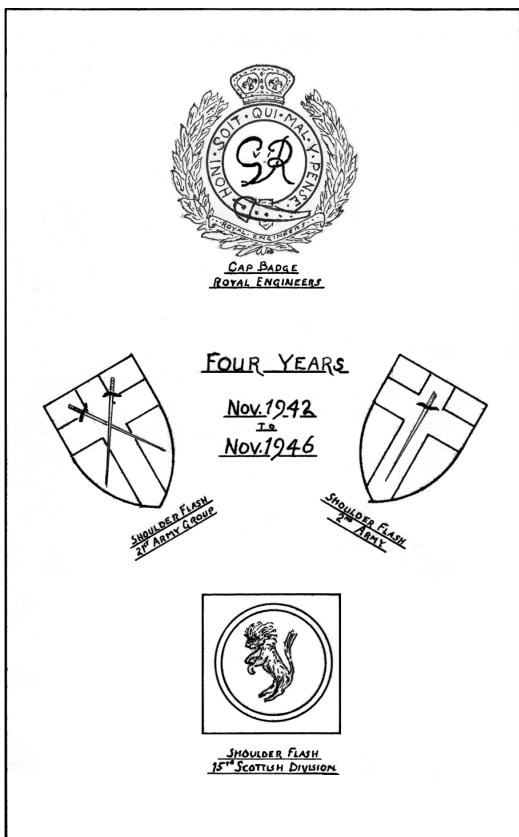


My Four Years in the Army

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1983



Foreward

From the bits and pieces I remember of those four years I have tried to compile a story. Most of the men's names mentioned are real but, for the story, I have used a few fictitious names.

If you are prepared for spelling mistakes, poor composition, bad grammar and lack of punctuation then read on — that is, if you can decipher my scrawl.

Chapter 1

Preamble to Call Up

At the beginning of the war I was working for a Coventry builder erecting houses on the Styvechal Estate. Materials for this speculative house building had become harder to get during the 1938 European political crisis and when war was declared in 1939 this trickle almost dried up so I began to look for other work. Carpenters were in great demand by factories which now had to black-out all windows and roof lights and take other air raid precautions and I obtained a job with Alvis Limited in Holyhead Road.

With the introduction of conscription for men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one years, I had my medical and due to varicose veins in both legs was classified B.II. Although working in a munitions factory I was not engaged in a reserved occupation and was liable for call-up at any time or could have been directed to work on Military Camps being built all over the country.

In February, 1941, I caught pneumonia, was very ill and away from work for almost four months. Early in 1942 I had pneumonia again but less severely this time. Some weeks after this illness I received a directive ordering me to report for camp construction. With the thought of approaching winter and working in all weathers on a muddy campsite, I asked my doctor if he considered me fit for this work. He told me to appeal against the move on medical grounds and gave me a note to enclose with my appeal. I had to appear before a Ministry medical adjudicator who upheld my doctor's view and recommended that I continue in my present employment.

Nothing more was heard about working on campsites, but to our surprise my calling-up papers arrived in November ordering me to report to Maryhill Barracks in Glasgow for six weeks 'initial training'. Nona, my wife, was now expecting our second child and was having a difficult pregnancy, needing constant attention from our doctor to prevent a miscarriage. Because of Nona's condition I applied for a compassionate deferment of call-up until after our baby was born; this was refused. Our doctor, in an attempt to cheer us up, said he thought I would be discharged as medically unfit in less than six months. How wrong he proved to be.

The telegram informing me that my application for deferment had been turned down arrived on the day I should have reported to Maryhill Barracks. Having said our goodbyes I cycled down to my parents' house, left my cycle with them and caught an early train for Birmingham where I changed to one for Glasgow. Ordinary service trains suffered long delays, priority being given to trains carrying essential supplies or troops. There were no buffet coaches so I had come prepared with sandwiches. Wearing my Home Guard uniform, now stripped of flashes, I was able to queue with service personnel at the

W.V.S. trolleys for cups of tea whenever the train stopped at a station. Some of the stops were long and the journey to Glasgow seemed endless. It was after lights-out when I reported to the barracks' guard room and was taken to a nearby hut to spend the night. There were no beds in the hut and no black-out shutters at the windows so I was unable to switch on a light. The hut was obviously a bedding store for there were heaps of straw and palliasse covers on the floor. With the aid of my torch I prepared a make-shift bed and tried to sleep. I was tired after the long, boring train journey but sleep wouldn't come. My brain was too active worrying about Nona and wondering if I would be punished for reporting late.

The hours passed slowly away until about 05.00 hours when one of the guards came for me. At the guard room I had a mug full of tea, washed, shaved and made myself presentable to be taken to the orderly officer who then detailed an orderly to show me to my hut.

Chapter 2

Six Weeks Initial Training

I was taken to a hut, one of several built on the side of a huge parade ground, which became my home for the next six weeks. The hut was full of men in various stages of dress, tidying up their beds and blankets. Seeing an empty bunk obviously waiting for me I dumped my greatcoat, gas-mask and helmet onto it. The bunks were two-tiered and I had a top one. There was hardly time to say hello and introduce myself to those nearest to me before an N.C.O. assembled us outside and marched us away for breakfast. Army breakfasts I found began with porridge, which I'm very fond of, except when it has a burnt flavour; and the rest of the meal varied from day to day. Scrambled egg made with dried egg powder and looking like a piece of chamois

leather served on a piece of fried bread or bacon and tinned tomatoes or sausage and beans were some of the other dishes we had for breakfast. The tea was generally good. It was hot, strong and sweet but was sometimes spoiled by over-chlorinated water. I have a fairly good appetite and am able to eat most things and this morning I was so hungry I could have eaten the table. Some of the more finicky eaters refused their rations and I was only too pleased to have extras. When breakfast was eaten I returned to the hut and began to get better acquainted with the men around me and asked them what had happened the day before. At 08.00 hours with other sections of the new intake we mustered on a small parade ground for roll call and after the parade a lance corporal was detailed to rush me round the barracks, drawing kit, having inoculations and injections. By tea-time my lost day was made up and I was on schedule with the rest of the section. From now on I was a surname with the number 14340452 behind it, a long number which I thought I would never remember. It was to become so much a part of my life and repeated so often that it is for ever fixed in my mind. I now had an awful amount of gear and wondered where to store it. At the moment it was just making its way from bunk to floor or vice versa; we had no lockers in the hut. A row of double bunks were set along each wall of the hut with a space about six feet wide between bunks and in the centre of the hut there was a slow combustion stove which proved to be more of an ornament than a means of getting warmth. Fires were not allowed before tea-time and our fuel ration of one large bucket of coke per day was hardly enough to warm the stove let alone warm the hut. An annex off one end of the hut contained the ablutions and toilets and the hot water taps in there should have been marked 'T' for tepid since the water from them just had the chill off; showers were a very hurried affair.

Our section N.C.O., a corporal of the Glasgow Highland Light Infantry, was a married man who had permission to sleep out of barracks when his duties permitted. He was a decent N.C.O., known to the section as 'Corp' or 'Jock' and we rarely saw him after training sessions. The fellow on the bunk below me became known as Pinkie because he had a very fresh complexion and also blushed quite readily when spoken to. He was several years younger than me, quite a likeable lad and we often chummed up to go out of the barracks in our free time for a change of atmosphere. The only other member of the section that I can recall was one we named 'The Camel'. He was an awkward recruit, tall and gangly and was the cause of the section having many extra drills. He could not keep time when marching or drilling with a rifle. He was never sure which was his right side or which was his left. He loped along with a camel-like gait, usually out of step, sending the section around him into disarray.

After those first two days of kit drawing and having inoculations we were instructed by Cpl Jock on how to assemble our packs and webbing into marching order and battle order and told what each pack of that order should contain. We were shown how to fold our blankets and overcoats correctly and how these and our kit should be laid out on our bunks for morning inspection. A chart pinned on the door could be referred to for this lay-out and after these instructions my gear seemed more manageable. Most of that first weekend was spent blancoing¹ our webbing, polishing brasses and cleaning rifles ready for Monday morning when training was to begin. The rifles handed out from the armoury were the greasiest things imaginable. It took ages to remove the thick brown grease that had been liberally plas-

¹Blanco is a substance for coloring belts etc.

tered on them.

Reveille² at 06.00 hours couldn't be missed. The bugler who blew the calls had a post outside our hut and his calls were loud and clear. At 06.30 hours after a wash and shave we paraded outside the hut in P.T. shorts, vest and shoes and were taken by a P.T. instructor for a run round the streets of Maryhill which I didn't think was an ideal way to begin a November morning. Returning from the run blue with cold and often wet, we had ten minutes to change and parade for breakfast. After breakfast we swept out our bed area, sweeping the bits to the stove for the permanent billet orderlies to clean up while we were out training. These orderlies, usually low grade in physical fitness, also cleaned the ablutions and left our fuel ration by the stove.

Our bunks, which had to be in perfect line, were juggled until all the ends touched a string stretched through the hut. Kit, now laid out as shown on the chart, was also lined up by a string. Huts were randomly chosen for inspection and extra drills given if they were not up to standard.

First parade at 08.00 hours was taken on a small square where the roll was called and we were inspected for smartness.

Having been in the Home Guard I was familiar with some of the drills and was elected Section Marker. This involved being on parade ten minutes before main parades, to be put through the drill of 'marking off' where sections were to fall in. On being dismissed, each section was marched away for its specific session of training which often meant changing our clothes. For First Parade, classroom lectures, I.Q. tests and drilling on the square we wore battle dress. Denims were worn for field exercises and assault courses and P.T.

²A military waking-signal sounded in the morning on a bugle or drums.

gear for the early morning run and gym exercises.

In a few days we all began to feel ill. The effects of our inoculation, vaccinations, and having caught colds were making us feel miserable. I now began to worry about my chest but my cold appeared to be a heady one. Some of the men were in agony from their smallpox jabs. Their arms were swollen and sore and drill, especially small arms drill, was torture to them. I was a lucky one for my vaccination developed into what looked, and felt, like a large gnat bite. Although Corp said our present training was light, to accommodate our miserable condition we didn't believe him. The Camel was the only one to need medical treatment. He became delirious one night and was put in sick bay for a couple of days.

The training periods were continuous each day from 08.00 hours until 17.30 hours with an hour's break for dinner except for Saturdays and Sundays when the afternoons were free. My bones and muscles ached too much after the unaccustomed exercises for me to bother about going out of barracks. After my bunk, the NAAFI was my favourite place. It was warm in there, I could read or write my letters and feed my ravenous appetite on tea and waddies. In all my misery I never lost my appetite.

Finding that close to the barracks there was a municipal bath-house where a nice hot bath could be had for sixpence, I decided to try it. I also thought that while I was there I could freshen up a few handkerchiefs which were being soiled quickly from my head cold. Having paid my sixpence I was directed by the attendant to a cubicle with a bath in it; there were about six of these cubicles along the corridor. Hot water was already flowing out of a pipe protruding from the wall at the end of the bath which stopped when the water reached the regulation five inches in depth. Ten minutes was the time allowed

for this luxury of soaking in nice hot water and when ten minutes had elapsed the attendant called out that my time was up. Clever like, I thought an extra minute wouldn't matter and carried on bathing. Suddenly a gush of icy water hit me in the back. Gasping for breath I was out of that bath in a flash. I had forgotten that the attendant had control of the water and he had turned on the cold water valve to get me out of the bath. He came in to clean the bath while I was dressing and jokingly I called him a lousy so and so. He grinned and replied 'other people want a bath you know,' and he carried on preparing for the next customer. On other visits I made to the bath-house I made sure I was promptly out when my time was ended.

The food here was pretty good considering it was bulk cooked. A.T.S. did the cooking and cleaning in the mess halls and an A.T.S officer always stood by the waste bins lecturing those who wasted food. She said, 'If you didn't like the look of it you shouldn't have taken it.' To complain about a meal when the orderly officer entered the mess and asked for 'complaints' required a lot of courage. Invariably when a complaint was made he either sniffed the food or tasted it. He then told the man making the complaint that the food was all right and was the same as that being served in the officers' mess. I wondered!

