a semi-final) against Aston Villa. He broke his leg and that I'm afraid put paid to his football career.

Another sportsman in a different light was my eldest brother Alfred—a very good middle distance runner- winning stacks of cups and medals and represented the County on many occasions. Next door to us lived the Salmons and the husband played for Dartford Football Club and once had his nose broken during the Boxing Day derby against Northfleet. Mrs. Salmon had three children, the youngest boy dying of consumption about 4 years of age. The daughter, Doris, when leaving school became an usher in the local cinema. Its funny in a way, she closely resembled a star of that day; Norma Shearer.

I expect the happiest days of my life was to be awakened early on a summer Sunday morning, taken by my brother Harry on the cross—bar of his bike taken up to Parsons Farm where he worked. We went to feed the pony, Peggy, brush her down- first to the pond and then a gallop around the secluded orchard. Around the apple trees were large nests filled with eggs. This horse it seemed

delighted in kicking the eggs against the trunks of the trees and what a messy affair it looked with most of the eggs addled. What birds were they? Partridge possibly. One of my brothers jobs was to convey Mrs. Parsons in a pony and trap on shopping expeditions and such. Manys the times I've been passenger into Dartford going to get farm seed and horse feed from Striclands. The farms main produce was fruit growing, its foreman and a couple of regular workers were housed just off the farm house in the High Road. I don't expect today, in fact I'm sure the quality could not be beaten today. Pears apples and plums in those days I could tell the name of most, if even blindfolded. The nicest apple was the Blenhiem and plum was the Black Diamond, although of course the Vics were lovely. In one year, such a glut, pick a peck of Vics: price 6d .

My mother sometimes worked at the farmhouse in my early days at school. Helping out cooking etc when required. She was often called out, sometimes in the dead of night to assist in some poor female in labour. If anybody died they sent for Mrs.Dixon for the "laying out". My mother many times in later life said that if she could have her time again she would have been a district nurse. When very young she had worked at the Gore Hospital, in the Laundry department.

Once a year we were taken to Southend for the day- buckets and spades-catching an early train to Gravesend, crossing the Thames by ferry to the Essex side. This was the most exciting time, going down in the engine room and see all the workings. I always remember on one trip peering out of the carriage window and getting a bit of grit in my eye from the coal engine and spending the whole day in discomfort and having pain all day.

Thinking back on little things, some episodes come to mind: Cissie B whose parents lived close by came home to stay for a brief holiday from service, one of her first duties was to come along and see myself and Kitty. I remember her as one of the most beautiful ladies I have ever seen. She would pick me up and clasp me to her breasts, I always felt she had a great love for me. She dressed in lovely clothes and wore fine furs around her neck and be-decked herself in lovely perfumes. It appears that her employers being very rich spent most of their time in Southern France and she was I expect a ladies maid. It was said by older folk that she was an "old man's darling", what that meant I never did find out.

Once a year (I think at Easter Sunday) or possible Whitsun, the poor of the parish went to Wilmington School for gifts-peas and flour-left by some long forgotten trust. The more elder people got more flour but our peas were always welcome, my father even using some for planting. I shall always remember the "Beating of the Bounds". This perhaps took place every 1O years or so. About 12 children-church officals-some school masters started out at about 9 am. We had to go through the confines of Vickers Munition factory, the men having to give to the gate-man their tobacco and matches due to high explosives stored and being used for shell filling and such. We were very tired at the end of the day having walked perhaps 12-15 miles or so. At various places, Bentleys Laundry van would stop and we would partake of corn beef, cheese rolls, lemonade for us lads and crates of beer for the men. It really was most enjoyable and for our trouble were each given a brand new sixpenny piece.

Having stated before, the long awaited Nov 5th could never come quick enough for us lads. A fortnight before that date we were preparing getting lose wood, stacks of old newspapers, sawing down old trees, getting if possible old wooden tar barrels from the council yard, this was at the bottom of our garden. Mr.Smart, who lived in Powder Mill Lane, running parallel with our street, had to keep alert at these times for he lived at the entrance of the premises. We had to out Smart him and made, at various times raids for this combustible wood. He was a good nice man and had the misfortune of his boy losing his leg, being run over by a bus. Poor Raymond, the lad was not too well afterwards!

Talking of accidents, when I was about 9 years of age coming home from school, I was linking arms with a class mate (Russel Thomsett, who died of consumption before leaving school), and stumbled when running down Church Hill, fell face downwards on the pavement breaking one of my front teeth and giving me a snaggled tooth appearance. I was greatly shocked, my face bleeding and I was in great distress. Getting home my mother was alarmed and dressed me as best as she could. This fall affected my teeth and subsequently my gums. During the war our unit held the front line for about a fortnight, taking over from some Indian troops -a very quiet sector- some mortar fire now and again- it seemed tome both sides adhered to the maxim, if you don't cause us trouble we'll leave you alone. During this period due possibly to indifferent drinking water and living in somewhat adverse conditions, I developed ulcerated gingivitis. When we were pulled out to the rear our M.O. sent me off to a Military Hospital. There I was interviewed by one of the senior officers. He was very kind to me and said in as many words, the first thing was to get my gums healthy, after that extracting all my teeth saying that that would stop this happening again. After about 5 days my gums healed and then the operation. I awoke in bed, my mouth very bloody and found two Italian ladies cleaning around my bed. I think I must have frightened them for they scurried out and brought in a medical orderly. What the surgeon had given me to put me to sleep I will never know, I awoke so light headed, gay and seemingly drunk. My meals consisted of soups, rice puddings and such and a bottle of Guinness at night. I enjoyed my stay, helping the nurses taking meals to the wounded lads, getting bottles and bed pans, but best of all wearing pyjamas and sleeping between white sheets and on lovely bed. All this must come to a close I felt, on a night hearing at the latter part of my stay the humming of transport and tanks of a night continually going past the hospital. Big things were adrift and all pointing to renewed conflict in the near future. All the lightly wounded were sent elsewhere and I returned to my unit. The major who operated on me said he was very sorry, he had hoped to have fitted me with false teeth but it was not to be. He was a very nice sort of fellow, he shook my hand and bid me good luck. Whilst my stay in hospital my unit had gone into battle once more having many casualties including the padre who lost both legs and died soon after.

Thinking back to my youth—crime where I lived was minimal - not these days I'm afraid. Well it’s the same all over the country. Unemployed makes strange bed fellows, what’s to blame? I personally think that most of it boils down to parent control or lack of it. In the dire poverty of my school days this never happened. People I'm sure were closer and seemed to have time, to pass time of the day in the streets. I have seen old blind ex—soldiers singing for coppers in the street and one legged men knocking on the door for a meal. Thank God this has passed but it still could be improved upon. The young men who returned home from the 1918 war must have been badly disillusioned. What with all the horrors, mud and filth; home no jobs —bad housing- dead end. The upper class did not have to endure the likes of these. The great Field Marshal Haig, writing to his wife expressed it all when he said he didn't know how his young officers put up with life in the trenches. What about poor old Tommy?

I can still remember my grandparents at least three of them were still alive when I was born, my mothers father having died earlier on. My mother used to tell me what a dear person he was and he was a shepherd. The tales she told me of taking food to her father miles away during the lambing season. This we will know is sometimes in the hardest of weathers. Her mother, from what l can recall looked like and even dressed like the old Queen Victoria. A very unhappy looking woman. On her death l had to file around the open coffin with the rest of my brothers and sister and pay my respects.

My father’s parents lived on perhaps until I was about seven and stayed with their married daughter (my aunt), Tiny or perhaps Tine. It was said that when she was christened she could have been put in a pint jug. Believe it if you can? When l knew her she weighed 25 stone due l expect to gland trouble—a more jolly woman you would never meet, happily married with a son and daughter.

Her husband was a bit of a lad and once told me of a sparring match he had with the old film star, Victor McLeglan on board ship leaving Australia and bound for England in August 1914. Old Grand Dad Dixon lived l believe to be 99 and his wife 98, at least that's what l was told. We used to visit them now and again on a Sunday during the summer time. By all accounts he also was a shepherd and had won awards for being the No.1 of Kent. On the death of his most faithful dog, he had it skinned and by his bed for a rug. Mostly on Saturday nights my Uncle, Gus Bennet and his wife would call in for a game of cards-Cribbage or Whist. This session would start after my father had been up to the Cressy Arms, had a couple of pints and come home with a large jug full of ale and bottles of lemonade for shandies. The beer from this local Pub came from Kidds Brewery, at Dartford, a wonderful ale that I can recall when l started to frequent the bars. Poor Gus was an old ex-soldier badly wounded in the shoulder and lost a part of his hand. A very cheerful man and l could listen to his tales of war time France for hours.

Sometimes of a Sunday, my sister who was in service at Dr.Carters in Lowfield Street would fetch his lovely but very sick daughter up to see us. She loved to visit us and being made a fuss of. l don't know what her illness was but I felt that she wasn't long for this world.

After about a year the doctor and family left and the premises was taken over by another doctor. Then another girl joined the staff, Beatrice Payne, became friends with my 2 sister and got to know my brother Alf and finally got married having a lovely daughter Dorothy who spent lots of weekends with us and became the apple of our eye. By then, three of my brothers were courting. Time was marching on.

We always had a dog and cat and these just ate any left·overs—no special foods in those days. I have had all my life a great affection for wild life and deplore the slaughter even in these days what is allowed to carry on. Fox and stag hunting, grouse shooting and such. Who would do these things? Why the upper crust, wealthy farmers, gentry (or so called), the upper privileged class. Bills to do away with these sports are defeated time and time again one rule for the rich, another for the poor. These poor old farmers having to adhere to the rules of the Common Market, having to listen to bloody foreigners, letting them tell us what to do. We are a land of snobs. We all have I'm afraid a lot to answer to our maker when the time comes, meaning modern farming for poor chickens, pigs, heifers and such. We are all to blame, what hurts me most is the buying of young pups by stupid people, after a time not caring and putting them into the streets to fend for themselves. Its Despicable!!

For myself I remember in my youth, for a bet, getting on the back of an old cart horse and having a trot around the field. All for fun and on a few pints of beer. When at school, some of the lads from the upper end of the village played a prank on an old farmer. He was a surly man I recall, and could be rather nasty to boys he found raiding his pear trees. He had a mule to cart his produce around and he was also fond of much, much drink. One dinner time the lads going home from school noticed his mule and cart quartered outside The Plough Inn, coming back it was still there. The old man was still inside drinking so three or four of these lads took the mule out of the shafts, turned him around and fastened him up·arse about face. I wonder what the old fellow said when he came out to go home??!!

The two most aristocratic women in England (perhaps), the Lady Whiteheads, still went around the village in their little horse and trap and woe betide any lad who did not doff his cap to them. If the headmaster found out, the culprits were in for a spot of bother, sometimes being shown up in class, for their lack of courtesy. For all I know these two ladies were "good doers" with funds etc. I remember they used to present prizes at the end of term times.

Christmas time to me couldn't come round quick enough. In the back bedroom were two beds, myself, Albert and Bill in one; Sid and Harry in the other; Alfred slept in a little bedroom; mother, father and Kitty slept in the front. On Christmas Eve I would try and keep awake all night. My brothers used to tell me off, they would say, things like, "I can hear him on the roofs at the top of the street, keep your eyes closed for he won't come if you're awake." They all knew about Santa Clause but never let on. That was very good of them and so perhaps I at least enjoyed five Xmas times without this knowledge. I never could keep awake all night and never did see him. My joy in the morning was unbounded and I felt like a prince. I recall one incident quite well, brother Billy winding his toy steam roller up on the landing, it over running and crashing down the stairs. That never went again breaking the spring or something. After a nice breakfast on that morning my mother would light the fire in the front room, what a wonderful place it seemed to me in those days. There was a settee, two arm chairs and a lovely round table. On the walls two large pictures, very Victorian. One of a young lady with a basket full of puppies, the other of a guards officer saying goodbye to his very old mother & off I expect to South Africa. Nuts and oranges would be on the side—board also a large bottle of cheap red Spanish wine, a bottle of good white port (price 5/-) and a bottle of Jameson Whisky (11/6). What happy days!

When around the age of eleven or so, four or five of us lads would go carol singing. This around the public house and sometimes ushered into the bar by tipsy customers and sang our wares. We made a few bob that way.