Gradually my body aches disappeared. My muscles were becoming more used to the unaccustomed physical exertions. My cold also began to improve and, generally, I was feeling fitter. One arduous exercise we had fairly frequently was the assault course. I found this rather exhausting and was thankful that we usually did this for the last period of the day. The course had all kinds of obstacles built into it to make it difficult. We had to crawl through tunnels constructed from large diameter pipes with a few inches of water lying in the bot-

tom, swing on ropes Tarzan style to get across wide ditches of muddy water, climb over frameworks of rope netting, overcome barbed wire entanglements and scale over high brick walls. All done ‘on the double’ and wearing battle Order. There was often a laugh to be had from the exercise, usually at someone else’s expense. The most common laugh came when some guy missed his landing on the opposite bank while swinging on the rope and fell into the ditch of muddy water. On one of these runs over the assault course I damaged a ligament in my right foot when I landed awkwardly onto the concrete pad beneath one of the walls. I limped to the medical aid centre in the barracks where our M.O. strapped up my foot with Elastoplast, told me to keep it on and report back in seven days time and carry on with training. The stiffness of the Elastoplast dressing made marching and drilling uncomfortable and stamping my foot on the hard parade ground during drills was done with caution. Sometimes I received some uncomplimentary remarks from the drill sergeant about my slovenly drill movement.

There was a nasty accident in the barracks while a section following us in the training schedule was receiving instruction on some of the uses of mines and booby traps. A small mine in use at the time was called a ‘talc mine’ because it was in shape and size similar to some tins of talc being sold in the shops. The mine was activated when the case was distorted by the weight of any light vehicle passing over it. The weight of a man was considered to be insufficient to distort the case and the instructor would stand on the mine in the classroom to demonstrate this. On this occasion when the instructor stood on the mine there was a loud explosion which wrecked the classroom, killing the instructor and killing or wounding some of the men in the section. Apparently, constant standing on the mine had

gradually weakened and distorted the case until the detonator was set off to activate the explosive in the mine. An inquiry was held about the accident and the big question was ‘Why was a live mine used in the classroom?’ That was the last I heard of the talc mine and never came across another one anywhere. Jock, our section N.C.O., who for the past three weeks had been sleeping out had a turn of duty in the barracks which forced him to stay in the hut for the night. He told us that he expected us to have the hut nice and warm for him. He knew we had a measly fuel ration but hinted that after our training in field-craft we ought to be able to improve on the supply and made a point of marching us through the cookhouse area of the barracks on our way to the training field to show us where the fuel dump was. We were a bunch of raw recruits and wished to be in favour with our N.C.O. so we discussed how we could get more fuel. It was decided that four of us, and I was one of the four, would try to get some coke from the dump. When it was dark we blacked our faces and dodged in and out of cover until we came to the cookhouse where we ‘borrowed’ four potato sacks. On the darkest side of the fuel dump we were able to ease up the wire mesh and scrape out enough fuel to fill our sacks. With pounding hearts, we stealthily made our way back to the hut. We had a beautiful warm hut that night and there was some fuel left over for another night which we hid underneath the hut floor. I dread to think what punishment we would have received if we had been caught.

Grenade throwing was practised by throwing dummies over a wire about eight feet high to land in a circle marked about thirty yards from the throwing line. For a bit of fun we wagered a few cigarettes as to who could get nearest to the centre of the circle. After many practice throws we were taken to the grenade range where we had

live grenades to throw and perhaps here we should have wagered on who would be the most scared. I must admit that my stomach muscles cramped up a bit when I threw my first grenades. I clearly wanted to toss the grenade away as soon as I had pulled out the safety pin and released the handle-like lever that held the firing pin in a safe position. Counting slowly up to three before throwing seemed an eternity to me and too long for me to worry about the possibility of a faulty fuse being fitted. Not many of our first live grenades went over the wire to land in the target circle. It was a quick count to three, toss away the grenade and duck for cover behind the wall of the throwing bay, the grenades exploding about ten yards away.

Another competition we had was stripping and reassembling the Bren gun in which we were supposed to become efficient enough to be able to do this blindfold. The prospect of winning a few cigarettes by doing this drill in the shortest time eased the boredom of these repetitive drills.

Several full consecutive days were allocated for weapon firing and we began by firing a .22 rifle on an indoor range. At this I was quite good and obtained a high score, but when we moved to the short range to fire our .303 rifles I was a failure. The Weapons Office couldn't understand why I failed after having had a good shoot with the .22 rifle. My rifle was checked and fired by good marksmen. My trigger pulling and sighting on target were OK but the cause of my low scoring couldn't be accounted for. By getting that good result on the .22 range I was given a chance to join the rest of the section on the Butts. The Butts were some miles from Maryhill and we were taken there by trucks. It was refreshing to get into the country again, away from the gaunt, smoke-grimed stone of the barrack buildings and drab multi-storied tenements crowding round the barracks, built from the

same dirty, smoke-grimed stone. The Butts were surrounded by pine trees which shielded us from the wind. Luckily the day was fine with some weak sunshine to temper the coldness of the air and it became a day that I enjoyed.

Live ammunition was fired from our .303 rifles at targets set at varying ranges and we also fired the Sten and Bren guns, both on single and automatic fire at varying ranges. To my delight I managed to total up a score which put me in the A.I category for shooting. My failure to get a reasonable score on the short range was forever a mystery.

The six weeks of initial training was coming to an end and I had found our section to be a friendly one. No long-term friendship with any member of the section developed during that time. We all knew that soon we could all be separated. None of us had any idea as to which regiment we would be posted to but secretly I hoped I would be posted into the Corps of Royal Engineers rather than an infantry regiment.

Christmas was almost here and knowing that Christmas was not celebrated in Scotland in the same way that it is celebrated in England I hoped to compensate with celebrating the new year in Scottish hogmanay style. The thought of spending Christmas away from home was disheartening enough and when I discovered that our passing-out parade was to be held on Christmas morning my spirits sunk to zero.

The afternoon of Christmas Eve was spent blanccoing belts, rifle slings and gaiters, cleaning brasses, polishing in every crevice of our rifles and making sure creases were in the right places on our Battle Dress. The hut also had a special clean-out in case it was chosen for C.O.'s inspection. On the day of the parade he chose a hut at random for his inspection.

On Christmas morning it is the custom in the British Army for sergeants to bring round buckets of whiskey-laced tea and dish out a mugful to each man while still in bed, reveille being later than usual on that day. There were a few weak wishes of a merry Christmas while we lazed in bed, smoking and drinking tea, before getting up to wash and shave. After breakfast beds, kit lay-out and hut received special attention before dressing for First Parade where our section officers made their inspection. We were then marched to our position on the main parade ground where the R.S.M. took over and drilled us into formation for the C.O.'s Inspection. The morning was dry but bitterly cold and without an overcoat I began to feel decidedly frozen. My fingers were so cold and stiff that I was afraid of dropping my rifle during the drill movements. It was a great relief to see the C.O. walk away after inspecting ranks and mount a dais to take the salute. A Glasgow Highland Light Infantry band led the parade for the march-past and marching at the fast Light Infantry pace helped to restore my circulation and make me feel a little warmer. As soon as we were dismissed I dashed off to the NAAFI for some hot tea and to finish thawing out ready for dinner which was an ordinary one - no turkey nor Christmas pud. The remainder of the day was spent playing Housey-Housey in the NAAFI and joining in the singing of a few carols. On Boxing Day normal duties were resumed and to complete my disappointment with the festivities we had a Posting Parade on the 27th and so I missed a Scottish hogmanay. I listened tensely as each name was called and to which corps or regiments they were going. Practically all our hut went to infantry regiments. Poor old Pinkie was posted to the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders which didn't please him. The Camel went into the Pioneer Corps and it was with much relief to hear Lawrence 0452 Royal Engineers, called out.

My silent prayers had been answered.

When the parade was dismissed we returned to our huts and began packing. Goodbyes and wishes of good luck were made, hands were shaken and we joined our various groups of postings. I was with a squad of about fifteen men, all strangers to me, who had been posted to the Royal Engineers. Kit bags and packs were loaded onto a truck and with an officer in charge and carrying our documents we marched to Glasgow station. A compartment was reserved for us on a train going to Preston. Our destination, Fulwood Barracks, the establishment of No. 4 Training Battalion, Royal Engineers.

Chapter 3

Sappers' Training

At Preston station an army truck was waiting to take us to the barracks in Fulwood, which was a suburb of Preston. The barrack buildings had that same unwelcoming prison-like appearance that Maryhill had. There was the all too familiar parade ground, surrounded by the same dirty looking, stone built, two-storey blocks of buildings. I was detached to No. 2 section, B Company for training, and the section was billeted in two rooms, one above the other, in one of these blocks. Half the section in the ground floor room had Cpl Blackwell, the section leader with them, and the other half in a room on the first floor had L/Cpl Derbyshire as room N.C.O. I was in this half. We were very cramped and overcrowded here. These rooms, originally intended to accommodate about eight men in single beds, now had twenty-seven men crowded in them. Three tier bunks, with a two foot gangway between them filled the room and round the open fireplace

there was a space, about six feet by six feet, with a couple of benches to sit on. In the scramble to claim bunks I went for a top one, which was some six feet from the floor. At this height, I could be sure of privacy and not have any old bod sitting on my bed as they did on the lower bunks. There was lots of room between the bunk and the ceiling and, in time, I became quite an expert dressing there, away from the melee below. One disadvantage was its position by a window. All the windows were fixed to leave a three inch gap at the top for ventilation and the draught from this gap caught me in the shoulders when sitting on my bed. Thankfully, the draught passed over me when lying down. The technique I had adopted in folding my blankets for sleeping in reduced the fear of rolling out onto the floor while I was asleep. The three blankets were folded to form a tube, and to give me two thicknesses of blanket under me and three thicknesses on top. I slithered into this, rather like squirming into a sleeping bag. We were not asked to lay out our kit in a 'spit and polish' manner. As long as it was clean and tidy, everyone appeared to be happy. The toilets, ablutions, and showers were in the basement and we had a good supply of hot water.

Well worn stone steps between floors were the cause of many accidents. Nailed and steel-tipped boots skidded easily on these steps and there was seldom a day when you didn't hear the clatter of someone going down faster than he intended and calling the steps some unprintable names. I had my share of bruises and abrasions from such falls.

The rooms were not centrally heated and fires were not allowed before 18.00 hours. The coal ration, supplemented with scrounged pieces of timber from the training fields, gave us about four hours of fire and after lights-out the benches were draped with wet clothes

to dry by the dying embers. I'm sure we had more than the normal amount of wet days during our twelve weeks of training. During one of these drying sessions the benches were disturbed by someone coming in after lights-out. A leg of my trousers landed on a hot cinder in the hearth which burned a hole through the cloth. I was fortunate to find a scrap of khaki cloth to sew on a reasonable patch which was luckily covered by my gaiter, saving me from having to buy a new pair of trousers from the quartermaster stores.

Our dining hall was behind Depot Company block, on the opposite side of the square to our quarters. A.T.S. did the cooking and cleaned up the dining halls. They had a terrible cookhouse to work in and naturally the meals suffered. The food was roughly presented, but I found it eatable and blessed those who had queasy tummies and refused their rations which enabled hungry bogs like me to have extras. Seeing the conditions here one could understand why Fulwood and Maryhill barracks were on the Army's condemned list.

The sapper course in peacetime was one of six months but it was now condensed into a course of twelve weeks and at the end of this course we were having our first 'privilege leave'.

Corporal Blackwell was an impatient instructor, and was also the foulest mouthed, most evil minded N.C.O. one could wish to meet. The section hated him. Lance Corporal Derbyshire was the exact opposite, well-liked by everyone and we tried not to give him any trouble in the room.

There were no hogmanay celebrations at Fulwood. New Year's Day was the same as any other day here. We began the course by having F.F.I. inspection and lectures in the classroom about what we were going to do here for the next twelve weeks. We also had an elementary test paper to fill in. The questions were mainly about build-

ing and drainage work. A day or two after this test, about a quarter of the section had a more advanced test paper to fill in with questions of a more advanced nature, covering a wider range of building, road construction, drains, sewers, and reinforced concrete work. When Holmes, Langley and myself were ordered to report to the Adjutant's office, we wondered what it was all about. Having taken care with our appearance we apprehensively approached his dreaded sanctions.

A staff sergeants' Course was about to begin and our results from these test papers had shown that we were likely candidates to go on the course. When the Adjutant told me this we were being interviewed separately. I was delighted and I could already feel that crown, bomb and three stripes sewn on my sleeves. He then went on to tell me that having passed-out as a staff sergeant I would be posted to the Sappers and Miners, the engineers of the Indian Army. This put a damper on the project. I had every intention of getting home as often as I could while in the army and thought it unfair to Nona to volunteer for an overseas posting. If the course had been compulsory, that would have been a different story, but to volunteer for an overseas posting, no, and so I turned the offer down. When I saw Holmes and Langley after their interviews, they were both my age and married, they also had declined, for the same reason. Other members of the section thought we were barmy. Had I been a single man, there would have been no hesitation in accepting such an opportunity. I believe this refusal became a black mark on my record sheet which I knew had been marked at the beginning, 'a potential leader'.

Training was carried out, in all weathers, on a large training area behind the barracks for five days of the week. The hours were 08.00 hours to 17.00 hours with an hour's break for dinner. On Saturday morning we had rifle inspection and went through some square bash-

ing. On Sunday morning, it was either Church Parade, for which we volunteered, or some awful fatigues. The afternoons of both days were free periods.

I always put my name on the list for church parade. I like a bit of ceremony and much preferred the extra ‘bull’ required for these parades, to being detailed to some dirty fatigue. I did miss out one Sunday morning, how I don’t know, my name wasn’t on the Church Parade list and I landed in a gang detailed to sort out the fuel store in the basement. Coal stocks were getting low and we were required to sort through the coal dust to find usable lumps of coal for our fires. In no time the air was full of black dust, clogging nostrils and throats and we soon looked like a troop of Kentucky minstrels. How I envied those smart, clean-looking sappers marching back from church with the garrison band in the lead.

Most of my evenings were spent in the NAAFI and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons I went into Preston with anyone from the room who was seeking my style of recreation. Three fairly regular men I joined with were Lacy, Macdonald and Owens. We didn’t want to pub-crawl but enjoyed a roam round town, a cup of tea in a canteen and a visit to the cinema.

The Sapper course covered a wide range of subjects which were considered to be a sapper’s basic knowledge. The drill on the correct use of a pick and shovel amused many of us, but it is surprising how many men use these tools to make hard work from them. Tying knots and lashings and splicing ropes was practised over and over again and a lot of this practice was done in our own time in the billets. Sorry to say I have forgotten most of the knots and splices. I couldn’t tie a running bowline and make a crown splice to save my life. We rigged blocks and tackles on trestles made from stout timbers to lift heavy

objects, built strong points from sandbags and barbed wire, learned a little about explosives and mines and acquired some basic knowledge about bridging. Instruction on explosives, mines and booby-traps was given by a sergeant major, a very cool customer while handling explosives. Using clay and dummy detonators, we made demolition charges and were constantly watched for any mistakes. There could be no room for errors when using the real thing. When we were considered knowledgeable enough to handle the real stuff, we had to make up a small charge of explosive and 'blow it'. Making a live charge and inserting the detonator for the first time was worse than throwing my first hand-grenade. Each move was made slowly and, after lighting the fuse, we had to walk away to a safe place. Running away was not allowed because of the danger of tripping over and being in the danger zone when the explosion took place. I think the worst part of the job was inserting the fuse wire into the detonator and crimping it on. A push too hard into the detonator could set it off and take away part of your hand. My fingers were a bit trembly as I inserted my first fuse into a live detonator and, after placing it into my charge and lighting the fuse, my legs wanted to break into a gallop, fearing that I might have miscalculated the length of the fuse. We received a basic instruction on mines and mine laying. The skills of this kind of work would be learned in specialised companies. I had a valuable lesson in the part dealing with booby-traps. After a lecture on these we were sent into a prepared area, where all kinds of traps had been set up. We had to find these boobies, recognise them and neutralise them. Seeing an officer's revolver and lanyard lying on the ground and thinking one of the officer's acting as umpires might have dropped it, I picked it up. There was a fine wire attached to the trigger guard and the other end tied to a pull-type of detonator. An officer

called out, 'Well sapper, you thought you had found a nice souvenir on the battlefield didn't you? Now you are a dead or badly wounded soldier'. From then on I was most distrustful about any object that could be 'boobied' when in suspected areas.

On the morning of February 8, the section was standing in a circle round the explosives instructor receiving a lecture and demonstration on an anti-tank mine. We were joined by the company sergeant major. He fished out a telegram from his pocket and making sure everyone could hear, he read out: 'Sapper Lawrence's wife gave birth to a son early this morning. Both doing well'. There was a loud cheer, many congratulations and handshaking as I stood there unable to speak for the lump in my throat. The company sergeant major then told me to break off training, return to barracks and get ready for a forty-eight hour leave. I was washed, changed, my gear stowed away in company stores in record time and waiting in company office for my pass and ration coupons. The company sergeant major also gave me permission to leave the barracks immediately after dinner which tacked a few more hours onto my leave.

I caught a bus outside the barracks gate to take me to the station and boarded a train to take me to Nuneaton where I changed to one traveling to Rugby via Coventry. I thought the train would be taking the line from Coventry to Rugby via Wolston. I got off at Coventry and asked the ticket collector at the barrier when the next train would leave for Kenilworth. He pointed to the red light of the train I had just left and said 'That is the last one tonight. The next train will be the milk train at 05.00 hours.' Swearing to myself about my stupidity in not checking the train I watched the red light disappearing round the curve of the Kenilworth, Leamington, Rugby line. It was too late to think of catching a bus so I set off to walk home. When I reached

Crackley Bridge I thought I might be able to shorten the walk by walking along the Berkswell Loop line, the line that ran in front of the houses in Red Lane. This turned out to be an unwise decision.

It was a dark, moonless night and I found many obstacles along the narrow path beside the railway lines, which I stumbled over and sometimes slipped down the embankment. I tried to walk on the sleepers, but found their spacing, too short for a normal walking step. Arriving at a point where I reckoned I should leave the railway and cross the fields, I had difficulty in finding a suitable gap in the thorn hedge, these gaps were hard to find in the hedgerows that divided the fields.

It was very late when I reached home. I had my own latch key so I gently opened the door and called out. Nona wasn't scared when she heard me opening the door; she was more than half expecting me. It was wonderful to see Nona again and to peep at the little scrap in the cot; our son. Cynthia was most surprised to see her daddy when she woke up that morning and was delighted with the bars of chocolate she found in my pack. With so much activity in the house which accompanies a new-born baby those few hours soon slipped away.

The section had now moved on for exercises on Bailey Bridge building. This was a new type of bridge invented by Mr. D. Bailey in 1940. There were no complicated parts in its construction. It was quickly assembled, was easy to manufacture, and it was now in use throughout our battle areas. There were seventeen different parts for building the bridge with nine others to build the supports at each end. We were taught to be familiar with each part and its sequence in building a bridge, but invariably I found myself in a 'panel party'. These lattice-framed panels, ten feet long and five feet high, fabricated from flat and angle iron, were a six man load and they were carried upright

by means of staves through the lattice work. The staves rested in the crook of the arms of three men on either side of the panel. They were quite heavy and it was not always easy to engage the male and female ends and line up the holes for the fixing pins. During the training period Blackie met with an accident.

Normally our mail was issued to us by Blackie when we lined up to march to the dining hall for dinner, or sometimes he would toss it round the tables while we were at dinner. This day Blackie was in one of his foul moods and wouldn't issue the mail. Someone began to tap the table with his mug and chant: 'We want our mail'. This was taken up by all of us, making a terrible racket. The Duty Officer came into the hall, accompanied by the provost sergeant and some regimental police armed with pickaxe handles who stationed themselves by all the exits. When we quietened down and the Officer had listened to the cause of the rumpus he sent for a copy of King's Regulations and read to us that part which dealt with 'riotous and mutinous behaviour'. The punishment we could have received for making the scene was pretty severe, but we got away with mail being stopped for three days and having a shortened meal break. It was after this incident that Blackie was injured.

While building one of our bridges a panel was brought in the wrong way round. Blackie went berserk. Mouthing all kinds of obscenities, pushing and shoving the panel party until we went off balance and dropped the panel just at the right moment to trap Blackie's foot. No-one could prove whether this was by design or accident. There were many unsympathetic smiles in the section when we saw Blackie moving around the barracks on crutches, nursing his badly bruised foot.

As well as being a unit under instruction we were also a unit that

would be called upon in an emergency to defend the area against parachute infiltration and one night we had an anti-parachutist exercise. The night chosen for this exercise was a foul one, bitterly cold with icy rain falling. The first we knew about the exercise was when N.C.O.s burst into our rooms about 02.00 hours and told us to be outside in ten minutes, dressed in battle order. There was an awful melee going on down below me as everyone tried to dress in a hurry, while I calmly dressed on my bunk. In the freezing rain we assembled outside. The roll was called and we were doubled away to man key positions and patrol the area for about two hours before returning to barracks.

There was little time to thaw out and get to sleep before reveille so we lay in our blankets smoking and grousing about the army. Our opinion was that the upper stream of officers consulted the meteorological men to find out when the weather would be at its worst for these exercises.

Talking about the melee at floor-level due to our overcrowded situation brings me to two lads in our room. These two youngsters who had lower bunks side by side were forever coming to blows over the jostling and pushing about in the narrow space between their bunks. They were, however, chummy enough to spend a lot of their free time together. They kept the room alive with their squabbles. The quicker tempered of these two lads, they were only just old enough to be called-up, a Bradford lad with gingerish hair was late coming in one night and received a seven day C.B. punishment for it. Besides having to report on Defaulters' Parade at 18.00 hours each night for an hour's square bashing, he was also required to be outside the Guard-room at 06.30 hours each morning dressed in battle order to be inspected by the Duty Officer. To make sure that Ginger was always smartly turned

out and on time, there were always plenty of hands to help him dress, tidy up his bed or loan him clean equipment. I found this comradeship in the army most impressive.

We had learned a bit about map reading and as a test we were taken into the country one Saturday afternoon, split into small groups, given Ordnance Survey maps and told to make our way back to barracks. We had no idea where we were. All signposts and name boards had been removed as soon as war broke out and we had no compasses. Looking round I could see a tall chimney in the distance which I recognised as the chimney of a Courtaulds factory in Fulwood. Some groups began to try and orient their maps with the chimney and find a way through the lanes back to barracks. There seemed to be a wide margin for error in this so I said, ‘Hang the maps, I’m making a bee-line across country for that chimney.’ Others agreed with the idea and we set off across the fields. Crossing open country, with our sights on the chimney, sometimes fording streams that crossed our path wasn’t too bad. However, in the built-up areas it became more difficult and we needed to ask for directions. Our group arrived back in time to have a shower and change before tea, as did many other groups, but some got lost in the lanes and missed their tea. One group who scrounged a lift on a lorry were seen by the section officer from the top of a bus, on which he was traveling and they had to do the exercise again the following week. Although the officer wasn’t too pleased with us for not using our map properly he let us off from repeating the exercise for our ingenuity in using a known prominent landmark for direction and taking a direct route to it.

Almost at the end of the training programme, we had to go through ‘The Battle Course’, and a Sunday morning was chosen for us to take it. Lance Corporal Derbyshire had warned us not to wear too many

clothes, since we could expect to get very wet and muddy, a condition we were getting used to during our field exercises. However I just wore my shorts and a vest under my denims to parade in battle order at 08:00 hours. We marched across the training fields until we came to some rough country and halted at a low wooden fence. On the other side of the fence were two ponds covered with a green slimey looking weed. Each pond was fifteen to twenty feet across and surrounded by brambles and weeds. An officer called us to gather round him while he instructed us about what lay in front. This, he said, was the beginning of the course and we were required to vault over the low fence, wade through both ponds, and follow the trail from the other side. Along the way N.C.O.s would be giving further instructions and making sure we kept to the track. He also told us to keep low when ordered to do so, because live ammunition would be fired over us and that tear gas and smoke bombs would be tossed amongst us at some point along the trail. While he was giving us these details, I eyed those horrible looking ponds and tried to imagine their condition after they had been stirred up. I decided that I ought to be among the leaders before they became too muddy. On the word 'Go' I vaulted the railings and headed for the ponds. The water was icy cold and came about waist-high at their deepest points and they stank like a pig-sty. Struggling to keep my balance as the thick muddy bottom sucked at my boots, I sloshed my way to the banks and stood on dry ground oozing dirty muddy water from my lower parts. We now had to break into a run for the remainder of the course, always being urged on by N.C.O.s. Someone had had a grand time thinking out and building all the obstacles to make our passage more difficult. There were all manner of barbed wire obstructions to overcome, various climbing structures to clamber over, and ropes to either crawl along, swing

along hand over hand, or swing Tarzan-style over gullies. The hazards were innumerable and ingenious. Puffing and grunting we came to an open ditch with about six or seven inches of water in the bottom and we were ordered to squirm up it, snake-like, on our bellies. To make sure we did squirm, Bren guns on fixed positions fired short bursts of live ammunition over our heads. We charged up steep banks to bayonet straw dummies and slithered back down to the trail. We came to the gas area, and how those N.C.O.s enjoyed tossing smoke and tear gas bombs into us. I was a bit slow getting my mask on and suffered a pair of tearful smarting eyes. To add to my discomfort, the eye part of the mask steamed over and I couldn't see clearly where I was going. Another lesson I learned from experience: apply anti-mist cream before these exercises. At last I entered the all-clear area and was told to dismiss and make my way back to barracks. After the ponds' icy water the exertions of the course had kept me warm, but now, through tiredness I was easing off and gradually I felt the cold of my wet clothes. Reaching my bunk I stripped off, tossed the muddy clothes into a pile on the floor, grabbed soap and towel and nakedly ran down to the showers. A nice hot shower, a brisk rub down and dressed in dry clean clothes I felt a new man and ready for any meal the A.T.S. had for dinner. There was the unhappy thought of cleaning and drying my kit in the afternoon, ready for Monday morning. Dirty denims were exchanged for fresh ones, not only were they wet and dirty but mine were also torn through, catching on the barbed wire. My body had not escaped the sharp barbs either. There were numerous scratches on my arms, back and thighs. One of the lads in Blackie's room had a bayonet wound in the calf of his leg. He had slipped back onto the bayonet of a man behind him. Otherwise no-one seemed to be harmed by our run through the battle course.