In the 20's people let their children go about and do things without the fear of molestation, far different from Today. People were very much poorer, I mean, the mass of humans one came into contact with were all in the "same boat". Neighbours would borrow things like an egg for cooking or a cup of sugar and my mother if she was short of commodities would do the same. Of course, like in all walks of life, some people over stepped, but on the whole neighbours got on reasonably well.

As a small child paraffin was our only source of light. The lamp was highly prized and kept lovely & clean, trimmed and polished. Cooking was done on a big black hob (coal fire) in our kitchen. Later on when my brothers left school and were able to find jobs we lived pretty well. Two were employed at the Paper Mills, Sid in Vickers, Harry on the farm and 'Snowys' first job in the Co-op butchers at the top of the street. Saturday night he would fetch home a couple of pound of pork sausages given to him by the shops manager for working late, these we had fried for a nice supper. Whilst on my holiday I frequently helped out, taking rush orders to customers from the butchers. One of my trips involved me in taking a basket of choice cutlets etc. to a large mansion in Hawley Road - Burnt House Lane. After opening the large gate I found myself surrounded by yapping dachshunds and dwarfed by three Irish Wolfhounds. It's a good job that a maid saw my plight, came and took the basket and so reassured me.

Today I try to remember odd, and perhaps somewhat weird things, that happened in my early life. One time a large balloon with two people in the basket came low over the street trailing a rope which dragged along the ground. Some of us got hold of the rope and even were dragged along for a time but angry shouts from parents made us leave go. The thought of hanging on and taken up into the heavens was with me for many a day. Also on a lovely spring showery day-a shower and this filled with thousands of little frogs. Unbelievable but true. The schools were very cold in the winter-only one small fire per class-room. Even the care-taker was not encouraged to fetch too much coal from the coal-bin. The headmaster even in the cold bleak times would often open the window and saying as always, "fresh air will do you good, put new life in you". The funny thing about it was that his desk was right in front of the fire. This headmaster, Mr. Johnny Walker, was I expect one of the last dying band of people who preached Imperialism. Our lessons, history and geography, were mostly about the British over-coming all obstacles and putting things right in the world. Didn't the red in the world map denote that? We never knew of the poor conditions of the unfortunate wretches who for instance were working picking tea in Ceylon and places for the likes of the Liptons and such people. Just a brief few lines-a lot of good was done in administrations and such, but also a lot of bad.

When I was nearing the time for leaving school the head had a bright idea. He called all the school together one Monday morning after prayers. He had thought about having a shield engraved with the name of the most popular boy in the school-this I expect done once a year. He addressed the whole classes on this subject and then asked a young lad in Class 4, "who do you think is the most popular boy in the school". Quickly came the reply "Bert Dixon sir." The third and second classes were also asked and the individuals said "Bert Dixon". I was so embarrassed I could I have dropped through the floor, I knew in my heart that Mr. Walker had dropped a clanger and his wonderful idea flew out of the window. Deep down he had hoped that one of his pets would be named—it was not to be.
I left school when I was 14 years of age and took a job in the Baltic Saw Mills-Sharpes as it was known then. The work proved much too hard for me, meaning I wasn't strong enough to carry planks and sustain it-it was in fact, work much too heavy for a lad such as I. I told my mother so she told me to leave within a couple of days so I got a job in the Vickers saw mill in Powder Mill Lane. The wages being 11/9-eleven shillings and nine pence per week. Time- Monday to Friday 8am-5pm, with 1 hour break for dinner and 8am-12noon on Saturday. We were never paid for holidays- we had no Union, we were continually chased by charge-hands and foremen, we used lavatories which never had doors on them so people in authority could spy on us to see if anyone was smoking. This offensive meant instant dismissal. I often asked myself in later years, why did the working class stand it. I've never come up with the answer. We made the richer people more richer, and ourselves more poorer. When I reached the age of 21 I was sacked—the reason being lack of orders. On that same day a young lad was started. He would I expect learn all the working of planes and sawing etc. for a lesser wage than I. This sort of thing (most fellows were sacked on reaching 21) got higher dividends for the share—holders. No wonder I turned out to be a downright Socialist.

I have written brief extracts of my army life, so I will not dwell on it too much. In a way it was a novel and strange way of life than what I had been living in the past. I was 23 years of age when I was called up. My weight, somewhere in the region of 9 stone 12lbs; height 5ft 7 ½" and not the warrior type at all, being somewhat round shouldered and not feeling very brave. I had been passed A1 by the doctors, but so was nearly everyone.

I joined the BUFFS on March 15th, 1940 and the War Office had sighs of relief · now perhaps the Tides of War will turn. We were put into Barracks in Canterbury in buildings built for the Crimean war intake, and I don't expect the training of soldiers had changed much since then. The same old spit and polish, always that feeling of fright in the early days of training when being shouted down by an NCO. At first it seemed our main training was not with the use of the rifle but saluting in the march imagining officers. It was drummed into us by the sergeant in charge of our platoon·"You are not saluting the officer, you are saluting his rank." It seemed all cock to me, even to this day. A funny thing though, on my first few days I saluted the RSM (Regimental Sergeant Major) on more than one occasion, you see he wore a Sam Brown belt, the same as the officers. The last time he called me over the coals and suggested I get my eyes tested, for he never had pips on his shoulders.
For all that, the training staff at Canterbury were wonderful , although strict, they never bullied. I know that when we left the Depot we clubbed round and bought our room Corporal a nice present. For all I know it was possibly the only present brought by an intake for an NCO during the entire war! I for one soon got used to army life and after about a fortnight or so it seemed that I had been in khaki all my life. One of the duties on Saturday night was to send out a patrol, dress clean fatigues and side arms (being bayonet in scabbard), about 8 strong, in the charge of a senior NCO. I was on one of these patrols. Our job mainly was to see that no rumpus took place in the pubs at closing time. Our tour of duty passed somewhat free from trouble but I have seen some lads the next day displaying black eyes, cuts and bruises in discharging their duty.
All this came to an end after about two months. We were assembled with all our kit loaded onto lorries and dumped at HQ, of the 8th Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Us Kentish lads were then distributed

into this unit. I found myself very much to my dismay amongst total strangers. Living under canvas and having to listen to their escapades against the German Panzers in France. I had a feeling that the wrong side had lost. Later on in years I found I could come to terms with what they were saying amongst themselves. After a few days the unit was on parade and addressed by their Colonel on food rations. Our meals were cut down and I for one was forever hungry. I was rather disillusioned and seeing a notice for volunteers on the notice board, I put my name down. I wondered in later life what caused me to stick my name down, what was it all about, where would it all end. I do know that if I remained in a battalion - these made up a division and these an Army Corps, would mean perhaps serving in trench warfare and the horrors of that, filled me full of repulsion and fear. Plus of course all the 'bull' that existed in large bodies of troops.

To cut a long story short, two of us X-Buffs and a Second Lieutenant named Hare were picked and packed off with haversack rations to a London Railway Station, possibly Kings Cross, there to await a train to Scotland. There were about 20 or so of us assembled and were called together, told not to leave the station, so we all went to the bar in the building, had a few drinks and got to know each other. We were of all ranks and regiments, kilted London Scottish, K.R.R.s, London Irish and such. It was here I first met Bill Gibson, Peter Harkness and Jimmy Prescott, all in the London Scottish. The first two became my firm friends, and Jimmy finished up as our CSM and also was a great chap. The train took many hours and we finished up at Inverness, on road, transport for another long journey to the wild west coast, de-bussing at a place named Arisaig. We had arrived at our destination, cold, hungry and rather fed up. This was our unit·No.5 Independent Company. The officer was dropped at a large castle, like a chateau, and other ranks in the tent area. The place was bedlam, about 200 or so fellows milling around—badly dressed, rather dirty looking, fully armed and even letting off live ammunition at random, totally different from the orderliness I had experienced at the Canterbury barracks. We lined up for food and were rewarded with mess cans full of stew. What a wonderful meal it was too. A funny thing, the fellow who dished it out was to become my firm friend—Freddy Peters, London Irish. He was a pugnacious and strong chap and had joined the Territorials when he was very young. He loved the army and all it stood for. He eventually married my sister Kitty and after the war lived close by and still remained firm friends. We had deer meat now and again, for the officers organised shoots. It was a very wild part of the country, close to the sea and stretching along our coast line, shrouded in mist, the Isle of Skye. It seemed to rain all the time, we were always wet and living under canvas didn't seem to help things. Worse than the rain was the midges, swarms and swarms of them. There seemed no escaping them & reminded me in a way of the Bible and the curse in the Old Testament on Pharaohs people by Moses. Well after a few days the officer, second lieutenant Hare contacted me. He asked me would I take over the duties of being his orderly until he got things sorted out. His excuse being that I was the only fellow he knew and would help him out. I declined at first but eventually gave way on conditions that it was not a permanent fixture. I got to know other fellows doing this sort of job and so got enrolled in the Batman Union (joke). This duty had it rewards in a way—no guards—skipping early parades, scrounging around the officers mess for anything that was going, plus the priceless pay of 2/6 a week for our troubles. This job didn't last very long, perhaps only ten days or so. My officer went on a rock climbing course from which he never returned—having, I am told fell from a great height and was killed. I packed up his kit and so that was the end of that. **[*note added by CVA (Pete R.) This officer was 2nd/Lieut. Owen Stewart Hare,* 129412, 1st Special Service Bn., Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) *aged 24*yrs]**

The training became very hard and we spent day and nights up in highlands. It seemed that us new intakes had to pass a full fitness and mental coarse, failing would mean R.T.U.—Returned to Unit. I'm sure that I wouldn't have lasted out if it hadn't been for the help of my two London Scottish pals—Bill Gibson and Peter Harkness. When sometimes nearly exhausted they often carried my rifle and some of my gear, and humour helped making light of trials. This unit I had been privileged to join had just returned from Norway and by all accounts did well against the enemy.

It was finally forced to be evacuated when larger forces of Germans landed nearby and escaped from being encircled in the nick of time. Quite a lot of lads sported enemy weapons and after examining them found them far superior to our arms.
My stay in Scotland of a few weeks did endear me to that nation—the few civilians we met were very kind to us and I expect felt sorry for us, seeing us living in these wretched conditions. One bright spot in the local area, was a prize Ayrshire bull we called Ferdinand, the most magnificent creature I have ever seen. Us lads went out of our way to stroke him and believe me- he loved it.

With possible invasion by German forces the unit travelled down to the South East coast to Dungeness and took up positions to try and repulse it if it was attempted. We laid barbed—wire and built what fortifications one could on this very stony beach. Later on we went inland a few miles to Manston and was billeted in the local school. This was a hot spot close to the airfield and very badly bombed.
That summer on some days there was always aerial activity & whilst on a route march near Pegwell Bay we saw a German fighter disabled and it landed on the beach and finished up with the incoming tide brushing its under carriage. The pilot never got out, was he dead? Who knows. We continued on our march. The next day was a bombing raid on Margate & we embarked on lorries to see if we could be of some assistance to the poor civilians. Whilst clearing up debris and such, a large force of Italian planes showed up flying very low and seeming full of Esprits de Corps! A most violent barrage of bofors fire like a blanket in the sky sent them back home with their tails between their legs. They never dropped one bomb, thank God for that. After that we were sent to the Isle of Wight and were settled in at a holiday camp called I believe, "Little Canada"-the buildings all like log cabins. Here I experienced my first spell under fire. It was on a bright summers day and the Luftwaffe were enjoying themselves immensely, a fighter group were attacking the barrage balloon guarding the approaches to Portsmouth. We had a ringside seat and were amazed at the exploits of these German fighters. After setting light to a few balloons they headed for home and must have seen us and so dived down, raking us with machine guns but luckily wounding only one fellow. It left a very dry sort of taste in the mouth and a sense of well being when it was all over-this time being only a few brief seconds or so.
In the late summer, the unit finished up in Paignton on the Torbay coast in South Devon. We at first were allotted digs in private houses, myself and a couple of others finishing up in a Mrs.Phillips boarding house. She in pre-war days took in holiday visitors and so we in a way helped out in the family budget. Her husband was a cripple having been a regular soldier in the guards-attaining the rank of sergeant, was very badly wounded at Mons in 1914. He had a business in town, a shop close to the sea front mending and repairing of shoes. Also for a price, he made shoes, these being very expensive. Our unit helped fill his coffers for he obtained permission to mend the units foot wear and so supply of much needed leather through the War Office. After a few days we were all paraded and told that the Independent Companies would be broken up and a new unit would be formed. This would be called No.2 Commando. The choice was given us-either join or go back to your own regiments. Most of my friends joined so I followed suit. I never regretted it, I knew dear men and I lost dear men , and I think that most days of late years I dwell on it more.

Here the training once more became very intense, getting fit being the main object. At Dartmouth doing sea landings in conjunction with naval personnel and once getting close to being drowned in very high seas. Spending day and nights on the moors. The unit was, and with new intakes made into, 6 Troops-each troop 60 strong. I was in No.6 and our C.S.M. Hammond was our senior NCO. He was a regular and a truly great man-whipping the troop into some sense of military discipline which had I think been lacking in the past. I remember we had to go on parade, the whole unit in battle-order, the pack having to contain all the requirements as if in actual combat. This was pretty heavy, these packs were all inspected and if short of any commodity the owner was put on a charge.

Then to our dismay we set off for a 20 mile route march, this plus carrying, I think 100 pounds of ammo. We came home feeling rather hungry and tired. This did not only mean marching, at various stages on route, we did sometimes do a mile run. We did this every other day for a fortnight.

After that came the big day, on parade at 9am and to march for 24 hours until 9am the next day. We stopped every 4 hours for sandwiches and tea, this being taken on ahead by transport. All seemed to go well until the evening and spirits became to sag and at 9pm knowing we still had another 12 hours to do was to say at the least, very disheartening. In the early hours of the morning the unit began to straggle, one young officer went for a time, completely off his head and was looked after by a medical orderly. Quite a few collapsed by the road-side, then it started raining. That was the last thing we wanted. At 6.30am we reached a brick factory where bricks were being made, having marched 60 miles or more. Being wet and falling out for a cigarette I was unable to get to my feet and continue to the final destination. My old pal Pete hauled me to my feet but I just couldn't make it. I and two others were left behind for transport to pick us up. A fair part of the unit finished the march it being from Paignton to Taunton-66 plus miles. This with the carrying of Bren Guns too. A remarkable feat and I only regret I didn't quite make it. My feet were very sore & rather blistered. The unit was now issued with what I would call Tom O'Shanters, a Scottish headgear and from then on we were called 'Jocks'. We also carried a knife for close fighting and was worn at the side of the belt. The markings on our shoulders was rather sinister, a black badge with a silver dagger and SS either side. Possibly copying of some German crack Troops!!?

For the payment of our quarters we were allowed 6/8d per day and for this we got 3 meals a day and sleeping quarters. It had its good points and also it's bad. For I instance I lived a good three quarters of a mile from HQ, the assembly point for all parades. Sometimes after morning duties, perhaps the next parade would be cross-country running would mean dashing home for a complete change. Still it seemed a good life, there was cider to drink which I required a taste for. On our weekends the fellows generally finished up in Torquay and many a time, I missed the last bus & unsteadily made my way back to the billets after a delightful evening at the London Inn.
Soon after our arrival in Paignton a batch of twenty or so fellows with officers left for Malta by submarine. Of course the Italians were now in the war and our lads' job was to make a nuisance of themselves, landing at midnight and then blowing up sections of the railway and doing other damage. Of course the island was constantly bombed and food was very scarce. They were not to be envied. Later on they came back & what tales they had to tell. They had experienced landings on enemy territory, ours had yet to come.

Every Sunday was church parade and everyone had to look spic and span. Onward Christian Soldiers was our favourite hymn, followed with Fight the Good Fight, a good second. At the rear some of the lads played Pontoon or such during prayers. It was really all good fun and I'm sure the Lord saw the funny side of it. After the service we marched around the town and many a poor serviceman, army, navy or air force who failed to salute the column was pounced upon and made to march at the rear. I felt sorry for these lads but it all came under "Bull".
The training was still very hard and we spent about one month in Devon, a lovely county perhaps the showcase of England? Some of the times I remember, most was getting lost on Dartmoor—snowing hard and coming across dozens of ponies huddled together for warmth, it was so cold our rifles froze to our shoulders. Another time having laid an ambush whilst on manoeuvres, awaiting spread-eagled at dawn for the enemy to appear, a weasel with a live rat in its mouth ran over my outstretched legs. Gave me a fright! Spent 1940 Christmas with the Phillips family, & had a lovely time. For the occasion I contributed a good bottle of Port-this they would not open and was drunk after the war, on our honeymoon where my dear wife and I spent a very delightful week. We still see and correspond with the daughter Eva and her husband.

After a seven days leave, once more the Commando was heading for Scotland. Headquarters was set up in Dumfries, and the six troops were billeted in small towns and villages in a radius of perhaps 2O miles or so from H.Q. We finished up in Moffat. Quite a change from Devon and we would, I felt, miss the sea trips on patrol boats, days out in the old lease and lend American destroyers, and once unable to dock in Plymouth due to a heavy air raid. Before leaving for the northern climes, fellows were called out on parade which later proved a raid on "heavily guarded water installations" in Norway, so we were told, a year or so afterwards. Some escaped into Sweden but those that were captured, by all accounts were taken to Berlin, interrogated, tortured and shot. Poor old lads. What would I do in these circumstances?

In Moffatt the Troop was once again quartered in civilian 'digs', Stan Willett and myself finished up in a cottage owned by Mrs.Smith, who had two daughters as well, living in, but for all that it was really a spacious place. They were all very kind to us and were wondrous people. Mrs. Smith also had a married son living close by and he ran their small farm. A few head of cattle, pigs and such and a little agriculture. Over the large open fire was hung the large pieces of bacon-there I believe being smoked from the fire. Every morning, porridge, then eggs and bacon. Cheese was also very available and I showed them what we called "Welsh Rabbit". Cheese sliced up, boiled in vinegar and spread onto toasted bread, plus a little pepper. They had never heard of this and went over the moon at its taste. My wife and I visited them on four times since the war, the last time being in October l989. Of course Mrs.Smith has passed away and only Peggy runs the place. It was called "Burns Cottage".

Our three officers:·Captain Burns, Lieutenant Peyton and Lieutenant Jenkins were billeted in the Star Hotel and here we paraded every morning, 'Mickie' Burns had, I understand, worked as a foreign correspondent of the Times; Lt. Peyton, a young man, very sharp and inclined to "pull his rank". 'Taffy' Jenkins a real darling of a man was a sergeant in the Independent , and went to O.C.T. and passed out as officer material. Both of the latter were destined to get killed in the raid on St. Nazaire also with Peter Harkness, Bill Gibson and many others of the troop.

The training around Moffatt was extremely hard. Most of this was done in the "Devils Beef Tub", I believe that was what it was called. Rolling hills and endless valley. Here we did firing, and having to transport as well as our mortars and Brens, an anti·tank rifle. This was a very cumbrous weapon to transport about so we made a type of carriage for it, out of an old pram. The discharge I recall when firing this would knock you back a foot or so, the bullet (I'm told) could travel 7 miles. Still it was a treat after a hard day, to return home. The ladies although at first rather shy were thirsty of what London was like. My knowledge of the 'Smoke' was rather limited but Stan lived in town. He used to tell them about the Tower, St.Pauls Cathedral and all known spots of interest, they hung on to all he said.

During or stay we had about a dozen or so ex-London policemen, did training in the Guards and joined us, I expect out of boredom. I remember one time travelling back to Scotland and having to wait overnight for the 6am train in London. There were 6 of us including 2 of the ex—coppers. They took us round to a large building which housed the constables. Here we were given supper and beds and called in time for our train.

Well there came a time on parade- "Fus. Roberts, Fus. Dixon and Sgt. Palmer fall out, pack kit and report to Dumfries". There we were given railway warrants and 7 days leave. The trouble was, the journey home and back took up a large part of leave. Back home I found Dartford full of Canadians who seem to have commandeered the place. After three days a telegram came and I was recalled back to Dumfries this I think nearly broke my dear old mothers heart. Back at HQ we stayed overnight, about twenty five or so of us, in charge of us was Captain Franks. Next day to the River Clyde and boarded a ship, the "Ulster Monarch". We didn't know then, but this would be mostly our

home for the next seven months or so. The ship was to me a sort of miniature liner, it was in fact a ferry, plying from the mainland to Dublin. Us Commando chaps had the pick of the cabins, if I remember rightly—on A Deck, two to a cabin. A chap from Lancashire shared with me. A very dapper, light built fellow who in our conversation told me that he was Private McLean and was on Manchester City's books. We were allotted jobs & became in a way—crew members. There came on board soon after our arrival a couple of hundred or so Black Watch, also some members of the Air Force. We joined a convoy and were heartily cheered when passing, the dock yards by the Jocks who were ship building. We headed out to sea and after 10 days or so arrived at Gibraltar. Our jobs were to do police work and usher the "Jocks" about cleaning decks, getting them into line at meal times. It amazed me, these Black Watch chaps, jumping about and doing things at our command. We also erected Bren guns on the top deck in case of enemy air action and manned under supervision of an old 14 pounder gun in the stern. After being seasick in the first day—never thought anything more about it, foul weather or not.

The "Jocks" left the ship for garrison duty and we continued in convoy down the west coast of Africa to Freetown in Sierra Leone. We disembarked and finished up in Wilberforce Barracks 2 or 3 miles south of the town. Also quartered around were 3 or 4 contingents, the same strength as ours, of other Commando units. We it seems were forward parties and our job was to prepare space and accommodation for our Commando units when it arrived. (or if it arrived).

We were told on parade that our objective was the Vichy French port of Dakar. A raid or landing had been attempted before our arrival and had ended in fiasco. Bad planning and possibly not enough resources had been put into it. The French at this period of the war were very hostile to the British. They had not forgiven us for the sinking of their fleet at Oran and under Laval, worked very close to the German naval wishes. The area around this part of the world (I mean the South Atlantic) was fast becoming the grave yard of Allied Shipping due to some extent to hostile submarines establishing a base at this said port. (DAKAR). Our sleeping quarters seemed quite adequate, a large long hut raised off the ground, the hut made of light wood and seemingly no doors, allowed certain amount of air to flow through in this somewhat torrid clime. After our first meal in the camp we were lectured by the camp Medical Officer on the Does and Don'ts. It mostly boiled down to don't drink to excessive, don't go with naughty ladies, and beware of mosquitoes of a night, when going out use mosquito boots the trousers tucked into the tops. We were also given ointment which in the evening was rubbed over our exposed arms and faces. We all had beds from which a mossy-net was hanging. On our first day we had been inoculated for God knows what and turned in after dark. Not all of us - two lads, an Irishman and a Manx man went out into the town. They roused us when they came in that night, rather the worse for wear, happy and drunk. Around our sleeping quarters were scores of goats with many young, Anyway when things quietened down, 3or 4 of us went out and caught a couple of the baby goats these we slipped under the mosquito nets of the two culprits. It caused a tremendous uproar from the two fellows thinking perhaps on their first night in Africa, they were being attacked by wild animals. Meanwhile the poor old nannies came into the hut to see what was happening to their young. What a laugh it caused and this little episode I will never forget. We were called on parade at 6am every morning washed, shaved and in clean fatigues, wearing of course K.D. plus a Pith Helmet. This to be worn at all times of the day, when out of doors. At this early hour we were given, under supervision of medical orderlies, quinine in tablet form to combat malaria. After a little marching, breakfast, a meal served by coloured orderlies, mostly consisting of I can recollect, bacon out of tins, I rather liked it. Midday meal, meats served up with yams, the latter taking the place of potatoes , which were I'm afraid unavailable.

We didn't stop too long in barracks, doing quite a lot of shooting at the Butts, taken on patrols through the jungle, in fact getting used to the climate. Every man, f due to the excessive heat, we were confined to our beds until 12.30 or so. We were waited on by black orderlies, it required running errands for us and doing our washing.

Bathing was close at hand- Lumney Beach. Possibly the most beautiful sea shore in the world. Fringed by coconut and banana trees-sand which sank to your ankles and twelve feet waves which broke on the shore. At my first entry into the sea I was caught unaware by the power of the waves and was thrown back on the beach and suffered minor lacerations. It was wonderful and have I become a better a swimmer. After an hour or so we would be joined by topless Negro girls from the local village selling their wares. A large bunch of bananas would be held in a basket and carried on their head. They were lovely to behold the way they carried themselves. We joked and had friendly chats and sometimes one or two of the lads touched them, all in fun. They liked us, we paid for our fruit and they were never molested. Could this happen today?