For the last week of the course we did more square bashing than field work and had tests to find out how much we had learned from our sapper training. We all possessed a small booklet called The Royal Engineers' Training Manual issued to us in the early days of our training, which contained information on all the subjects we had taken on the course. We were supposed to know by heart all the information it contained and an officer from H.Q. asked us individually to answer some questions taken from the manual. At the same time he was looking for suitable candidates to form an N.C.O. cadre¹. My questions on the manual were easy to answer but I'm afraid I was a bit undiplomatic with my answer to his question of whether I liked being at Fulwood. Of course I didn't like Fulwood. I hated the place and told him so and expressed my views about the cramped, primitive conditions of our quarters, all quite respectfully, of course, so that I couldn't be booked for being insubordinate. My refusal of the staff sergeants' course and these remarks at this interview meant no place for me on the N.C.O.s cadre and I was remustered as a sapper C&J grade III. I would have to take more courses to become sapper C&J grade I.

We may have been cramped in our quarters but it amazed me how well organized, and how smoothly the training was carried out. Neither the companies or the three sections of companies in training ever clashed or got in each other's way during the training period. Church parade on Sunday seemed to be the only time when a large number of men were on parade at the same time. Company training was such that one company 'passed-out' each month and it was now our B Company's turn.

¹A basic unit of servicemen forming a nucleus for expansion when necessary



Figure 3.1: No. 2 Section B Company at the Fulwood Barracks. The author is fourth from the left in the middle row. Sapper King is second from the left in the front row.

The company passing out parade went off quite well and the following day we moved over to depot company on the other side of the square ready for leave and posting. This same block of buildings were the quarters of men on permanent duty in the barracks. Leave passes, railway warrants and ration coupons were issued and away we went for ten days privilege leave. Leave is not a right in the army but a privilege.

It is surprising how short those leave days were. There seemed no time at all to visit the people you wanted to see or try to catch up with the neglected jobs a man usually does around a home. There was also something special about this leave: I had a new born son to get used to.

Our doctor was very surprised to see how fit I was. The cold, the wet, wearing damp clothes and the unaccustomed exercises of the past four months had certainly improved my physical condition. At the end of my leave I reported back to depot company at Fulwood and was detailed to a room with some of the men I knew in No. 2 section. Unlike our training quarters there was ample room here to move about.

Chapter 4

Depot Company

Postings during the next few days quickly reduced our numbers in depot company and each morning I expected to hear my name read out from the daily posting list but several weeks were to elapse before this happened. Meanwhile, with an ever dwindling number of sappers, I paraded each morning a 08.00 hours to answer roll call, listen to the posting list and be detailed to fatigues. Company Sergeant Major Richards, who took this parade, had a wonderfully deceptive way of getting men to volunteer for unwanted fatigues. Alec Middleton who slept in our room was caught in this deceptive way to volunteer for ‘fire picket’. The way S.M. Richards phrased his needs was to make one believe that you were volunteering to become a member of the barracks’ fire brigade, with the added probability of a permanent posting at Fulwood. Alec was friendly with a girl in Preston and a permanent posting here would have suited him very well. While the

men on parade were looking at each other and wondering where the catch was and Alec was dithering about volunteering for the job, I tried to convince him to chance it saying that perhaps this was the opening he wanted. A sapper on his other side joined in to egg him on. Finally Alec, mumbling that it was against his nature to volunteer for anything in the army, stepped forward and S.M. Richards told him to report to company office at 18.00 hours for further details. Alec as usual dressed up to spend the evening with his girlfriend in Preston and called at Company Office on his way out of barracks.

He was soon back in a furious temper. He wasn't going to be a member of the barrack's fire brigade but had unwittingly volunteered for fire picket duty and was now confined to barracks for a week. The names he called me and Johnson, the other sapper who had egged him on, were not complimentary. Alec who was a single man and appeared to have a comfortable flow of cash, paid someone each evening to stand in for him on the fire picket so that he could get into Preston.

I had become friendly with a regular soldier in our room who was on the barracks permanent staff. He was an army-trained tailor and spent his time in the tailor's shop altering and repairing uniforms for the officers of the establishment and for a few shillings was ready to do stitching for anyone else. He altered my battle dress blouses for me. He was almost ready for discharge when war broke out and so he had a wide experience of army life. From him I learned many tips on how to make life in the army more comfortable. This knowledge could not be found in any training manual but put together it would have made a nice little booklet called, 'A Scrounger's Guide to the Army'.

On most parades I was detailed to draw a carpenter's toolkit and sent to repair windows and doors around the barracks, work which

suit me. My best fatigue was when I was sent to the records office in Preston to alter shelving and storage racks under guidance of the A.T.S. officer in charge there. They appeared to have an unlimited supply of tea and biscuits. Having to have my dinner at the barracks meant that the time of four bus journeys a day left little time for work at the office and using those little bits of knowledge gained from my tailoring friend, I made this job last a long time, so much so that S.M. Richards jokingly suggested that I should find billets there. The price of my bus fares were refunded by company office on the production of my tickets.

Scrounging about the barracks and making jobs last as long as possible became very boring. The familiar faces of the men I had trained with had all disappeared and I was beginning to feel out on a limb, so I decided to have a word with the postings clerk. Seeing him alone in the postings office one evening when I had walked that way to read daily orders, I went inside and asked him if he knew of any reason why I hadn't been posted. He asked my name, looked through his files and told me that as far as he knew there was nothing holding me at Fulwood. That was a relief anyway for I wasn't happy with the place. When he told me that sappers from here were sometimes sent to Kineton I just prayed that I could get onto that kind of posting and I had visions of cycling home from Kineton to Kenilworth at weekends. My dreams came to an abrupt end soon afterwards for I was posted to Darlington where a new artisan works company was being formed.

Chapter 5

488 Artisan Works Company R.E.

A depot company truck took me to Darlington and dropped me outside a small school building that had been requisitioned by the Army and was now the H.Q. of 488 Artisan Works Company R.E. This building was situated in a cul-de-sac and it was only large enough to provide accommodation for Company office, quartermaster stores, officers' quarters, cookhouse, sergeants' mess and dining hall for O.R.s. Other halls nearby had been requisitioned for billets and I was detailed to one of these: a meeting room over a Methodist Chapel about fifteen minutes walk from H.Q. The concert hall of a working men's club a bit further on had more sappers billeted in it. This was the pattern of O.R. accommodation here in Darlington. There were about

twenty of us in the room which was a vast improvement to those dreary crowded rooms at Preston. There was no N.C.O. in the billet and we were on trust to ensure that our presence here would not inconvenience the Chapel congregation. We had turns to be billet orderly, a duty that I didn't enjoy. The chores of cleaning up the room and toilets were expected to be completed by 10.00 hours ready to be inspected. Billets were randomly chosen for this inspection. Since the room wasn't locked the orderly was also responsible for its security. After the cleaning chores were finished, time hung heavily. There was nothing to do but read and smoke and be alert for a snap inspection. The journeys from billets to H.Q. for parades and meals were a bind. Buses ran along this route and had stopping places near to our billets and H.Q. If we saw the conductor was busy taking fares at the front of the bus we often hopped onto the platform for a free ride. Some conductors took a dim view of this free riding and would hurry down the bus to get our fares. A ring on the bell usually slowed down the bus sufficiently for us to jump off the platform, often accompanied by some flowery remarks from the conductor.

This new company commanded by Maj. Bell was in an early stage of its formation. There were now about forty sappers on the roll, very short of officers and N.C.O.s and quite disorganized.

There was no playground at this school so our roll call and inspection parades were held in the road outside, which had quite a slope to it and it was quite easy to slide and lose your balance. A sergeant who was acting company sergeant major had a peculiar way of coming to attention. His right foot swung outwards and came into his left foot with quite a kick. One morning when getting the parade ready for the major's inspection he kicked his foot from under him and sprawled on the pavement: amusing for us but embarrassing for him.

The major, known to us as Ding Dong, was a finicky fault finder and he always managed to get a quota of men for the 18.00 hours defaulters' parade to do spud bashing. Twice my name appeared on this list, once for having rust on my water bottle cork and the other occasion was for using blacking on my boots instead of dubbin.

When we were dressed in battle order for route marches, and we had plenty of these, the major always checked to see if water bottles were full and checked the odd cork for rust. They were difficult to keep clean and free from rust. There was a hole through the centre of the cork and through this hole there was a wire with tin washers at either end to hold it in place. The wire rusted inside the cork and water sloshing round in the bottle washed out the rust stain onto the end of the cork. That is how I earned one night's spud bashing. The other time was through applying unpolished blacking to my boots instead of dubbin. Dubbin is a greasy messy material, ideal for waterproofing boots but useless for making muddy boots look clean so I often applied blacking. This particular morning there was a bit of shine on my toe caps and Ding Dong soon realised I hadn't used dubbin so, on the list again went Lawrence 0452.

I had a good pair of walking feet and although I had varicose veins in both legs they were not troublesome so I didn't mind the major's route marches. He was always in the lead on these marches, accompanied by his pet, a cross-bred lurcher type of dog. Being on the edge of the Darlington sprawl we were soon in the lovely surrounding Yorkshire countryside. The time was early spring when everywhere was beginning to look nice and fresh again. To me it was a joy to march through these country lanes where hedges and trees were beginning to look green again. Quite refreshing after the winter months spent in those grimy stone-built barracks of Maryhill and Fulwood. The dog

also enjoyed the opportunity to examine all the scents of the hedges and ditches.

Blancoed webbing was below the major's standard one morning and we had to spend our Saturday afternoon's free time in reblancoing. While we were doing this the major's dog paid us a visit. We grabbed him and daubed blanco on his coat. The major was furious when he saw his dog covered with khaki green blanco and our route marches became longer.

Darlington was a nice town to be billeted near. It was about half an hour's walk from our billets to the town centre. There were three cinemas here to give a variety of films for watching, canteens to meet the needs of hungry stomachs and, on Saturdays, there was an open market to wander round. I enjoyed listening to the stall holders trying to convince the large number of people milling about that they had the best and the cheapest wares for sale.

The Ministry of Supply had a small storage depot at Darlington and sometimes we were taken there to sort through haystack size piles of sand bags and camouflage netting that were beginning to rot due to rain seeping through the tarpaulin covers. Stacks of barbed wire rolls and coils of Danet wire were rusting in the elements and we were supposed to sort through them and divide the good from the bad. Still without N.C.O.s in sufficient strength to organise work parties there was more skiving than work done on the dump.

I had a feeling that 488 Company wasn't going to be a happy one and I wasn't looking forward to a future in it, so when I read on orders that I was being posted I was rather pleased, but I was also a bit apprehensive as to where I was being posted. I had read those orders as I was leaving the dining hall after Sunday's dinner and my instructions were to report with all my kit at company office at 08.00

hours to receive my posting documents. A few of my room mates who were not very happy with the company thought I was lucky to get out of it.

We usually had a quiet hour on our beds on Sunday afternoons smoking and reading and today we were doing just that when a D.R. came in with orders from H.Q. The company was moving out and we had to pack our kit and parade in Full Marching Order outside H.Q. at 15.00 hours. Kit bags and blankets were stacked in the room to be collected by truck. This put me in a dilemma. Where would company office be on Monday morning, here or at our new destination? I dashed up to H.Q. for confirmation and was told to parade with the others, company office and staff were also moving out.

There were some absentees from parade when the roll was called. A few sappers had gone into town immediately after dinner and knew nothing about this movement. What a surprise they were going to have when they returned to find empty billets. Arrangements were made to gather together these absentees and bring them along later. Lucky devils they had a ride in a truck, we had to march. Our destination was Staindrop, a village about sixteen miles from Darlington. The first part of the march wasn't too bad but gradually my pack appeared to get heavier and heavier. This was my first march dressed in full marching order and the whole load weighed about one hundred-weight. The afternoon was warm. I perspired freely and my shoulder straps dug into my shoulders. I was quite ready for the ten minute breaks. At one halt a sapper flopped down on a wasps' nest. Weary legs were soon forgotten in the scramble to get away from the angry wasps.

When we reached Staindrop we were marched into a field where bell tents and small marquees had been erected. After being detailed

to tents and collecting kit bags and blankets we sat down in one of the marquees full of benches and tables for a meal the cookhouse staff had prepared for us. They had come by truck to get this meal ready for our arrival. There wasn't any need for me to unpack my gear since I was moving again in the morning so I prepared my blankets for bed and lay on them for the remainder of the evening.

These tents were old and tatty and although the guy ropes were checked for slackness before retiring, the night air tightened them up sufficiently to put enough tension at the top of the pole for the pole to push through the rotten fabric. The canvas slithered down the pole to smother us. Fortunately the night was fine so we finished our sleep in the open. Several other tents collapsed in the same way and at breakfast our tent caught fire, presumably caused by a carelessly dropped cigarette end.

I didn't fall in with the main parade at 08.00 hours but stood at the end, surrounded by my kit, waiting to receive my orders. Major Bell in passing to take the parade stopped to ask why I was standing away from the ranks. When I told him that I was waiting to get my posting documents his memory was refreshed. He asked me if I had any reason as to why I shouldn't be posted and I told him that I knew of none. I didn't add that I was thankful to get away from the company. He then told me I was being posted because the company was now over-strength with my classification and that I was going to a field company that had an excellent record. He wished me luck and moved to take the parade.

When I collected my documents and found that I was going to 278 Field Company R.E. stationed at Hurworth-on-Tees, a village about three miles from Darlington in the opposite direction to Staindrop. I felt like going berserk, I reckoned I need not have done yesterday's

march and could have gone straight to Hurworth. A company truck took me as far as the bus terminus in Darlington where I caught a bus for Hurworth. Alighting in the village I made enquiries about where I could find an Army H.Q. and was told that some soldiers were in a house along the road in the direction of Croft. With the addition of my kit bag my load was now heavier and more cumbersome and I hoped that I wouldn't have far to walk before finding 278 Field Company.

Chapter 6

Field Company R.E.

Shrugging my gear into a more comfortable position I set off along the road towards Croft. There were cottages on either side of the road but as far as I could see, and that was about three hundred yards before the road curved, there were no houses large enough to accommodate a platoon let alone a company. There was a surprise waiting for me. After walking some two hundred yards I came to a fairly large stone-built house, set back from the road with a boundary wall in front of it. A divisional flag was fluttering from a pole outside the house and standing at a gateway leading to some outbuildings and the grounds of the house, was a sergeant of the Royal Engineers. Hopefully I asked him if this was H.Q. of 278 Field Company and to my delight he replied that it was. After explaining that I had been posted to the company he introduced himself as Sgt Greenway, took the large manila envelope containing my documents, grabbed my kit bag and took me

to company office. Here I met Lt Taylor who scanned my documents and asked me a few questions such as when I had last been on leave, what my family life was like and if I had any problems with which he could help me. He then told me that I would be in No. 2 Section of No. 2 Platoon which he commanded and that Sgt Greenway was my platoon sergeant. When I was dismissed Sgt Greenway helped me with my kit and took me to No. 2 Section hut calling at the cookhouse on the way for a welcome mug full of tea. There were a few empty two tiered bunks in the hut and I dropped my kit onto an unoccupied top one. The sergeant told me where to find company stores for my blankets and after sorting and laying out my kit to change into denims and report to him. Company stores was in a small chapel building a bit further down the road and from here I drew my summertime issue of two blankets. Until the section came in for dinner Sgt Greenway gave me a few chores to do round the cookhouse and dining hut and after dinner I was to join the section.

Lieutenant Taylor gave me the impression of being a decent officer and Sgt Greenway seemed OK. Now I wondered what the rest of the platoon was like. Corporal Murphy came in for dinner with the section and I was quickly made to feel that I belonged with them. First impressions are often a good sign as to what people are like. Murphy, as his name suggests, was an Irishman. He was section leader and a good one he proved to be, tough as leather and a demon for work.

Company office, platoon office, officers' and sergeants' messes were in the house and on what had been the lawns and gardens of the house, wooden huts had been erected for other ranks' quarters, dining room and a NAAFI canteen, run by ladies from the village. The cookhouse was in what had been the coach-house and stables and our latrines and ablutions were in other outbuildings of the house. From

the huts, a long winding footpath through a spinney and shrubbery led to open fields, the path crossing the River Tees which cut across the grounds, by means of a rustic wooden bridge. One of the fields at the side of the river which had now curled back on itself was our bridging hard, where we practised bridge building. Two huts were built on the hard, one contained a miscellany of stores and in the other one explosives and ammunition was stored.

The company was split into two parts. H.Q. platoon and No. 2 platoon were billeted here at the house and Nos. 1 and 3 platoons and our transport were in buildings nearer to Croft. At this time Capt. White was acting C.O. and our company sergeant major was S.M. Duncan a strict disciplinarian; short in stature with a bark much louder than his height gave reason to believe he had. The other N.C.O.s of the platoon were L/Sgt Cawfield, Cpl Wilkinson and Jarvis and L/Cpls Di-aplo, Jamieson and Whittaker. Lance Sergeant Cawfield, for some unknown reason, tended to irritate me and often brought me close to a situation of insubordination when addressing me. I had a feeling that he was a 'creeper'. Corporal Wilkinson, a regular, lived in the London area. He lowered his popularity when he brought his saxophone back with him after one of his leaves home. Wilkie was a beginner on the instrument and his scale practice wasn't appreciated. Corporal Jack Jarvis was a gaunt West Country individual full of chatter but had a terrible habit of biting his nails, he gnawed them until he drew blood. Lance Corporal Diaplo was a short, lively fellow, well liked by the section and full of good ideas. Jamieson was a Scotsmen, most difficult to follow when he was talking for he not only had a broad Scottish accent, he also spoke through clenched teeth. Horace Whittaker was a Brummie like myself. He lived at Water Orton near Coleshill. He was our platoon storekeeper and was quite handy with

comb and scissors for haircuts which cost sixpence. 278 Field Company was one of three companies forming the Divisional Engineers of the 15th Scottish Division and our C.R.E. was Lt Col. Miller. The 15th was a Territorial Division formed in the early days of the war, still understaffed and under-equipped and until recently had been part of the southern defense system. The shoulder flash of the division was a red Scottish rampart lion inside a white circle which represented the letter 'O', the fifteenth letter of the alphabet, all on a blue background.

A wide piece of ground between the house boundary wall and the road was our parade ground and our parades, especially defaulters' parades, were a source of entertainment for the young villagers. They enjoyed watching the orderly sergeant of the day putting the defaulters through an hour of lively drill.

There was a small workshop in the basement of the house and I was often detailed to work down there with 'Dippy', L/Cpl Di-aplo, who was also a carpenter. Very secretly a baby's cot was being made down there. Lieutenant Taylor's wife was expecting her first baby and cots were not easy to come by. In fact it had been heard on the grapevine that this was a major problem for Lt Taylor. Unknown to him the platoon carpenters were making a cot from materials scrounged or bought out of funds contributed by members of the platoon. The construction had been well thought out and it was being built so that Lt Taylor would not have a transport problem but would find it easy to assemble. When it was finished Sgt Greenway brought the lieutenant into the basement. He was astounded when he saw the cot and mystified as to how we had been able to make it under his nose without him knowing. When he had the platoon together he thanked everyone on behalf of his wife for the gift and added that he would be more vigilant about our movements in the future. He was a

very popular officer and we were all sorry to lose him when he was later promoted and posted to an airfield construction company.

To my surprise I was granted another privilege leave in April and on this leave Garth was christened at St. Nicholas' Church. We had a family photograph taken at a studio in Leamington and I carried one of these photographs with me for the rest of my service in the Army. It finished up looking a bit tatty from the rough treatment it received in my pocket. I think it was on this leave that I did a perambulator conversion job. The wartime model we had bought for Garth had a rather flimsy wheel and springing construction and it was quite hard for Nona to push. In fact it had developed a lean to one side and each time it was eased down the kerbs one expected it to collapse. I had a chassis from a pre-war perambulator onto which I was able to fix the body of our newer perambulator. After a bit of paintwork Nona had a sturdier and easier perambulator to push on her walks to Kenilworth.

On the hard there was a mixture of folding boat and Bailey bridge parts and besides practising the drills on the conventional methods of bridge building and rafting from these parts, Lt Taylor tried a few ideas of his own. Rafting as we then knew it was normally done with the F.B. equipment which was capable of taking loads such as a Jeep towing an anti-tank gun. Lieutenant Taylor thought a raft built from Bailey bridge parts and floated on folding boats could take heavier loads. We built the raft for him and it appeared to float nicely on the water. A loaded three ton truck was then driven onto it and again everything seem all right until we began to pull it across the river. Then calamity struck. The weight of the Bailey bridge parts together with the loaded truck were too much for the canvas and wooden structure of the Folding Boats. In midstream the boats collapsed and our raft with the truck toppled into the river. Fortunately for us the river here



Figure 6.1: The Lawrence family photograph. Taken on leave at a studio in Leamington

was only a few feet deep and not in flood so salvaging was not too difficult. After heavy storms in the hills and moors of Durham and North Yorkshire the Tees rose very quickly and developed an ugly mood. This was one experiment that went wrong but there were other improvisations that were a success. Rafts using Bailey parts built on pontoons made of Marine plywood were later used to ferry tanks across rivers.

A room above the coach-house was used for a lecture room and, having assembled in there one morning for what we thought was going to be another lecture about some new mine or piece of equipment, we had quite an awakening. We were told that 15th Scottish Division had been chosen to take an important part in an assault against the enemy. When or where was not revealed but from now on there was going to be a vigorous period of training beginning at section level and progressing up to divisional level. He also told us that this information was to be treated with the greatest secrecy and in future not to discuss outside the camp where we were going on our exercises. Punishment for careless talk was severe.

A check on our physical fitness was the first exercise in the training programme. For this the platoons were required to make a ten mile forced march, have a limited number of men falling out on the way and at the end of the march the platoon was to be strong enough to take up a defensive position which would be satisfactory to the umpires. Two hours was the time allowed for this exercise and it was to be repeated until platoons achieved this standard. Lieutenant Taylor said he hoped we would do the test on our first attempt and not have to waste time and energy on repeats. We were dismissed to our daily tasks and went away making wild guesses as to where we were going. There were plenty of rumours floating around about the opening of a

second front.