One day after about a week at the camp, Billy Elwood and myself after finishing duties, ventured into town. We called into a shop where we had a snack and drink, some bottles of cheap sort of wine and some local insipid local beer. It was quite dark when we left the shop, there is no evening in these climes. Going down the street out-side a theatre type of building a large amount of the populace had formed. Being nosey we joined it. Large cars were stopping and somewhat grand dignitaries were getting out and being greeted on the top steps by official in grand uniforms and entering the building. Lovely dance music was being played. The white and coloured ladies were dressed in long silk gowns and the diplomats in evening suits with tails and red ribbon draped over shirt. Meanwhile my pal and I had found a side entrance and entered. We were stopped by (I expect) the caretaker but took no notice of him. We ascended a long spiral staircase and mounted very stealthily and to our surprise, finished up in the orchestra. We then had to make ourselves less conspicuous and so mingled with all the guests. We both partook of drinks that were being served and food on the tables. My pal Billy was in his delight and tapped various men on their shoulders to cut in on the dancing. After being refused he got me to jig with him. This caused some commotion and I think we were about to be apprehended and so made a bolt for the entrance. A passing 14 cwt truck going back to the camp stopped and picked us up and so saved our bacon. Although it was really a joke, I've always been ashamed of this evening, but that's life!

During our short stay at the barracks, us No:2 fellows combined with No.9 Commando to form a football team. These were great chaps especially a big chap by the name of Hordkinson & his side-kick Stewart. We liked to play against the Navy sides best-on their ground. After the game, a nice meal and an invitation to their Naval Canteen. Here the beer flowed and cigarettes could be bought cheaply and in abundance, different and better by far than we were getting at Wilberforce Barracks. We were given a lecture by an officer of the Sierra Leone Frontier Force. It was mostly about the dedication of the natives who when of age would journey for days and under great hardships to enlist in the army. Going into the camp where these young men were training, I for one was appalled at their treatment. They were pushed and brutally slapped around by their coloured N.C.O.s and grossly humiliated in front of their white officers, a new intake, & I was told were Polish.

Whilst having a spot of training on the coast we observed a large formation of ships out at sea-some of the ships breaking away from the convoy and heading into Freetown harbour. The other endless line of ships headed south and we could discern the Repulse and Prince of Wales proudly keeping in line and I expect, going to the Far East. Little did we know what would befall them, to us, idle loungers they were unsinkable. On one of these big ships was an old school friend of mine-Jimmy Furlong, and he was to die in seas off Malaya. Word came round to pack up our gear and embark back onto the Ulster Monarch and Jock McKenzie and myself took over our old cabin. It seems that the skipper had asked our officer for help to run and maintain the running of the ship and its defence. We were all delighted and accepted it as a sort of holiday. We also knew that we were on our own and in troubled waters and to get away from army bull was well worth it. We up-anchored and headed south, away from the sultry heat, mosquitoes and such.

Our duties were to be-helping in the galley, swab the deck, take over watches, man the I4 pounder on the stern and keep sharp look outs. We also had placed 3 Bren guns on the top deck to be used if we were attacked. During the day light hours-music was played through-out the ship, our favourites being the Dorothy Lamour melodies from her films. It seemed just right in these climes. I and another used to draw the rum rations for our mess at 11am and to me was the most enjoyable times of the day. Quite a few of the chaps after a while didn't bother to drink it, so we shared it out among ourselves. It always seems to have given one the sense of well being. Our first call was at the port of Takoradi in Ghana and here we unloaded goods and stayed a couple of days. A pleasant stop-then sailing in sight of the shore and hoisting a non-belligerent flag, arrived at Lagos in Nigeria. We had all now got used to the seas except of course "Pugsy" Foomry, who when we met on high seas he still became very sick. (He was killed at Salerno). I think on board ship was some of the most happiest days of my life. The food was good-the bread was white-we had our own private accommodation-discipline was relaxed-we could keep ourselves in clean clobber-the weather on the main, excellent.

We did two or three runs from Gibraltar to Freetown and this consisted of taking top ranking forces, personnel and lots of air-force down to Freetown, to be flown across country to Egypt. At this time the Mediterranean was too hazardous and the sinking perhaps in the ratio of three out of four ships sunk on this venture. One of these trips I developed a violent toothache and reported to the sick bay. I was very lucky, for on board was a Lt. Colonel in the Dentistry and he kindly did the extraction in his cabin. It was painless and he was a real gent to me. On another trip the meat in the refrigerator became suspect and us lads had to don gloves and heavy coats and dump the carcasses over board. The sharks had a good feed I expect. Later on in Gib, we went into dry dock for repairs. This consisted, that after the ship came to dock, a large gate affair was closed around it, something like on a canal. Then the water was drained off, and as it subsided props were placed against the vessel to keep it in its right position. When the water had flowed back into the sea a large amount of fish was left. This was gathered up by the Spanish workers who came across the border every day to be employed by the authorities. We were given enough for our mess the rest they took home to their impoverished families. After coming out of dry dock the ship was placed along the Key behind the capital ship, HMS MALAYA. Alongside us came Corvettes and an occasional submarine. Being tied up, to get ashore they had to come aboard us. We made quite a lot of friends and sometimes were invited into the mess.

Whilst us army fellows were in Gib, every day we were detailed for working duties. Working in the bowels of the Rock, loading up the light railway with shells and such which was stored in the arsenal-these being hand pushed into the key for various ships. The worst job we had, and which was very dangerous too. Unloading a ship load of (I expect high octane fuel) onto a lighter in the bay. This was all in light tin cans and quite a few of them leaked. Whilst unloading this stuff it was like sitting on a time bomb. We all complained of feeling groggy, this of course because of the fumes. We also mounted guard duties around the dock at the bottom of the gang-plank-there would be two on guard-one of us, and a sailor. Our job was to watch out for saboteurs who around Christmas time 1941 were placing bombs and limpet mines around the shipping. One evening coming back from a jaunt into town a ship was sank alongside the harbour with a frightful explosion. Whilst during our stay at least four ships suffered damages. We also had duties with the police in searching Spanish workers when they crossed into British territory for work in the colony. They were also searched on their return. They were half starved and you would now & again see them searching through the dustbins and such looking for anything to eat.

One day we were called on parade & afterwards were given a talk by Captain Godfrey Franks about what was happening, in the next few days. lt seemed possible that General Franco would join the AXIS and so all the ladies in British Embassy's in Spain were to be evacuated, all converging on Gib, where later they would be shipped to the UK. lt seems they would stay on our ship whilst awaiting transport back home. We had to make everything ship-shape, also giving up our Cabins, and going down below for that period of time.

The day came and we were given a stiff lecture by our C.O. to conduct ourselves like gentlemen and remain sober if we went ashore. A dance was organised to welcome the ladies aboard, a band was laid on. Meanwhile myself and 3 or 4 others including, "Robbo" Roberts went our merry way. Of course on this night it had to happen. Robbo met some old pals in the R.E.s. After the bar closed they invited us back to their sleeping quarters where a bottle of rum was passed around. We tried to talk Robbo into taking it easy but his long lost friends insisted that he had another and another etc, etc. We finally got back to the ship and going up the gang-plank under assistance Robbo's head gear fell into the sea. He did no more than dive into the murky depths and retrieve it. Pulling him up in the key, looking more like a thing from outer-space, we smuggled him through the dancing couples to the tune of "The White Cliffs of Dover". We must think ourselves very lucky at that time, for knowing our C.O. he would have made our life hell if he'd been aware of what had just happened.

Just about that time a football match was arranged between us army lads and an XI picked from the crew. The day came, our officer said he had had a sizeable bet with some of the ships officers on the result and he had great confidence that we would win. The whole ships complement, with a few exceptions, were around the touch line-we were in front at halftime. At the interval we were given a complementary drink of rum by the navy people-alas we lost 2-l. Strategy?-one could say that.
We were still in Gibraltar on Dec 31st 1941 and each of us fellows was given a bottle of gin between 2 of us and at midnight formed a long chain-naval officers included and danced around the deck and finished up, squeezed in the Officer Mess. After that, Billy Mills climbed the mast and hung a jerry on it. We had lots of laughs, but bad headaches the next day to make up for it.

Soon after we were once again heading for Freetown not in convoy, but on our own. About 12 hours or so sailing time from our point of call and in the early hours of the morning, we were aroused from our sleep by the alarm and to get to our firing station immediately. lt was very dark & out of the gloom appeared a large ship-was it hostile?? The officer on the bridge shouted through his megaphone-"Who are you"? and kept repeating it but with no response from this ship. Finally with no reply it was followed with, "if you don't answer we will open fire". The unknown ship then replied with heliograph and must have satisfied our captain, so we broke off and went our way. A few days later in town we met some of the survivors of this ship. It was Swedish I believe and on disclosing herself by flashlight was seen by a German U-boat that was on the surface close by and promptly sunk. That's the way of war.

I must tell you of one incident whilst in port. The crew were made up of R.N.V.R.—navy, merchant seamen and us 25 or so army fellows. We lined up at mealtime in a line and was usually served by a rather loud mouthed merchant seaman who always displayed his strong arm, tattooed of course and on most occasions adopted a surely attitude when serving us army chaps. He would sometimes when serving give the navy fellows bigger portions of meat etc. on the plates than us lads. Why I didn't know? He seemed to be always looking for trouble, so sure of himself, big of stature and perhaps Irish. (I have nothing against this race, in fact some of my best friends came from the Emerald Isle). It all came to head one fine day. We had a fine well built Jewish boy in our mob, smart, always of a happy disposition and very popular. On this day in question on given short rations he asked for more, the same as the matelot next to him had been given. The server had been waiting for this, he created a scene swearing and calling the lad a Jewish bastard and such and invited him

after meals to fight on the upper deck. Would our friend be able to put up a good show against this rough? We formed a large ring around the contestants and then it started. The seaman had divested himself of shoes and shirt but our lad went into action wearing his army boots, this putting him at a distinct disadvantage, he slipped around on the deck. He soon found his feet and adopting a professional stance he cut the bully to pieces. He went down twice to our fellow asking him to give in, he didn't want to hurt him anymore. The third knock down he was helped to his feet by our lad and then the evil sod tried to butt him. Anyway it taught him a lesson he would never forget. Once more I would say again this young man lost his life later on in the landing at Salerno. Little did we know that of our small group at least five would get killed and quite a few more wounded before peace was declared.

Sometime in February, or was it March , word came in that a Commando raid had been made on St.Nazaire, a French port on the Bay of Biscay. Later it was given out that it was our unit which had carried out the operation. We were immediately recalled home and after a severe storm battering voyage came to port in the Clyde. What a nightmare the trip was, the ship having a high structure was buffeted by gale winds and high seas. At one point the ship lost its power, and wallowed aimlessly until the engines got going again, also we were on our own. One good thing about it was, that I expect U-boats could not properly operate in these circumstances.

We were taken from the ship in army lorries and finished up in Ayr at the HQ in Wellington Square. Here we were taken in hand by Sgt."Tiny" Burke, six in all, Perkins, Billy Elwood, Bill Ballard, Pugsy Formore, Billy Mills and myself taken to a Mrs.Murries boarding house and this was to be our civilian digs for the next six months or so. Also in this large house were two police women, three civilian workers plus the Murrie family. Also she took in holiday makers in the season. Our first enquiry was about the raid and I was shocked to hear of our casualties. My old No.6 Troop, I expect did never really recover, both Junior officers were killed and many of my mates including the London Scottish lads. Our Captain Burns was captured and taken giving the "V" sign. It was I think the most heroic action fought by the British forces during the whole of World War II. This action taking place after leaving Falmouth to St.Nazaire a journey possibly in the region of 3OO miles or so in light craft were made of plywood and hastily caught fire. Looking back I wonder why the planners had not employed some of the old American destroyers. This I'm sure would have given better protection. Well it proved a success, an old navy destroyer rammed the dock this filled with high explosives, and timed to go off at a later date—it did, causing great damage and stopping U-boats from using that port. Meanwhile some troops landed and under the command of our dear and beloved Lt. Col Newman gave (I'm later told) a good account of itself. This fight was to drive the enemy away from the dock area so that REs could demolish the docks working mechanism. Lots of our lads were killed and wounded and it was reported (perhaps not true) that some enraged Germans killed some of our wounded. For this our CO was awarded the VICTORIA CROSS, and I feel he would be badly missed in future hostilities, this of course meaning, being a fine example of British soldiery, which perhaps had been lacking since the start of the war.