Dressed in battle order with fifty rounds of ammunition in our pouches, weighing altogether about fifty pounds, our transport took us to the starting line. Sections were formed up in staggered formation on either side of the road ready to begin section leapfrogging. On the word 'Go' from an umpire we moved off with No. 1 section in the lead marching at quick time while Nos. 2 and 3 doubled up until No. 2 section were in the lead who dropped to quick time. Now Nos. 3 and 1 were doubling up, bringing No. 3 into the lead when they dropped to quick time. This procedure of leapfrogging over sections was carried on for the rest of the march. We had one command of 'Enemy aircraft, take cover!' when we dived into the nearest ditch. Turns were taken to carry the section Bren gun and its two boxes of ammunition. The Bren's weight of twenty pounds on top of the fifty pounds I already had felt like a ton when it was my turn to handle it, especially towards the end of the march. It wasn't an easy weapon to carry if you carried it by the handle it swivelled and bumped on your thighs. If you put it on your shoulder it bounced up and down as you jogged along. The ammunition boxes were easier to carry. Having two of these, one in each hand, they were a more balanced load and easier to manage than the Bren. The man next to you carried your rifle during this period. The pace began to tell after five or six miles and the odd sapper was forced to give in. Sapper Harris was the only one of our section who didn't finish the course. My legs were now moving mechanically, my chest was beginning to hurt and my breathing became more difficult. I was gulping in air and gasping it out like an old pair of bellows being pumped at a fast rate but somehow I managed to keep up with the section. The periods of quick marching seemed to get shorter as the march progressed but they were a welcome respite to try and get

breathing back to normal. We finished between Croft and Hurworth where we set up our defensive position which satisfied the umpires. Not too many men of the platoon had dropped out of the march so we were declared strong enough to hold our position. When we were told that we had completed the exercise within the time limit we found enough wind to give a rousing cheer and the news put life into our legs to march back to camp. I gave Darlington a miss that night. Tea and waddies in our NAAFI hut and a smoke and read on my bed were enough for me and I wasn't alone in this idea of spending the night.

After the forced march we had exercises to polish up our drills on mine laying, mine clearing and the setting and neutralizing of booby traps. We also had two exercises on the River Skerne, a tributary of the River Tees, to practise the use of kapok footbridging and how to get into a two-man rubber dinghy without upsetting it. Kapok footbridging was designed for the use of assaulting infantry units really but it was thought to be useful for us to get some idea of how to use it. The equipment was a series of kapok pillows strung across the river rather like floating stepping stones. While practising to cross over and not fall into the water we must have looked like some comic ballet dancers as with arms outstretched for balance we tried to get a rhythm into our feet and step from pillow to pillow and reach the opposite bank without getting wet. The inflatable two-man rubber dinghy was part of the platoon's equipment used on bridging schemes. There was a correct way to get into the dinghy without upsetting it and we all went through the drill. From both these exercises we got soaked but we had many laughs to compensate for our discomfort.

We had route marches both by road and across country. On one of the cross country marches, Lt Taylor brought the platoon to the bank of the Tees and told us it was time we tried the correct way to

wade across a river. We crossed in single file with the tallest man of the platoon in the lead, and each man clutching the belt of the man in front. Sapper Caswell and I were two of the tallest men and Caswell took the lead with me behind him. We found a couple of sticks to probe the river in front of us searching for hidden holes or sudden shelving in the river bed. At its deepest the river was over waist high on us and chest high on the shorter men who were in the middle of the file. The flow of the river wasn't too strong and the river bed was firm to our feet so we managed to make a safe crossing. The remainder of the march was done at the double to fight against the chill of our wet clothes.

In May platoon exercises on bridging began which took us away from Hurworth for several days at a time. Bridge building using the folding boat equipment was carried out on the River Blythe, a short distance inland from the town of Blythe where the river was still tidal. This type of bridge had a maximum load capacity of nine tons and was soon superceded by the Bailey bridge equipment. At first we built the bridges in the day time to get used to the equipment, then we built them at night. There were ramps at each end of the bridge which adjusted themselves to the rise and fall of the tide on trestles. On one of the night operations, the party fixing the ramps and trestles on the enemy side of the bridge were having difficulty in getting the trestles erected. Some pins were slightly bent and were not aligning themselves to holes in the trestle legs. Sappers Peters, Morris and myself were detailed to dash over and give the party additional lifting strength. We didn't get very far. The decking party had fallen behind with their work and to catch up in the sequence of building had left a piece of decking unfinished. In the dark, and in our hurry we failed to see this hole and fell through it. As I went through the gap I caught my

chin on a transom. My jaws were snapped together so hard that my top dentures broke. Three wet, angry sappers struggled to the bank muttering all kinds of threats to the decking party. A rum ration was issued for these night exercises and tonight my ration was more than welcome. Building bridges on the River Blythe was a dirty, messy job. At low tide boats and equipment had to be manoeuvred over a wide expanse of tidal mud. In places it was ten to twelve inches deep and the glutinous stuff sucking at your feet almost brought you to a standstill. To fall over was fatal for it was impossible to push yourself upright again without assistance. The folding canvas boats were unreliable. From long storage in a folded position the canvas weakened at the folds and often split along this crease when built into a bridge. Changing damaged boats could be more difficult than building the bridge. My teeth were repaired at an army dental unit in Darlington I spent the rest of the day in town.

In between schemes a percentage of forty-eight hour leave passes were issued. The number depended on the C.O.'s discretion ad to how many men he could allow away from the company at any one time. Whenever possible I applied for one of these passes and since a large number of men either didn't wish to spend money on railway fares or were too far from home for the pass to be worthwhile I was often successful in getting one. Railway warrants were not issued for these short leaves and to supplement my money for rail fares I teamed up with Spr 'Ginger' Nichols to go hay-making during the short periods between schemes. The local farmers were glad of a little extra help to gather in the hay and paid us two and sixpence an hour for the hand blistering work.

Ginger was lucky not to be badly injured on one of our trips to the Butts for firing practice. After firing live rounds from our rifles

they had to be boiled out to remove any carbon deposits left in the barrel. Boiling water was poured down the barrel to wash it out and was followed with pulling oiled cloths through the barrel to prevent rusting. On this particular shoot Ginger saw a spare rifle standing against the wall of the Butts and when it was his turn to fire at the targets he decided to use it and so save himself the trouble of cleaning his own rifle. Ginger was always on the lookout for these sort of dodges. Unknown to him this rifle was waiting for an armourer's attention to remove a blockage in the barrel. While the sapper who owned the rifle was pulling a wad of cloth through the barrel his pull through cord broke leaving the cloth stuck in the barrel. Ginger took his position on the firing line and squeezed the trigger. There was a louder than usual explosion with a recoil from the rifle that almost broke Ginger's shoulder. The explosion also split the barrel of the rifle. For firing another man's rifle without permission and damaging it by neglect he received a detention sentence.

No guards or gate pickets were mounted at Hurworth during the day, but at night a fire and roaming picket was mounted for the hours between 18.00 hours and 06.00 hours. After the picket mounting parade and the detailing of duty periods for each man, the off-duty or rather those not on patrol returned to their hut or went into the NAAFI and later lay on their beds fully dressed until it was their turn to patrol. Prince, a stray crossbred Border Collie dog had adopted the platoon and lived in the camp. When I was on fire picket I loved to get Prince to accompany me. If the night was cold I would squat in the dark with my back to a tree on the spinney path and hug Prince to me for warmth. His low throat rumble if there was any unusual noise or movement was sufficient to have me on the alert. One night a sapper patrolling round the hard saw smoke coming from the hut where the

ropes, netting and other stores were kept. He rattled the camp alarm to rouse everyone and a chain of men were soon organized between the hut and the river passing along buckets and utensils of water to try and douse the flames. Another party of men began clearing the explosives hut, its sides were beginning to scorch from the burning hut, now well alight. By the time a fire engine arrived from Darlington there was little left of the hut and stores to damp down. Careless smoking was ruled to be the cause of the fire and a 'No Smoking' notice went up on the hard. The incident illustrated how vulnerable our wooden huts were to catching fire.

Our company was detailed to organize a series of demonstrations and lectures on mines and booby traps to be give to the 6th Guards Tank Brigade who were training on the Yorkshire Moors. As training schemes became larger the Guards and the 15th Scottish Division worked together on operations and tactics which proved to be valuable when they fought together in Normandy. Lieutenant Taylor and No. 2 platoon were chosen to give these lectures and demonstration to be held at Askrigg Masham, Bedale and Leyburn. For two weeks we gathered together models and exhibits for the lectures and collected gear required for the demonstrations and for our camp. At the same time Lt Taylor introduced more spit and polish parades to try and get our standard of turnout as good as the guards.

It is customary for Royal Engineers to have their jack knives on lanyards worn round the waist with the knife dangling over the right buttock. Too often the knife was in a top pocket of our B.D. blouse or not even carried and Lt Taylor had a purge on this one morning. When we paraded at 08.00 hours he told the orderly sergeant to take the names of all men not wearing their jack knives round the waist. As Sgt Cawfield moved to take our names, and mine was on

of them. Lieutenant Taylor called out: ‘Put your name down sergeant you haven’t got your knife on’. Sergeant Cawfield answered ‘Excuse me, sir, I cannot see yours.’ Lieutenant Taylor fumbled at his waist and burst out laughing. ‘OK’ he said, ‘I’ll join you for spud bashing tonight.’ Sharing defaulters with an officer and a sergeant was quite a joke. the quota of potatoes for the cookhouses were soon peeled and we were dismissed early for a spell in the NAAFI hut which closed at 21.00 hours.

We were away from Hurworth for about three weeks on this demonstration scheme and camped at the four chosen centres. The campsites had been well chosen by Lt Taylor. Each one was beside a lovely Yorkshire stream with clear running water and firm rocky or gravelly beds, often with a waterfall nearby for ablutions. The July temperature was warm enough for us to splash about in the evenings, playing a rough form of water polo. There was always a ball of some kind amongst our equipment and we were never without packs of cards. I enjoyed exploring these streams which seemed to abound with waterfalls of some kind, some were quite spectacular. This was my first real exploration of the Yorkshire Dales and I became quite attached to them; so much so that I brought my family here for some lovely holidays after the war.

Corporal Jarvis and myself were made responsible for the models and exhibits used by Lt Taylor to illustrate his lectures which were held in the mornings. In the afternoon after our sandwich snack we gave the lecture room a clean-up and rearranged the exhibits for the next lecture and were back in camp early enough for me to go exploring before the demonstration party arrived back for the evening meal at 18.00 hours. Their booby traps and mines were prepared during the morning while the Guards were at lectures and the demonstrations by

Sgt Cawfield's and Cpl Murphy's squads were given in the afternoon.

Two sappers, Lauri and Stevens, who were still serving a C.B. sentence for being absent from camp after 24.00 hours were on permanent camp duties which included digging latrines, washing up for the cooks and going the night picket. To ease their plight the potato peeling chore was overcome by each man picking up two potatoes, peeling them and dropping them into a bath of water as he left the dining tent. Lauri and Stevens were unlucky to have been picked up by M.P.s in Darlington in the early hours of the morning. They had been out with some girls for the night and when answering their A.W.L. charge they had told the C.O. that they had lost their way. The C.O. nearly exploded when he heard their excuse. He told them that if they had said they had overstayed their time with girlfriends he would perhaps have been more sympathetic but for two of his sapper to say they were lost in Darlington after the length of time they had been in the area was inexcusable. He gave them fourteen days C.B. and the camp chores on the demonstration course, which amounted to an extension of C.B.

At Leyburn with only a few days to go before we returned to Hurworth I was thinking about how this course had been like a camping holiday and that soon we would be on those uncomfortable training schemes again. However, I was to have quite a pleasant surprise before returning to Hurworth. The D.R. who came daily with our mail brought a privilege leave pass, with railway warrant and food ration coupons for me to go on ten days' leave. Lieutenant Taylor gave me permission to leave camp at mid-day after his morning lecture which gave me ample time to catch a bus for York and catch the Birmingham train, the same train I used to travel on from Darlington when I had leave passes. I walked the few miles into Leyburn to catch a

bus for York. While waiting at the bus stop I was joined by a guards sergeant. He was going to Birmingham on a short leave pass to visit his sick father. He told me that he had frequently hitch-hiked from York to Birmingham which he intended to do tonight rather than wait for the train. Because of the convenient times of trains for my leave passes I hadn't bothered to hitch hike, but having been convinced that I could save hours on this journey I decided to accompany him. We had a quick tea in a canteen at York and set out to thumb our way to Birmingham. A private car driver took us as far as his local pub, a few more miles along our way, where we had a couple of beers. Traffic seemed to be quiet that night and we walked miles before we had another pick up. By now I was beginning to regret my decision to try hitching a ride, even the sergeant was getting pessimistic about our luck. Eventually a seedy looking lorry pulled in in answer to our thumb signs. He was going to West Brom and agreed to give us a lift into Birmingham. The sergeant got in the cab. There wasn't room enough for three so I climbed into the back of the lorry and tried to make a comfortable seat from some tarpaulins. The lorry had a huge casting of a naval gun turret roped in the back. It was going to West Brom for machining. The casting was too heavy for this type of lorry and frequent stops had to be made for cooling off. For me it was a most uncomfortable ride and how I wished that I had caught the train at York which would have got me to New Street station hours before this hitched ride. I was cold, dirty, tired and hungry and I vowed that never again would I hitch hike while public transport was available. After leave it was back to Hurworth and more training exercises on bridge building, mine laying and mine clearing.

Four months had passed since I was posted to 278 Field Company R.E. and I now had many friends to go out with during my off-duty

hours. It is difficult to name any one of them as being a special friend for I was always prepared to join in with anybody who had my idea of entertainment. Drinking parties were not one of them, my money was better spent on rail fares. There was a wonderful team spirit in the platoon, with friendly rivalry among sections trying to prove which was the best section in the platoon. Corporal Murphy drove us hard to be the best. This spirit I later discovered existed throughout the company. Company discipline, although strict was not harsh and very fair and our C.O. was more concerned about our training for efficiency than he was about bull. This attitude towards bull cost the company a month's loss of all privileges while we were at Otley. An inspecting brass hat complained about the appearance of the camp. We had been out on a company scheme and the white washing of kerb stones, and boundary markers were below standard. When the brass hat complained to our C.O. about this the C.O. asked him which he preferred, training or unnecessary bull? The company couldn't do both. For this our privileges were cancelled for a month. Although we grumbled about losing our leave passes we were behind the C.O. for his attitude about whitewashing.

Lieutenant Taylor was promoted and posted to an Airfield Construction Company, R.E. and we now had an energetic and keen young officer, Lt Baron as platoon commander who soon became as popular with the platoon as Lt Taylor had been.

About August we left our camp at Hurworth and moved to Otley, midway between Bradford and Leeds. We were not allowed to take Prince with us. He was left behind with the NAAFI ladies who promised to take care of him. This camp at Otley built on the town show ground was large enough for the company to be together in one place and, round about, the 44th Lowland Brigade of the Divisions

were in similar camps to ours.

One of the air raid shelters built in our camp was found to contain a large quantity of explosives and ammunition left behind by companies who had been in this camp before us. Due to unsatisfactory storage conditions it was beginning to sweat and corrode and looked unstable. An inspector of explosives called in to examine the sweating explosives ordered all of it, together with the rusting and corroding ammunition, to be destroyed. The task was given to Lt Baron who detailed No. 2 section for the job. While Lt Baron and Sgt Cawfield went on to Ilkely Moor to select a spot suitable for blowing up the explosives, Cpl Murphy organised us to pack the sensitive materials into boxes and load it onto our section truck. There was not the usual light-hearted banter while we were doing this work. Altogether there must have been a quarter of a ton of mixed explosives and ammunition to destroy. When loaded, half of us sat on the boxes in the back of the truck to stabilise them while our little Taffy driver carefully drove us to Ilkely Moor and onto the spot chosen by Lt Baron for the blow up. The other part of the section were in a pick-up with red flags flying to denote a dangerous load. They drove in front of our truck. I didn't enjoy that ride, sitting on a box of unstable explosives and I'm sure the others like me travelled with crossed fingers. The boxes were stacked into a small depression in the ground and well sandbagged to contain the shrapnel of the hand grenades and the bullets of the small arms ammunition. While Cpl Murphy made up his detonating charges, inserted electrical detonators and wired them back to an exploder box situated well away from the dump, the section radiated outwards to ensure that no-one was in the danger area and took post to keep out intruders. When Lt Baron received all clear signals from the sentries he signalled to Cpl Murphy who was safely tucked

behind a small hillock, to detonate. There was a terrific bang when the explosives blew up and Ilkley Moor now had a new hole in its surface which was afterwards inspected to make sure everything was destroyed. The area round about was also searched for anything that could be dangerous.

Lieutenant Thomas, commander of No. 3 platoon, who was about six feet two inches tall and weighed something like ten stone was naturally nicknamed Jumbo. He was a Rugby league fanatic and he began organizing rugger games which we played on the showground arena, a grassed area in front of a grandstand, all out of bounds except for these organized games. At first these games were enjoyable but gradually without proper refereeing and the introduction of rough play they became a free for all and it became harder to get players. The games were also a bit one sided for when Jumbo gathered the ball it was almost impossible to floor him. Like a runaway bulldozer he charged towards the goal line with half the opposing side hanging onto his shirt. His handing off was a thump in the face leaving you with a bloody nose or a split lip and in tackles he introduced the pulling of under arm hair. He was a dirty player. Lieutenant Shaw of No. 1 platoon and our Lt Baron soon had excuses to opt out of the games and in the evenings or on Saturday afternoons it only required someone to mention that Jumbo had been seen leaving the officers' mess with a rugger ball under his arm for everyone in camp to go into hiding or make hurried exits through the barrier and into Otley.

I was on gate picket one night doing the 24.00 hours to 02.00 hours turn of duty and it was well past midnight when everyone without a special pass should have been in camp. I saw Jumbo approaching. He had both hands in his pockets, cap tilted back on his head and was quietly whistling to himself, obviously a little merry from

drink. Although I recognised him I thought it wise to challenge him in the correct manner, and not take a chance of being put on a charge for neglect of duty. Shining my torch in his face I called him to halt for recognition. This annoyed Jumbo and he shouted 'Put that bloody light out. You know who I am and let me through'. He stomped into the guard room, stormed at the guard commander and faulted all he saw. The incident was recorded in the guard book and we heard on the grape vine that Jumbo had a ticking off from the Major for his ungentlemanly behaviour. After that I kept clear of Jumbo as much as I could.

Our old Bedford trucks and Bren carriers were called in and we now had new Austin four wheel drive trucks with winches built on the front, and white armoured cars to replace the Bren carriers. The Austin trucks had more body room and by careful arrangement of our tool boxes and equipment and a few improvised hammocks, our section was able to sleep in the truck when we were on exercises, that is until some nosy M.O. discovered what we were doing. He put a stop to this practice from a hygienic point of view. I must admit it did get a bit fuggy in there. Building a bivy from groundsheets and gas capes was all right while the weather was reasonably warm and dry, but not so comfortable as the year rolled on when the streams in which we washed and shaved were covered with ice. Ablutions then were distinctly chilly and our food, brought to us in hay boxes soon became cold in our mess tins.

On one of our exercises the platoon was laagered¹ in a farmyard when our evening meal was being prepared. It had been a quiet afternoon and we were looking forward to a quiet night. The stew and

¹A laager is a camp or encampment.

tea, plus a couple of hard biscuits was dished out and before we had time to consume it we were called upon to move out and build a class 40 Bailey bridge across a river where the road bridge was supposed to have been hit by shellfire. Two umpires stood on the bridge to make sure we didn't cheat and use it. No. 2 section was detailed to prepare the river bank on the enemy side for the bridge and to our horror we discovered that our rubber dinghy was punctured and useless. We now had to wade across with our tools and equipment which included the metal parts of the bridge support, all of which we normally floated over in the dinghy. The heavy timbers used to strengthen the bank were pulled over by rope. It was another night of cold and wet when my rum ration was gratefully sipped.

We were exercising with the 6th Guards Tank Brigade on one occasion, clearing a gap through a minefield for the tanks to begin an assault. This particular field was supposed to have machine gun covering fire and we had to clear the gap in the dark. Crawling on our bellies through the wet heather and spongy ground we probed for the mines with bayonets and removed them. For some realism the trip-wired booby traps were attached to small explosive devices which prevented any haphazard searching. The devices were harmless unless your face happened to be over one when it detonated. In the darkness they were quite startling when their flash revealed a mistake in searching and a grim reminder about what could happen with the real stuff. The umpires did make some of our searchers casualties. On all our exercises I never made the casualty list, an omen or not I cannot say. To help the tank drivers with their night drive through the gap, small shaded lights were attached to short stakes, battery operated cycle lamps were used for this. The gap was cleared and marked on one night and the tanks drove through the following night. Having cleared

the gap and returned to the start line for further orders, a group of us sheltering behind a piece of broken wall were having a moan about why brass hats chose such situations for these exercises. Out of the darkness from the other side of the wall a voice said, 'I couldn't help hearing your grumbles sappers', and out of the darkness the brigadier appeared. He gave us a lecture as to why the brass hats deemed it necessary to have exercises in bad weather. He told us that working in adverse weather and living on half-rations was to condition us so that when we were in battle we could carry out our duties efficiently and ignore the weather conditions. Sometimes bad weather could be an ally in war and he concluded by saying goodnight before he strode away.

These big schemes took place on the Northumbrian and Cumbrian moors and our journey from Otley to these moors took us through Newcastle. When our convoys approached the bridge over the River Tees the D.R.s rode up and down the line of vehicles calling to the truck drivers to close up so that the column could get through the city without being split up. On this particular trip the convoy was well closed up and doing about 30 m.p.h. over the bridge when a pedestrian stepped from the pavement in front of the leading P.U. truck, causing the driver to brake sharply forcing the following drivers to do likewise. There had been a light shower which had made the road surface a bit greasy and the trucks began sliding and skidding in all directions. Luckily due to petrol rationing oncoming traffic was virtually non-existent and casualties were confined to our convoy. There were a few dents and scratched paint on the truck and the occupants received a few bruises. Our Taffy driver fought his skid well and regained control with the truck facing in the opposite direction. There were some shunt collisions and a truck of No. 1 platoon had a lucky

escape. It had mounted the footpath, crashed through the side railings of the bridge and had one wheel hanging over the river. The winches built on the front of the trucks protected the radiators from damage and came in useful to pull the truck that had nearly gone into the river back onto the road. Skids became very commonplace during the late autumn and winter manoeuvres.

Ferrying was another exercise in our training programme. No. 2 section once had a ferrying job to do while the rest of the company built a Class 40 Bailey bridge higher up the river. Infantry, with the aid of light assault craft, had crossed the river and were now in need of their anti-tank guns to consolidate and hold the bridgehead they had gained, until heavier support could get over the bridge and push on with the advance.

The ferry was constructed from folding boat equipment. Four folding boats with a platform built on them and ramps at each end which raised or lowered formed the raft. Strong ropes were stretched from bank to bank and crews of sappers in the boats of the raft pulled along these ropes to get the raft across the river. The Jeep drivers had to be good. There was just room on the platform both in width and length to take a Jeep towing an anti-tank gun or a small trailer. Each time one accelerated up the ramp and onto the platform my heart stood still. The raft rocked uncomfortably and looked top-heavy with its load. I quite expected the whole thing to topple over. After a while the boat I was in began to ship water. The canvas was cracking along the fold line and each time the raft was loaded the crack went under water. After an examination and knowing that the bridge building was going well Lt Baron decided to carry on ferrying with the damaged boat, rather than change the boat and hold up the infantry support vehicles. What water we shipped while crossing with a load we baled

out with our helmets on the return journey when the split was above water. It was arm and back aching work pulling on the ropes and Murphy was all the time yelling at us to go faster. There was a sigh of relief when the news came for us to cease ferrying and begin to dismantle the raft. The bridge was now open for traffic.

Having obtained those good marks at the firing range at Maryhill and being classed as an A-1 shot in my records, I was chosen to be in a squad of marksmen under S.M. Duncan to zero the company weapons at the Butts and since we would be there for a day or two we camped on the Butts. It was here that S.M. Duncan almost lost his foot. We were checking the Sten guns, a most unpredictable weapon for jamming, and beginning to fire again after a heavy jolt if the safety catch was not on. We were firing the Sten in short bursts at the targets when Spr Brownley's gun jammed. Instead of staying facing the target and holding his gun in the air he turned round with the gun pointing to the ground while trying to release the jam. The gun cleared itself and began firing a stream of bullets which went close to the sergeant major's feet. When the sergeant major got his breath back and looking a bit pale in the face he roared at Brownley using a beautiful selection of profanities. Brownley was then forbidden to take part in any more weapon firing and given all the menial camp tasks that Duncan could find for him.

Having had no practical experience of floating Bailey bridge construction the company moved to Lancaster for a month's intensive training to build this type of bridge. Our billets were in an old mill about four miles outside Lancaster and about two miles from the hard on the River Lune which was a permanent training establishment. The Lune was a fairly fast flowing river, especially after heavy rain and it became quite dangerous for bridge building. Some Canadian sappers

had been drowned here while on the same course we were now going to take. One of their pontoons with sappers on board, got our of control and was swept away by the rain-swollen river to crash into the stone pillars of a road bridge. The pontoon broke up and the sappers were thrown into the river and drowned; their bodies were later recovered from Morecambe Bay. In its quieter moods the river was so clear that you could see down to the river bed an watch the large salmon gliding in the water. We tried to gaff them with boat hooks, but were never successful. There was also a large flock of seagulls here who were ever ready to snatch at the bits of food we tossed into the air. Their aerobatics were so fascinating that they had quite a share of our haversack rations.