Getting back to us lads who had returned from West Africa, we were given a 14 days leave pass, and headed for home the next day. My dear old mother was pleased to see me, for she worried a lot which of course was quite natural. Half a dozen of us lads met in London and "went up town". I got home the next morning, catching the 'Paper Train'. The leave soon went and once more I was back with the unit, or what remained of it. New men left their regiments and volunteered to join our Commandos, we even had some "Free French" fellows and they were happy lads and well liked. Ayr was a nice spot to be in, the town reminded me in a way of Eastbourne. It had picture houses, dance halls, skating rink and also a music hall. In the latter place, for a few pence, we sat in the 'gods'.

By todays pleasures it would appear rather corny but we loved it. The locals always enjoyed the comic kilted Scot who in the sketches always out witted the English gent. The whirl of the bagpipes would send them stamping and cheering. All good fun. This place also had a bar and was widely used during the intervals.

The unit, still short of men, was also badly short of officers. One day on parade the troop was introduced to one of its new officers, a Lt.Frank Mason. It appears he wanted an orderly (batman) and would anybody take on the job. Nobody volunteered and then the TSM called out my name remarking I had for a brief time looked after the officer who was killed on a climbing scheme. I said I had done that job but only for three days, but really I was talked into taking the job on promises of missing guard duties and some early parades. I never regretted taking that job and me and Frankie got on like a 'house on fire'. He was older than I, married and I believe came from Cricklewood, and if I remember rightly had two sons. He once introduced me to his wife who had paid him a visit. About this time a second officer, Lt. Joe Nichols joined the troop, a young fellow very strong, not seemingly to have a lot of humour, and joined our troop football side. Charlie Goff put him on the left wing where he could do the least of trouble. For all that we became troop champions and in the final game I in fact scored the winning goal. The troop leader was Captain Hooper.

The training in Ayr proved as always very tough. We also had a new commanding officer, Lt.Colonel Churchill. He was a very handsome man and in pre—war days had appeared (if memory proves me right) on adverts for Bryll Cream (hair lotion). On parades he sometimes wore a large sword and once getting out of a jeep nearly fell over it. He had two main hobbies playing the bag pipes and archery. Whenever we went into action he would be seen in full view of the enemy playing the pipes. It later became his downfall when leading a section of another Commando he was badly wounded and taken prisoner.

Our life in the Murray household was a happy time and dear lady did us well. Two of the lads became attached to the policewomen escorting them to dances and such and a good time was had by all. Us army fellows were very lucky & made the most of life for who could foretell the future. We had a good troop and also an exceptional fine heavy weight boxer named Harry Lumm, a cockney. Boxing bouts were fought against Guard divisions and other units and our fellows nearly always proved victorious. We were the "Pride of the North ".

We went away for long periods on boat landings and one winters night the troop landing craft got stuck on a hidden sand bank. The sailors in charge of the operations were all 'rookies' and were new to their job. We could see the coastline and it was white with frost. All the craft were stuck on the sand bank and would not move. We were loading up with kit and ordered out of the boat to help pull it clear of the obstacle. Our feet touched the bottom and the water was up to our chests. It was extremely cold and although we had lightened the craft it just wouldn't budge off the sand bank. After about a fair period of time we gave up our struggle and headed for the beach, the time being well passed midnight, more dead than alive. Freddy Peters and myself stamped up the frosty hill and perceived a small glow of light. Disregarding our unit we carried on up the hill and low and behold was a crofters cottage. We knocked on the door and after a while were let into the abode by an old farmer & his wife. They were appalled at our plight, made a roaring fire up and gave us hot soup. We sat in front of the fire and after a while regained our senses to explain what had happened.
After a couple of hours or so we left this dear couple and with, many thanks departed to join our lads on the beach. These lads in the meantime had collected vast amounts of driftwood and such and made a vast bonfire. Later on the incoming tide shifted the craft and they were able to pick us up and take us back to the ship, their awaited us a nice hot meal.

During my stay in Scotland I covered a lot of ground, from Dumfries in the south to a landing in the Orkneys in the extreme north, plus spending countless nights on Ben Nevis on manoeuvres and other exercises, sometimes in conjunction with American Rangers. These were fine, strong & mostly well built young men and eager to acquire the arts of war. They were very well paid, there army rations wonderful, plenty of cigarettes and these they shared at all times with us. I speak for myself and lots of my pals—the Yanks were good.

During the summer of 1942 the town of Ayr still had its ration of holiday makers and here I made the acquaintance of a young lady by the name of Miss Jean McGee. She was with her widowed mother, her father having recently just died & had got released from the WAAF to look after he mother. They lived in the small town of Kilburnie about 25 miles north of Ayr. By all accounts her father had held a rather important job in the local factory and I gathered a prominent person in the town. Jean was a well educated lady and her crowning glory was her lovely hair, so dark and Gypsy looking. They were staying in Ayr for a fortnight with friends they knew. This allowed her to come out of an evening and we went to the pictures on a couple of occasions accompanied by my old pal Freddy Peters. On taking her back to her digs I was introduced to her mother. She was a nice old lady and still at a loss by the death of her husband. When the time came for them to depart I got an invitation to visit them any time & would write and let them know when I could come.

In late September I duly paid a visit to see Jean and she met me at the bus stop close where she lived. It was the first time in my life that I had gone to a ladies house and had a meal. It seemed very strange to me for I was rather a shy sort of person when in female company. The day went well and at about 9 o'clock I caught the bus to Ayr arriving home about 11pm. My roommates wanted to know all about it and Billy Elwood enquired, did she have a friend? I wrote to Jean to see if on my next visit we could make it a foursome? She was all for it, and one Sunday afternoon, Billy and I set out to meet the two girls. We had a very pleasant day being showed around the town having tea at mothers, a walk in the evening, ending with the girls awaiting with us at the bus stop. The bus did not show up, what were we to do? We bade the girls adieu and headed off in the direction of Ayr, there being of coarse no sign posts up, these having been taken down as a security measure. Well after midnight we came across a fire station which was manned and duly operational. They treated us well, giving us supper and camp beds to lie on and an early call to catch the milk train to Ayr. So alls well that ends well.

The training was still rather hectic and then somebody had a bright idea, we were lent collapsible 'bikes' by the High Command—these proved for a time a pleasant break. It was hard to understand that some fellows had never ridden and it was chaos at first. We had a fellow °Ginger' Havin who always came on parade with his land ladys dog and many a time he was ordered by the sergeant in his section to take it home & lock it up. lt was so attached to him and became friends with all his troop. He appeared when we had the bicycles & followed us, that was OK when we were marching but on wheels we covered lot of ground. The poor old dog just couldn't keep up so Ginger and his best mate rigged up between them a gas sheet, this held by them and the little dog in the middle. By this way (believe me) he was taken home back to where he lived.

Christmas day came, 1942 and we were all, l mean all, the whole unit on early morning parade in shorts and vests on this winter morning. This was said to get the effects of drinking the previous night out of our system. lt was a wild day, wet and cold. We first had to have a dip in the sea & then started off on a cross·country run which included crossing the River Doon, this we waded through up to our arm pits. To me it was plain stupidity and very unfair to us and our land ladies. Just imagine all us lads in our house hold on getting home all clamouring to get in the bath at the same time. The officers could go back to their classy hotels, but us fellows were in a different kettle of fish. Still that’s all in the past, thank God.

The year closed with perhaps a break in the future for the Allied cause. The German onslaught in Russia had come to a stop and the 8th Army had won the Battle of El Alamein and the Axis forces were in retreat. Our units time for action must soon be approaching. About early January the Troop went on leave for seven days and Freddy Peters and Stan Willett spent a few days at my place. We spent a pleasant evening with my sister Kitty and her friend Violet and my chums visiting the local pubs. What else could one do in those days. I had on other passes, another old friend Dennis Salmon staying with me for a few days. The girls enjoyed the company of my mates and later on in 1946—Freddy married my sister and I married her friend. Both girls gave birth to daughters on the same day in the same hospital on March 22 1948. lf that wasn't a coincidence I don't know what was.

ln the Spring of 1943 (I might be wrong about the actual time) we were issued with the Green Berets. The unit was up to strength, all leave was cancelled and we awaited our fate, all spare kit was stored in HQ and we were inoculated and kicked our heels around the town. Then wonders will never cease, we were given embarkation leave and marched through the town in full battle order, our train awaited us in Ayr railway station. The bagpipes preceded us, we marching with shouldered arms and it seemed that all the citizens of the town had lined the streets to bid us farewell. lt was very touching. Late evening we went aboard the carriages, they were very crowded. Freddy Peters I recall made himself scarce and settled in the luggage rack and went to sleep. About midnight a violent shunting went on and after a time the train continued its journey. Imagine our surprise and frustration (plus anger) when we arrived back in Ayr. I remember the adjutant running up and down on the platform and shouting, "Its not my fault you've been recalled," thinking perhaps that some irate squatty would thump him in the dark. Within 48 hours or so we were on board a troopship and allotted our space to swing our hammocks. We were over crowded and living conditions in somewhat squalled conditions for the trip which lasted 10 or 11 days. The officer class paraded on the upper deck and we were not allowed to enter that terrain at all in fear of punishment. No wonder my Socialist principles increased and still do to this day. The food was moderately good but our troop medical orderly, Jimmy Neighley was sick all the time and hardly touched a scrap to eat during the entire voyage from Greenock to Gibraltar. He was in rather a sorrowful state when we landed.

We marched off the ship and settled in large Nissen huts bordering the parade ground. The officers were quartered in an old monastic type of building, which had been damaged by French bombers in the previous year, in retaliation of the sinking of their Fleet. To get to the officers we had to pass through Alameda Gardens a fine park like area with lovely gardens. Our stay of a few weeks was very pleasant and after duties played hockey on a pitch just outside of our Nissen hut. During an inter—troop encounter I was hit rather savagely with a hockey stick and was taken to the Garrison Hospital situated right on the peak, for treatment. We went to the officers (us orderlies) quarters early morn, and in the evening. We got off stupid parades and this didn't go down very well with the Commando Sgt.Major, who was always after us for getting away with "it". Whilst I was away he went through the sleeping quarters, picked up my rifle, put one on charge, it being no doubt a little dusty—I was awarded 7 days confined to camp and of an evening had to work in a N.A.A.F.I. washing glasses and dirty dishes etc. I didn't mind that, plenty of free beer and bangers and mash for supper. Frankie Mason apologized to me in secret for given me seven days but I told him I wasn't worried it was just the rules of the game.

A boxing match was arranged for the Commando against the entire Garrison and we were very confident of the ability of our lads to give a good account of themselves. The lads got into training, special food no parades but plenty of exercise. The big lads in our troop were sparring with Harry Lumm (our hero) and getting him fit for his bout. He looked wonderful, fit and strong and we thought he was unbeatable. Just before the event some Royal Engineers came down to us and offered us bets on the heavy weight contest which was the main event of the night. We laid our money on our chap, at evens I think it was, we couldn't lose. The night came, the ring was installed on the parade ground (I think) and raised so everybody could see. Our lighter weight classes did very well as expected—then came the fight we'd been waiting for. The fighters were announced and it started. Harry hit and hit his opponent repeatedly, hammer blows which would fell most mortals but not this fellow. He still came forward just shaking his head under a barrage of blows. It should have been over in the first round but this fellow was still on his feet. Harry came back to his corner after the first round, held his arms in the air in dismay and for all his efforts he seemed the one who would finish second best. Harry was knocked down twice in the following round, his opponent then attacked the referee and had to be dragged off him by his seconds. He was just plain punch drunk. We lost our bets but for all that, I felt sorry for the state of the man that in the past he had suffered so much from the "Ring".

Rumours were rife in the camp and one day we boarded a ship for where? Sometime in early July 1943 I had taken the precaution of buying a couple of hundred "fags" in Gib and this in later dates did me in good stead. Some of the fellows still thought they were going home but to me that was so unreasonable, the next conflict would be fought in the Mediterranean. Our first port of call was Algiers and then onto Malta and then to Sicily, where the invasion had just started. We got into the landing craft & headed for the shore. Around us were scores of floating, bodies mostly of glider men who had been shot down, seagulls perched on these bodies and pecking them, a repulsive sight. We landed at dusk through a deserted town and headed into the surrounding country—to the sound of the guns. We marched on & on heavily laden with weapons, ammunition and equipment & finally came to rest in an olive orchard. We were dead beat, nothing to eat and only water in our water bottles. About midday the cooks erected a fire place, then we had tea, bully beef and biscuits, wonderful.

We didn't move far during the next couple of weeks getting acclimatized and enjoying life in general. Sicily, at least where we were, was fine, abounding in agricultural produce. On fruit that perhaps we all fell foul of was the prickly pear. Unknowingly we picked this fruit off with our bare hands—what an unpleasant surprise was in store for the culprit, hundreds of tiny sharp thorns which proved very painful and if not removed at once could cause one to go for medical treatment. For me, the fruit inside this covering of prickles was not really worth the trouble. Close by to us was a large raised cement pool, filled with water for the farmers use I expect. This was handy for romping in and doing our washing. Nearby were the towns of Augusta & Syracusa which we were allowed into now and again. At one point Frank Mason wanted some alterations on his shirts, they were to be cut down and elastic put in at the waist line. Just off the main street in one of these small towns, I found a small tailors shop, that what I called it anyway. I went in and was confronted by a very fine looking woman and I tried to explain what I wanted done. We didn't understand each others language and then to my amazement lifted her skirt and stretched the top of her knickers and so we had come to some arrangement. We both laughed and the next day I picked up my shirts and took, Dennis Trueman with some of his officers gear with me. I tried to get her to show us the elastic in her knickers but she wasn't having any of that-shook her finger at me and in Italian (I expect) called me a naughty boy.

Well once again we boarded ship, was lectured by some old general, our job was to land somewhere up the coast and halt the Axis forces who were pulling back to Messina. At this time the whole unit was plagued with diarrhoea and in the dead of night the troops were landed. Each troop was landed at about 2OO yards from each other so causing a dispersed force. Our troop ran up into a culvert which opened up into the streets of this town. All at once a deafening explosion the lads just away from us had ambushed a German convoy and had in rifle exchange blown up an ammunition lorry causing casualties on both sides, some Commando chaps being killed outright. Some of the enemy jumped their transport and headed on foot into where we were getting assembled. I was with troop HQ along with Sgt.Major Jimmy Prescott, he was immediately shot, and all hell broke loose. Some of the Germans (they were Hermann Goering Division) crack troops, fortified a large house and hurled grenades at us. I'm sure to this day that those Jerrys were drunk as lords and were finally overcome and in the process our Troop Captain was badly wounded in the upper leg. After rough medical treatment we were proceeding along a railway track and Captain Hooper, still in great pain, insisted on leading the column. He was placed on an hand cart and in doing so caused a slowing down of the advance. He had to give up and was left by the side of the railway track. My old officer was now in command and we pushed on. At dawn some of the houses with verandas over looked the track and we all had a good laugh when some elderly couples appeared in their night attire to see British Troops going by. Later on we approached a town and had our first meal-then Freddy and myself jumped into a large water tank that was in the main square. Then all at once mortar bombs were rained down on us causing some wounded, when the explosion came I ducked under the water. Straight away we got ready and was on our way to find the enemy. We got into a very rocky hillside and there gunners spotted us and gave us a very frightening time. The shrapnel hitting the large rocky flooring and creating more bomb blast. They pinned us down for quite a while and then caught up their main body. The chase was on and we came to the coast road approaching Messina. The towns people came out of their houses greeting us with flowers and wine. They seemed very happy to see us, and for them the German occupation was over. Then the 8th Army tanks appeared and could be discerned from the Italian mainland. This caused violent shell fire to be brought down on us and I'm afraid, killed and some of the civilians who, just a few minutes before had welcomed us now, wished us in hell. I can still see now, mothers screaming and carrying their wounded children into the adjourning houses. Us fellows sheltered and climbed into the tanks and made for our objective. On reaching Messina still under gun fire our troop HQ broke into a bank. It was a newish strong looking building and Frankie Mason said that the vaults would be strong enough to resist the shrapnel. It was like Aladdin's Cave, there was possibly millions of newly printed Liras, stacks of them of different denominations. In true life, us dozen or so fellows were made. Our officer said, and we believed him that this currency would be no good in the future. My only regret that I didn't put 3 or 4 100,000 in my pack. Nobody touched it. Were we fools????

The American forces came along then, having come along the northern route. Some drunken German soldiers were riding horses up and down the main street and these were soon dismounted and some of our lads took over and galloped around. I think they were Italian cavalry mounts. Then we found a German run lager brewery and had a few pints. If all wars were won like this you could count me in. The occupation of the island was a piece of cake but the Italian mainland would I felt be something quite different. The unit was brought to rest, clean up and get ready for the future. Town life started up, shops opening—wine bars to go to on ones time off. I saw one incident which is still vivid in my mind. Down one street in this certain town were "ladies of the red lamp" selling their wares. Outside of the front door were queues of a dozen or so allied soldiers awaiting their turn. All at once a violent screaming came from the lady in the house·the door was thrown open and out came a Canadian (anyway it was an Empire trooper), a handful of money in one hand and a colt revolver in the other. He had perhaps had his fill and then robbed her of her takings. Poor little woman.

It must have been sometime in the late August, I was taken ill. What was wrong with me I did not know. I sweated and shook with the cold. Jimmy Neighbly and Fred Peters my arms around their necks took me to a First Aid Post. This was in an old school building and I was placed in blankets on the floor with scores of other fellows in a similar state. I don't remember much about it, only that I felt death could be very near. I had Malaria and was confined at this Red Cross Post for ten days. I was then sent back to our HQ and found quite a few chaps like myself who had been taken ill. It appears that whilst I was sick our unit had invaded with the Allied armies, landing at Salerno. We awaited for perhaps 3 or 4 days for transport and then we were on our way to rejoin our pals. My nagging worry was is old Fred Peters OK, for he was a very resolute soldier, he loved the life.
He lived with his widowed mother in Fulham, his father killed in 1918 in France. He rarely drank spirits, but on one occasion finishing up the best shot in No2 slept off the night in a field in Moffat.

Getting near our objective we passed a hospital ship and felt this was not a very welcoming sign. We landed on the beach and then German long range guns opened up. Grabbing our equipment we made for higher ground, there we were confronted by the beach master and directed in the direction of where our Unit might be. It was all in a way, pot luck. We found our No.6 Troop or what was left of it, about 15 men from the strength of 60. I asked around, Freddy was badly wounded, my old Franky Mason dead, and the man who had taken my job as Troop runner also lost his life whilst under mortar fire, The whole Commando had suffered clearly. The Duke of Wellington was also killed and badly missed by his men. It was that when he was off parade, and speaking to his men, they called him Dukey. The tale goes that he was wounded in the backside and the assault he was leading was brought to a halt. Whilst gathering their strength he said, "You not going to let the Jerrys get away with this are you? They made one more effort and drove the enemy from his position but he fell mortally wounded. His death reminded me of a poem that we had to learn at school, Vistai Lampada by Henry Newbolt. Now at the age of 75 I can still remember the lines. A part of it runs:

The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And, England’s far and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks;
'Play up' play up! and play the game!

Battle is not just like that, it is bloody rotten, cruel and there are no winners. Another very close pal of mine, an ex—policeman, Taffy Davies was also killed. Never more to hear his lovely voice and to feel his close companionship. Perhaps I shed a tear. The songs our troops sang when in billets or on the march - The Old Girl sat by the fire' and 'There was an old monk of great renown' and many others.

After a couple of days or so the Commandos remnants said goodbye to Salerno and were taken back to Sicily to be made up to strength. It was surely needed for it was a shadow of its old self. I must add, it would be the Allies bad luck to have landed when by chance some German divisions were at that time on manoeuvres in that area.

Volunteers from long serving 8th Army lads, some who had been in North Africa since the early l940s and had withstood the first assault of Italian soldiers, under the noted General Wavell. I mean of course the British C.O. had been made Viceroy of India and been now supplanted by General Montgomery. They had been away from their families for a long, long time and thought perhaps that our Unit would now be sent home and prepare for the Second Front. They were mistaken.

After a month or so we embarked on a Navy tank landing craft, a huge boat. Whilst on parade in the docks-my name was called from the upper part of the ship. It turned out to be a mate of mine who lived in our street back home. He was a rare lad—Albert Lewis, he had a way with all men. Coming aboard he took me to his mess and was introduced to all his pals. I was given rum and hundreds of fags which in returning to my own pals dished out. Our RSM came to see and asked if I could get him some tobacco, this I declined. The old sod had put me on a charge in Gibraltar so why should I help him?! We landed in Bari in Southern Italy, a large port on the Adriatic coast and finished up at a smallish town of Molfetta about 30 miles or so further up the coast. Here I was approached by Lt. Nicholls would I become his orderly. I accepted, for the living quarters of the troops in town were terrible. All the officers and servants were quartered in an immense chateau a couple of miles out of town. We got on very well and us orderlies formed a very solid bond. Like a union. Perhaps I am a little adrift with my memory, we did stay in town for a while and then shifted into the large palace like building. We now spent some harsh training up in the mountains—once spending a week on exercise and staying in a large deserted monastery. It was extremely cold and bleak but I expect it put us in good stead for things to come.

Our next encounter with the enemy was in a landing in Albania, we were now in Adriatic Land Forces. It was a complete success and a credit to the organisation. Our troop had a section of mules to carry our ammo and food up the mountain track. They were wonderful creatures and I was in charge of one. I had no trouble until I came to a mule that had been hit by shell fire and had to make a detour round it. We came across a few civilians and these proved to be in very dire straits, abject poverty, hungry and rags. It was rumoured but unconfirmed that some of our dead had been found naked, stripped of their clothes and footware. Looking back now who could really blame these poor creatures for committing this somewhat foul deed! During this operation a section of us went further inland and mined a road which would later be used by hostile forces. It being in dead of night we found ourselves treading over German soldiers dead bodies which covered a section of the road. Perhaps two dozen or so, a ghastly sight I shall never forget. Blood was everywhere even on the sides of our rubber boots. They must have been marching up the road when death hit them. What caused it? I reckon it could have been an Allied fighter (Mustang), glided behind them when they were in formation and machine gunned the lot. I shall never forget the blood.
After a brief stay, wet and cold but feeling happy to be leaving this desolate land we headed for the beach. Here our wounded had been assembled and awaited transport, back to hospitals in Italy. One of the chaps on a stretcher called my name·"Don't you know me Dicky" he said, I knew him, he was from HQ and I said, "it won't be long now you'll soon be tucked up in a nice bed with pretty nurses to look after you." I asked a medical orderly how bad was he. Wounded in the thigh and he should be OK soon. To me he had death in his eyes and his face had got drawn. He died in the next 24 hours.

I must explain, it appears that our units frequent excursions into Axis occupied territory was to hold the enemy forces down and even to install the feeling of a large landing in these areas. We seemed to have had some success, these pin pricks must have caused the German HQ quite a few headaches. After a spell back on the mainland in the early Spring of 1944 we landed in Vis an island in the Dalmation group. The Commando was split up and the 6 Troops occupied 5 strong points around the island in case of an enemy invasion. You see all the other islands were held by the Germans. These troops had taken over from the Italian soldiers who previously had had that job. Myself and Dennis Salmon found ourselves a nice cushy number. Overlooking the main town a half a dozen or so officers had their digs. There was an old rather 'posh' Yugoslavian lady who cooked the meals and a fine rosy checked lady of around 18 years of age who did the serving at tables and the house work. About that time two South African officers joined the unit. We found in a way that it proved very fortunate for us. Presents were sent to us and I was given a sleeping bag and various other things from these very kind people from Pretoria.

The weather held fine, Dennis and I slept in an out building and when the summer approached we made our beds out in the opening—this view overlooking the whole harbour and on two occasions were perhaps the only witnesses of German fighter planes at early dawn, coming in at about top level and strafing the small navy craft. Also dropping small bombs. There was a large formation of partisans on the island and also very young children from 12 years to I5 years formed into army units and dressed in cut down uniforms. These were always seen marching to and fro. The 'Yogoes' never seem to have a lot of time for us. They never saluted our officers but always (I noticed) when a Russian officer came along, they stood to attention and greeted him with the affection of a clenched fist. Men and women made up these fighting force and seemed to get on well together. It was rumoured and I feel perhaps it was true, that on the outset of the Army under Tito, if a woman became pregnant, the culprit was known to be court-martialled and if found guilty, shot. It seems it paid then to keep out of each others beds. (Joke).

The harbour and shipping was under the control of a very dear gentleman, Admiral Cowan. He must have been in his 70s and was a credit to the services. At all time of the day and night he would be seen strutting around with his large shepherd crook getting things cracking. I bet he didn't stand any nonsense too. In the harbour were 3 MTBs and sometimes we went on trips with them and once had running battles with similar German craft. These boats were very fast and ply wood was widely used in the building of them. They could not sustain heavy damage and sometimes limped back to port in a frightful mess. There was a hospital inland where I stayed for a week or so with another attack of malaria. Whilst there a very large formation of US flying Fortresses had bombed the Rumanian oil field at Ploeste. These brave young men had dropped their bombs at close range, at roof top level and of course were badly knocked about. These flyers must have been told that us "Brits" held this island and if they were in dire trouble and unable to reach the base, bail out over us. On this day 3 planes attempted the drop, we could see from the ground the damage they had sustained, one with only one engine operational. The pilots it seemed put the plane in a circular motion around the island and chanced their arm. It was no good, these young men just drifted out to see and just could not be picked up in time. Poor lads.

About this time a section of our No.6 Troop went out in a night recce on the MTBs—Motor Torpedo Boats. Luck was in, they captured a large schooner and in it many German service men going home on leave from Greece. The boat also yielded casks of butter. Us fellows eat & eat until we were heartily sick of it. It was wonderful. The poor old Germans were very down hearted, their destination was Venice and then onto a train to see their loved ones. In a way they were very lucky, they thought they would be handed over to the partisans, that would more than likely mean death. They were eventually shipped over to P.O.W. camps in Southern Italy.

Our stay in Vis was real fine and the fine wines the best I have ever tasted. Because of the war they couldn't export these wares and for a few cigarettes or a tin of bully beef a litre or two of remarkable good wine. There was also a very harsh drink called 'Rakia' which was colourless, very alcoholic and I expect if one got addicted could send one round the bend. I tried it once out of courtesy with some partisans and that being the only time. We were sometimes issued with a bottle of beer and that not every week and cigarettes which had been manufactured in India with their tobacco was a disgrace to the British Army. The officers and senior NCOs got whisky and I expect that kept them happy. The hard drink was always delivered to the officers mess and I was always given the job of taking the sergeants their ration. I was always sure of a nip or two from Jimmy Prescott, Sgt.Dawson or Reg Furze. We were a happy crowd in No.6 Troop.

One night one of the officers was sent out on a recce, his name "Pissy Parsons" on account of his love for wine. An M.T.B. dropped him on the shore and was to pick him up the next night. All they found was a torn blooded part of his garment. He was never heard of again. He was I recall, very popular with his men and badly missed.

The time came for our next operation, and our entire unit was landed at dawn on the island of Kocular *[CVA note – This refers to the raid on Solta, not Kocular]*. We were met by a few partisans who directed us through the mine fields and booby traps which were along the track loading to the German strong hold. The enemy were taken by surprise and with the help of our heavy weapon; 3" mortars and Vickers machine guns plus a Mustang *[CVA note – Other Veterans recall a flight of American Kitty Hawk fighter bombers taking part]* which was flown from Italy to help the operation, the garrison soon surrendered. Myself & another couple raided the officers mess, I came along with a couple of bottles of good champagne and stupidly left some souvenirs of some value to the pickings of other fellows. We didn't wait long, leaving the civilians to their fate once more. We were told that German Troops had reoccupied the island, 24 hours after we left. We claimed just over 100 prisoners—not bad bag—what?

The next night, having a meal in our billet, (it was just dusk) enemy fighter planes give us the once over. We heard the bombs dropping and they were getting nearer. Angelica, the servant girl screamed and went rather wild, like in a film but this was true, I pulled her to the floor and covered her with my body and talked quietly to her to try and console her fears. It's a good job the bombs weren't very big. They dropped all round us, the nearest on a house just 30 yards or so away, that bringing our windows and glass on top of our laid bodies. The next night they came again and us occupants of the mess, officers and other ranks fired our rifles at them. This was I expect in retaliation for our raids.

The next bit of good news was the opening up of the Second Front in France. The loud speakers were giving it out in the small town, and even the partisans shook our hands. To them and us, we thought the war was soon to be over, at least by the winter. It was not to be. About this time we were reinforced by a Marine Commando, the 40th or 41st, one of these. Also REs and air force personnel came with heavy machinery and got a landing stage ready to receive fighter planes. A little while after this, early in the morning us fellows were called to arms. Grabbing what kit we could, ammunition and grenades about 3O of us were loaded onto a MTB and went hell for leather to another enemy held island. This was a combined attack of joint forces, partisan and Marines. When we landed the Germans who were entrenched in this mountain like terrain had with stood the combined assaults, our own CO Colonel Churchill playing his bagpipes had entered (by all accounts) the enemy position but had the misfortune to be wounded and captured. The partisan
artillery was still firing into the hills which was shrouded in mist and smoke. The stretcher bearers mostly "Yugos" were fetching their bloodied and sorrowful comrades down the mountain track. Some were very young girls and in great pain. A young naval officer came up and joined our group. His orders were to evacuate and within a couple of hours too. The field guns were still firing and were going to use up all their ammo before returning. Our officer was in a dilemma, his purpose was to try and rescue the Colonel. He maybe felt that we were too big a force (us 30) and asked for volunteers about 10 or so to reconnoitre and abide their time. Charly Goffe stepped forward and his pals soon followed him and made up the required group.

We re-embarked and went back to Vis and our pals were picked up 24 hours later. They had bumped into an enemy patrol but no fire exchange was made, the Jerries possibly having had enough and our lads didn't want larger German forces to join in. We never saw our CO again till after the war. It appears he was taken to the mainland and flown to Berlin. With a name like that you can bet he was in for a rough time.

A little after this an officer in one of the lower numbered troops ie—No2 or No3 Troop was landed in the dead of the night in one of the occupied German garrisoned islands. In conjunction with some of the local villagers he dressed like an old shepherd and in the evening of the next day drove his flock in the village (because of course there was a curfew and anybody caught out after that would possibly be shot). He knocked on the door where the senior German officer was quartered and it was opened by the lady of the house. By the way, this officer told us about this event after the operation, so its not a lot of bull. He held his fore finger to his lips and gestured to the lady to remain quiet. He mounted the stairs and opened the door, the German he said had become aware that his life was in danger and placed himself in the shadows. Again, just like in a film our man says he saw a movement. He shot all his whole rounds in his revolver into the body, ran down the stairs and escaped, a boat awaiting off shore. The Germans didn't take too kindly to this action and the head of the SS, issued a statement that all Commando troops that were captured would be shot out of hand. This caused a certain amount of alarm at our HQ. I have often wondered what happened to the local villagers and particularly that poor lady who had opened the door? Was it worth it?

Our time in Vis was coming to its end - we spent in all 7 months. Marshal Tito inspected us and just before departing our unit played the partisans a game of football. Us British lads were outnumbered at least 10—l in the crowd. It proved a victory for our lads, we did well for some of the Partisans were pre-war internationals. We bade adieu to the local people, Angelica and the old lady were sobbing, we would never see them again. I think that they both felt that their protection had gone. The old lady had I feel (in the past) been of some prominence. She had no love for the partisans and I feel no leaning towards the communist movement. When the island had been taken over at the outbreak of war by the Italians, her brother had been shot and killed. She had had a rough time and felt secure whilst we were in occupation and that now had gone.

Getting back to the mainland, there was another reshuffle. I left 6 Troop and went to 5 Troop, that under command of Captain Larry Taylor. He was a dear old lad & had for his batman a little lad called Ainslee. Larry being in the Liverpool Scottish was kilted, always had a long walking stick (like a crook) and smoked a large curving pipe. A figure that all artistic people would like to draw. The NCOs were good, Sgt.Major McAllister, Tiny Burke and Tan Rudge. Also I made friends with Corporal Walter Ainslie, why I don't know. We didn't seem to have much in common. He was well turned out, very smart in fact, very blond. He called himself "Ace". We were given a few days leave and Dennis Salmon and myself got foodstuffs and blankets etc and headed on a hike inland with map and compass. We put up in little hamlets and were well treated by the local people. Wine was cheap and so was the local foodstuffs for we were in the heart of the agricultural areas of Southern Italy. We were invited and had meals from farm workers living rather poorly and with their mule munching hay in the next room. I liked these people, they seemed contented and at peace with the world and glad that the Fascists had been overthrown. They were happy and when so, full of song. The officers took their turn of being in charge of catering, mess bar and general welfare of the mess. The officer in charge at the time I'm writing about organised a jeep with 4 or 5 of us orderlies to hunt around in the farm country for produce, vegetables, eggs, wine well anything they thought was available. Meanwhile bully beef, biscuits and tins of soup were loaded up for purchase. We found ourselves in villages distinctly marked 'out of bounds' but paid little heed to this, luckily seeing no red—caps. We did very well, but what the civilians mostly wanted was coffee, cigarettes and the like. Heading back home having had a few glasses of Vino and one of the orderlies playing his accordion, we were in great spirits. We came upon a large house just outside one of these small towns with a balcony around it and nice young women waving to us. We stopped and were invited in, chatted to the ladies, drinks were served, an old piano and our musical box dished up the music, and we danced.

We had a merry couple of hours, gave the ladies some bully, got a kiss and then we were on our way.
Sometime, I can't remember when, one evening there was a constant drone of aircraft overhead. The sirens were sounded but the enemy was headed for Bari harbour. We all went up on the flat roof of the mansion to get a better view of the bombing. It was most severe: Laying anchor was a large merchant fleet composed of tankers, ammunition ships and vessels with various types of gasses on board, these in case the Germans broke the Geneva Convention. This was said afterwards one of the biggest calamities suffered by the Allies in the Mediterranean campaign. The explosion of the large ammunition ships created havoc, sunk or even set alight to other craft. The harbour and a large part of the town went down like a pack of cards. God knows what the death toll was. Some of our unit went to help in the rescue work the next day. I went a couple of weeks later and was astounded with what I saw. Lots of ships could be seen with just chimney stacks showing. The port was a wreck.

It was now into summer and the unit, between raids here and there, took over front line duties. These in fact made a pleasant sort of break, that's if you weren't hit by shellfire etc. In June Rome had fallen to the allies & a large pre-war sport complex was opened to British Troops for the spending of long awaited leaves. In late August the unit was given leave, those who had joined us from the original 8th Army in Sicily and had been overseas 3 years or so were flown home. A lad in our troop who had never seen his daughter got leave. On his return he said to me, "Dicky if you ever get the chance to go back to England on leave, refuse it"! He couldn't bear the parting from his wife and little girl who had only really got to know him. I don't think he ever got over it and was killed later on in a raid on the lakes. **[CVA note –**
This was, I believe, Lance Bombardier George James Deaker, 6201681, Royal Artillery and No.2 Commando, kia 3rd April 1945 aged 25yrs]

Getting back to my own story, Dennis Trueman and myself got leave passes to spend in Rome. Just imagine, we were 36O miles away from our destination, no transport laid on, get their under your own steam. We thumbed a lift to Foggia where the American Air Force was stationed and thought perhaps we'd get a lift to Rome that way. We enquired and were conducted to the top man in charge of operations, some General, he was very kind and said that he had aircraft going to Rome but the Military Police wouldn't allow men to be used on these operations. In fact he said he would be sent back to where we came from. If it could be of any help he said, "we have a convoy of lorries (transport & jeeps) going to Naples, and your more than welcome to have a lift." Thank you very much. We spent the next night in Naples, stayed and had meals at American army camp, these fellows couldn't do enough for us. Caught another transport going to Rome, arrived there late afternoon we put our gear in the "Holiday Camp". The Italian capital was a very crowded place and so was the camp, troops everywhere. One got rather sick of seeing uniforms and eluding officers who one was bound to salute. Dennis and I spent our time sightseeing, Coliseum (not as big as I thought it was) the catacombs, Spanish Steps, various large Palaces and finally The Vatican City. My friend was an ardent Roman Catholic and so we spent a considerable amount p of time in St.Peters. I was spell bound by the beauty of this building especially the dome. What wonderful artists & builders were employed in its construction, a dedication perhaps unknown today. Whilst in the building mostly army chaps, we were ushered into a large hall. (this remember was 48 years ago and a long time to recall). The Pope was carried round on a sort of dais escorted by the Swiss Guard and passing by, blessed us. He was then placed on a throne and welcomed us to the Holy City, his main theme being that let the cruel war finish soon, and everyone going home to their loved ones. My pal was dumb struck with the ceremony & I was impressed too. The time came and our leave had expired, it was well worth going and we were on our way back. We were once again lucky with transport problems it taking us 2 days to get back to our camp.

The war carried on and at one time we were in the American zone of operations. I remember once that our unit was close to the recognised front line and our section had halted and settled in the afternoon in a badly bombed out house. The so-called town was in ruins having changed hands two or three times just before our arrival. People still lived in these ruins, the roads were pitted with shell holes badly filled in and traffic had a problem getting through. There was the usual winter mud and hardships to contend with. Ammunition lorries were passing and the little ragged children would 'whip-tag' behind, shouting with squeals of laughter. All at once a loud explosion and a part of the building caved in. The bumpy road must have in some way ignited the ammo. What a sight-nothing to see really but the poor mothers drawn to the scene of the accident, crying and pulling their hair-searching, searching but all in vain. I used to think sometimes-was there a God.

Christmas 1944 came and us orderlies were awaited on by the officers which was the usual custom. I was asked by the lads to give a short speech. We had had a few drinks and were in fair fettle. I rose-it went something like this- "Remember chaps this time last year we were eating Scottish Turkey, this year Italian Turkey-lets drink a toast that this time next year we will be eating Tedeski turkey." I shall always remember officers and men clapped me and I was a little embarrassed.

The Americans put on a show for us in some forgotten small town. The artists had come from Broadway, or so we were told-they weren't a patch on the Ensa, still it made a change. It was held in a large hall and us orderlies were up in the balcony. Between acts, now and again, a well built strong looking Italian woman would appear scantily dressed and prance around the stage. The last act was announced by the Yankie sergeant and he laughingly said-keep your hands in your pockets. The curtain was raised and there was this lady in all her nudity, kicking her legs high, prancing around in some sort of dance, to the music. I'm sure none of us had ever witnessed the likes before. She was a mass of lovely dark hair. Somebody besides me said she can have my chocolate ration any day and someone else remarked, it looks like she could do with my razor blade ration. The local police were awaiting outside to arrest her, but she was smuggled into the officers mess and escaped them.

The war still continued and we passed through a badly bombed and blacked—out Rimini on a spell at the front. At one time at dead of night we were marching up the road to release some infantry for a spell in the lines. Behind us, tanks had started to rev up. We knew what was about to happen the Germans got the wind up, thinking perhaps an armoured attack was being launched and shelled the road. It was rather a sustained and luckily inaccurate bombardment and we got off rather lightly. We got to our position, if I can recall at early dawn. The positions were mostly old farm dwellings or such. lt was held by half a troop (30 men under one officer). Trenches were dug around the building and used at Stand-To and Stand—Down, and of course during shelling. We had our medical orderly Jimmy Neilly—signals and phone laid onto HQ in case we needed heavy weapon support. We were self contained, food and water and what else we required we brought up in the night. Sentries were posted at all times and for the first couple of days everyone had to be alert. Just previous to our taking over the Germans had captured in the night a body of Canadians such as us and spirited them back to their own lines. By all accounts drink had been the problem. All these farm places had large vats of Vino and had to be drunk in moderation.

lt could not be put in the same context as life in the First World War front lines. We lived rather comfortable had one hot meal a day—little activity, to me it seemed if you don't fire on us we won't fire on you. Of course that was OK until some Staff fellow in the far rear wanted to know the strength or such of the opposition facing you. One of the problems when going on these patrols (in the late evening) was to beware of booby traps and mines etc. One night on a stealthy patrol amongst olive trees one of the lads stumbled on a trip wire which caused an explosion amongst the

tree branch. This caused very many lights which lit up the land, and some mortar fire directed in our vicinity. We soon scuttled back to our little house.
I had a spell one time to be look out for our Troop sniper. We made our position upstairs way back from the opening where the window frame once was and surveyed the quarter where perhaps trouble could come. Watching and watching, remaining quite still, no smoking, after a time I dozed off and awakened with a start, with the crack of the Enfield, I've got him he said and pointed out the approx place this German had fallen, it was rather bushy and amid long grass and stuff. Whether he did score a hit I will never know. These spells in the front lasted about a fortnight and worked sometimes fortnight on, fortnight off.

About that time an lrishman—Paddy Jerman joined 5 troop. He wanted a batman, l was asked, and accepted. A very neat man—called me Dicky—we got along well. I had a feeling he came from the Irish Free State, still that was neither here nor there. He was smart, clean looking and had that sort of Errol Flynn look about him. He was very popular with the men, really well liked.

We spent quite a bit of time in Ravenna, a badly knocked about town at that time. The unit found 'diggs' where it could and we sufficed. There seemed a lot of early Roman history in this town and when I could l looked around and marvelled at this grandeur of past history one saw. No wonder they ruled the known world of the period. The war seemed to be ending and in April 1945 we made our last attack. We headed for a place named Argenta- got out of our transport and awaited orders. Whilst awaiting at the roadside two young ladies driving goats back to the farm halted in front of me and said (I having had my teeth extracted had no teeth at all) Poor English Soldier (of course in Italian which I understood) come with us into the farm and our mother will give you some goats milk. I did & was extremely grateful to these ladies and have thought about them many times through the years.

Well we got ready and started our advance. Our No5 Troop advanced up a narrow neck of land with water at one side. Shells soon fell amongst us and the nearer we got to our objective the fire got harsher. Haystacks were alight and the wounded were screaming-dear God, all this and the stupid war is nearly over! We then came under intense small arms fire which tore the ground at our feet. We took a brief cover and continued aided by two tanks which fired on the German positions and made them keep their heads down. The enemy position was a large embankment which covered all the width of our troops movement. The quicker we got to the embankment the safer we would be. We at last reached it-us one side them on the other. We I expect were only 12 to 15 'yards apart. Clambering up the back a fellow I was with had his pack torn from his back by a percussion grenade, the blast sending us both to the bottom once more. We passed our own mills bombs up to the lads on the top and these soon dealt with the enemy causing him to flee back to their rear positions. Then we started to dig in, our entrenching tools making little progress with the earth. My old pal Walter Ainslie had carried with his own gear a large shovel. He beckoned me and l gladly joined him, we soon dug a hole to crouch in. The mortar fire was very intense and dropped all around us. On our right about 4 yards was dug in, Sergeant 'Taffy' Davis. A bomb dropped right on top of him, killing him out right. The blast caused Walter and myself to fear for our lives. Then the Germans attacked nearby reaching the embankment, but were driven off by a tank which had come up the causeway. The tank in doing this ran over a large mine and blew up its ammunition exploding inside of it.

That night the Marine Commandos went through our position to continue pressure on the enemy. They were met immediately by intense shell fire and suffered casualties right away. This was called leap frogging and we continued our advance at dawn. We hadn't gone above 20 yards or so when we passed by a human leg still with its boot still on. It was one of ours and looked to me, obscene. Poor fellow. Just further on were two young marines dead in a ditch. The Germans in their retreat from us had before with a flag of truce collected their own dead and wounded. We pushed on and

came to empty houses and here I stole a pair of sheets (shame on me) to be used in more healthy times.
We carried on the pursuit and the unit was halted alongside a fast river with a bombed out girder bridge which had spanned across but now was a broken obstacle. Our troop was bringing up the rear and we neatly laid down on the ground with our feet, resting up the bank. This seemed always so, it seemed, to comfort ones tired legs. An NCO from headquarters came along and wanted Lt.Jerman, who had to report forthwith to the Commando CO. After about 20 minutes or so "Paddy" returned, came up to me saying get your kit Dicky, us two have had orders to get across to the other said and find out what that rifle fires all about. I thought “fancy him picking on me". I think too it might be my luck to be named as the last British soldier to be killed in World War II. We reached the other side after a struggle, having to wade and swim part of the way and watched by the whole Commando. Wet through, we walked up a large hill about a mile and down below was a hamlet. There was a church and on reaching it we were surrounded by rough looking Italian partisans. These people were overjoyed at seeing us, the fellows shaking our hands, the ladies repeatedly kissing us. I understood the language but could not say it, if you understand what I mean. Paddy Jerman spoke fluent French but that was no help. The churchman took us both to a place in the cemetery and dug up a bottle of spirits—either whisky or brandy, I forget what and saying he had pledged himself that in the arrival of allied troops he would pass the bottle round.
We had a good drink, and enquired about the rifle fire taking place at the rear of the village. The partisan leader said in words I understood "They are some Black Shirts, we will get them out, don't worry we don't want any help"—winked his eye and pulled his forefinger under his chin in a cutting motion. We both understood. The women, glad to see us, were terribly afraid that French North African forces might be employed in this sector where they lived. By all accounts they had heard of bad reports, of rape and pillage taking place in other areas by these troops. It seems that the French officers turned a blind eye to their goings on. The spoils of war?

Getting back to our troop we marched on, settled down for the night and heard that the enemy forces in Italy were surrendering. Late May or early June our unit was placed to receive one of their divisions - a camp had been erected, sealed off with barbed wire. Awaiting them we heard them miles away. Then over the brow of the hill they marched. They looked splendid, eyes to the front and singing all the time. The column seemed endless and bringing up the rear was red cross ambulances. In these were women, perhaps officers wives and I suspected, camp followers, I might have been wrong. There were lots of Alsatian dogs which I was informed was widely used in the German Army. We searched all these fellows and some of them I'm afraid lost watches and other valued articles. What I did take from them was cigars. We had little tobacco and these cases of Dutch cigars. That wasn't right, was it? No, looking back our chaps were pretty fair and never confiscated the lot.

We didn't stay much longer in Italy, down to Naples on ship, home for a spot of leave. We finished up on a race course in Sussex under canvas. We went out to finish our time in a little town near Bochum called Recklinghausen. The whole area was laid waste by Allied bombing. What was gained by Unconditional Surrender? It only prolonged hostilities, & caused more havoc and a million or so more deaths. Remember Dresden! The nation greeted Winston Churchill after the war as a hero, I thought him a fool!!! When I was very young my mother used to talk of the Boer War. It should never have been and was only started by this country—to get their hands on the gold and diamond fields. Into this conflict stepped one of the elite, Winston Churchill ·a war correspondent-captured—broke his parole and escaped- not very gentlemanly. Entered Parliament and changed from Whig to Tory. War came. He had a big say in the Gallipoli set back, I bet the Australians loved him. Later on caring little about the state of the unemployed and miners and such. In the Second World War, sending capital ships to their doom off the Malaya coast. It was also said, the large guns defending

Singapore were facing the wrong way. He was mixed up in some very debatable points of view. They shot poor old Admiral Byng.

Things I remember. My father telling me about a football match he saw when he was a young man about 1886 I should think, Aston Villa v Arsenal at Crystal Palace. Then, when a very young boy going through the orchard seated on the back of the cart, seeing a hare killed with the first shot. A man from Our Street, a so-called gentleman who had fallen on hard times, telling me over a pint of mild and bitter about receiving a Telegram to report to so and so station in London, all kit provided (this before the war) and playing for one of the posh amateur sides. After the game finding a £5 note in his jacket pocket.

Well I really must close now—all I have written is true, as much as I can recall. If dates and places are slightly out, put it down to my old age, for in 3 months time I will be 76 years old.

The time of signing off 4:30pm May 21st, 1992.

Herbert Dixon

Commando Veterans Association comments:

Herbert Dixon was born on 11th August 1916 joined the BUFFS on March 15th, 1940. He volunteered for, and was attached to, No.5 Independent Company before joining the newly reformed No.2 Commando under Lt. Col. Newman. He served with No.2 Commando for the remainder of the war.

Post war aged 75 he wrote his memoirs and our thanks to his grandson Tim Huelin who has provided us with all the photos and information. Tim adds " Bert passed away unexpectedly and peacefully at home in December 1999 at the age of 83. I can also honestly say that he was the kindest and funniest bloke that I've ever had the honour of knowing certainly not the soldiering type, but I suppose not many were."

Herbert Dixon, known as 'Bert', or to some Commandos as 'Herbie', was initially in 6 troop of No. 2 Commando. Late 1943 when the Commando was restructured he was moved to 5 troop. There are group photos of him and others in the 5 troop album of the our website www.commandoveterans.org