It was a hard course. The journey between billets and hard was always on the double and we were dressed in battle order. The morning run wasn't too bad but the return trip after a days heavy work on the bridge wasn't so welcome. Building the bridge section on the pontoons was awkward and difficult and getting the sections into position and holding them against the current was a nightmare. As fit as we were, our muscles groaned at the end of the day. Large rowing boats called whalers were used to control and tow these sections of the bridge into place. and they were crewed by six to eight oarsmen. The oars were like young oak trees and the boat needed a lot of muscle power to get them moving. At the end of the course it was customary to have a whaler race with crews from each section rowing against each other in a knock out competition. We had trials during our mid-day breaks to select crews. I didn't make the grade to be a member of our crew and wasn't sorry about that. Our section crew didn't get very far in the competition; a section crew from No. 1 platoon had the honour to be the winners.

Lieutenant Colonel Miller, our C.R.E., insisted on a regimental guard being mounted at the billet, the only time I ever took part in regimental guard mounting. Prior to being on guard we had the afternoon off from bridging to get our webbing blanccoed and brasses and boots polished. In a guard of this kind there was always a spare man known as the stick man who was chosen by the officer of the day during the guard mounting inspection for being the best turned out man on the parade. The stick man did no sentry duties but was available to fill in if a sentry was taken ill and he also collected the guard's rations from the cookhouse and ran other errands. It was an honour worth trying for. Our guard fell in for inspection and who should be the officer of the day: Jumbo with Sgt Greenway as orderly sergeant. The choice for stick man narrowed down to Spr Petronugio and myself and the stick finally went to Petro. The next best thing was to be first sentry which went to the second smartest turn out and today that was me. Having taken part I began to cover my beat in true Buckingham Palace style, I thought. Apparently Jumbo didn't think so and he ordered Sgt Greenway over to tell me to get straightened up. He said I looked like a bag of shit marching about and I was to keep marching through the first hour of my duty period I'm sure Jumbo, like his elephant namesake had a memory and had not forgotten the Otley incident. The C.R.E. paid a visit to the camp while I was on duty and I had to call out the guard and give him the 'Present arms!' as he passed through the gate.

If I wasn't too tired after my day on the hard I walked into Lancaster where there was a good canteen and one of my many friends running short of cigarettes would always be ready to join me, but most nights I was content to stay in billets. Saturday morning was a morning of cleaning up billets, shaking blankets and cleaning kit and

in the afternoon liberty trucks were laid on for visits to Morecambe. I only went into Morecambe once and found it so uninteresting that I preferred the four mile walk into Lancaster for my entertainment, where, besides the decent canteen, there were cinemas to visit. The liberty trucks didn't leave the billets until after ten so that their arrival in Morecambe was always too late for a cinema show. Most of those who went were pub crawlers and the return journey from Morecambe was far from pleasant due to drunken brawls and sickness.

Morecambe Bay with wire entanglements everywhere and its sea-front buildings, other than those requisitioned by the Defence Ministry, were closed and shuttered which gave it a very depressing atmosphere, especially in the blackout.

On Sunday we had church parade and were marched to a nearby church for the service, other denominations were accommodated in Lancaster and taken there by truck. Our parades must have delighted the vicar for he not only had a large congregation, his collection plates were much heavier. The afternoon was usually spent on my bed with a book or a letter to write and in the evening a walk with some pals into Lancaster.

Tommy Drummond in the bunk next to me always wrote very regularly to his wife in London and he received regular replies from her. For several days while we were on the course Tommy had no mail and he became very worried, Eventually the C.O. sent for Tommy and told him that his wife had written asking what kind of soldier he was. Apparently one night Tommy had written two letters one to his wife and one to a girl he was playing around with in Otley and had put the letters in the wrong envelopes. Tommy was given a forty-eight hours compassionate leave home to try and sort out his matrimonial affairs which ended in a separation order. His girlfriend also discarded him

when she found out that he was a married man.

The course came to an end and I think we were all pleased to return to Otley.

Otley was a good town to be billeted in. There was a cinema and a well stocked NAAFI where we could spend our off duty hours and a regular bus service between Bradford and Leeds passed near the camp. Bradford was a bit dull and wasn't visited very often, Leeds on the other hand, had plenty of entertainment to offer. The market again being one of the attractions.

Freddy Frisk, a company clerk, and I frequently went to Sunday Evensong at Otley Parish Church. Here the people's warden, Mr. Watkins and his wife befriended us and sometimes invited us to their home for supper. Mrs. Watkins had one big grumble and that was the disruption caused in the town centre when we moved away for manoeuvres. She thought it was most inconsiderate of us to have traffic right of way and so delay the townspeople getting to their work. Well she provided such nice suppers we agreed with her about the disruption of civilians getting on with their war effort. They had one son who was in the forces stationed somewhere in the Middle East.

A privilege I had in Otley was to be able to borrow and take away books from the library. It began with my visits there, selecting a book to read in the library and then asking the librarian to hold the unfinished book for me until my next visit. Eventually, on promising to return any library book by post if I was suddenly moved away from Otley, I was allowed to take books back to camp.

George Banwell, one of the sappers I went out with, was made platoon clerk when Jones went on an officer's selection course. George discovered a group of elderly ladies who met one night a week in a chapel room in town. They provided a nice cup of tea and a home

made cookie for any serviceman who wished to call in and also darned socks for those unable to do their own repairs. I went with him fairly often to this chapel room for a quiet, homely and friendly chat with the old dears.

George was a poor manager of his money; it was not unknown for him to draw his pay, go out by himself and squander it on drinks for anyone in the pub. After these drinking bouts he was broke and miserable and I either lent or gave him some cash to see him through to next pay day and made sure he had some cigarettes. In return for these favours George often left my name off picket duty lists which he made out for Lt Baron's signature and he also endeavoured to get my applications for forty-eight hours leave passes signed. Yes, I was becoming corrupt, even sinking to bribery.

The bus service into Leeds was very convenient for catching my trains to Birmingham when going home but the return journeys were not so good. Leave passes expired at 24.00 hrs. on the day of your return to duty and one always caught the last available train to get you into camp at that time. Trains could never be relied upon for punctuality and a blind eye was turned on late arrival in camp for those who had been on leave. Provided you were in before reveille and had not been stopped on the way by an M.P. The train I used to catch at Birmingham should have arrived at Leeds in time for me to catch the last train to Gaisley and then have plenty of time to walk the three miles from there to camp and be in before 24.00 hrs.

The Birmingham train was nearly always late and missed the Gaisley train, also there were no buses running at this late hour. Normally there was plenty of time for the twelve mile hike from Leeds back to camp but if the train was extra late then the journey was a hurried one. There were usually several of us from the camps around Otley

to make the walk.

The corridor coaches of those days had toilets at one end of the corridor and at the other end their were tiered racks for large pieces of luggage. By curling into a foetal position it was possible to get in these racks and have a sleep; there were never any empty seats at Birmingham. I had slept a few muscle cramping hours on these racks when returning from a short leave pass and done the twelve mile hike back to camp which I had reached just before reveille and stopped to read duty orders' in the dawn light. That best B.D.s were to be worn on first parade wasn't pleasant reading for me for mine which I was wearing looked pretty awful after it's night of ill-use on the train. There I stood on parade looking like something out of a rag bag. Creases in my uniform anywhere but the right places. Lieutenant Baron looked a little shocked when he saw my appearance and asked if I was really wearing my best battle dress. Aster I answered in the affirmative he gave me two days C.B., time he said to get something done to improve my appearance. Chalky White a Londoner in No. 3 Platoon who was returning from a privilege leave and was on the same train I had caught at Birmingham had forgotten to change from his brown shoes into Army boots and was put on charge for being improperly dressed on parade.

This inspection and check on our best battle dress was in preparation for General Montgomery's visit to the brigade. He was touring around the troops who, unbeknownst to us, were preparing to invade France. It was a drizzly morning on the day of his inspection and we were marched to a large field on the Leeds side of Otley for the parade wearing gas capes over our uniforms and steel helmets instead of our caps which we had tucked into our belts. The brigade was formed up company by company into three sides of a square and just

before Monty arrived the sun came out, something we were all hoping for. Gas masks and helmets were discarded and quickly gathered up to be taken back to camp by P.U.s laid on for that purpose. Monty arrived in his special Jeep and after a few barked orders we were in open order for his inspection. Momentarily he stood and looked each man in the eye and I had never had such a pair of piercing eyes looking at me. They seemed to penetrate right through my head. After his tour through the ranks which took quite a long time he mounted his Jeep, called us to break ranks and close round to hear his short speech, one which he seemed to use on all these inspection parades. After reforming into companies, the pipes and drums of 44th Lowland Brigade headed the march past for Monty to take the salute; a rostrum for this had been erected on the road back to Otley.

Coming back to short leaves, I scalded my foot while I was getting ready to return to Otley after one of these leaves. Boiling water was spilt all over my foot and I was unable to get my boot on, the local police were contacted and asked if they could inform my unit about the accident. They replied that I wasn't to worry, they would phone a regimental aid post who were in a large house in High Street and they would take care of me. An M.O. and a sergeant of the R.A.M.C. arrived in a jeep, looked at my foot which had now blistered, gathered my gear and took me away, telling Nona that if she wished she could visit me the following afternoon at the R.A.P.

Here the small blister was drained and dressed and for a couple of days I spent most of my time lying on my bed. Nona came to see me each afternoon. By Thursday I could get a shoe over the dressing and by promising to return to the R.A.P. by 20:00 hours the M.O. let me go home. On Friday morning the M.O. said I was fit to return to my company and began making out my discharge paper, but again

putting me on trust not to leave the house, he said I could go home for the weekend and dated my discharge for Sunday. By now the soreness had gone from my foot and I could get my boot on.

The camp was empty when I arrived back for reveille on Monday Morning. The company was away on a scheme and for security a small rear party of sappers with Sgt Dickens in charge were left behind. At 08:00 hours I reported to Sgt Dickens in Company Office who immediately wanted to know where I had been, I was reported missing. I told him that I had been in hospital and produced my discharge papers to prove it. I had been under the impression that the company had been informed by the R.A.P. about my accident, but apparently I was wrong and a warrant had been issued for my arrest for desertion. The company wasn't expected back at Otley until Friday and Sgt Dickens didn't seem too happy about having another man in his party and said he wished the hospital had kept me for a few more days. Cheekily I said 'How about a short leave pass sarge, that would solve your problems.' He called me a cheeky bugger, but made out a pass for me and I was out of the camp and on a bus for Leeds like greased lightning in case he had a change of mind. Our neighbour Mrs Shirley, whose husband Bill was in the army, said it was amazing how many times I came home, her Bill didn't seem to get the same leaves. Perhaps Bill didn't try hard enough. I seldom managed to get a seat on the train at Leeds. when going home. It was usually filled to capacity at Darlington where its journey began. There was a chance at York or Sheffield that some people would get off and if you happened to be by that compartment you quickly claimed their seat. On the trip home I managed to get a seat at Sheffield and after undoing my boot laces to ease my feet and unbuttoning my blouse, I fell asleep. When I woke up it was quite dark and the train was

stationary. When I enquired where we were I was told that the train was now in Birmingham and had been there some time. This train always made a long stop at Birmingham to load on mail for London, its next stopping place. Panic, I grabbed my and with buttons undone and laces straggling, I pushed my way along the crowded corridor to a door. I had just dropped to the platform when the guard blew his whistle, waved his green flag and the train began to move away for London. After that close encounter for an unwanted journey, I asked fellow passengers to wake me up at Birmingham when I had a seat and felt sleepy.

Frequent F.F.I. inspections were made to make sure no one was hiding V.D. complaints and although we had been told that catching V.D. from lavatory seats was extremely unlikely I had a problem about it and was very careful when using toilet seats. The platoon was erecting three Nissan huts on some waste ground near the C.R.E.'s H.Q., and our M.O. stopped by to give us an F.F.I. With one hand holing my slacks at half mast and holding my shirt high with the other hand I stood before the M.O. After his quick inspection I walked away tucking my shirt into slacks and preparing to button up when I heard him call to me. 'One moment sapper, I would like another check.' Immediately I thought: 'It is true that you can get V.D. from a toilet seat.' And I was quite relieved when the M.O. said, 'You have a slight sweat rash, sapper. Report to your company treatment room and get painted with iodine for three days.' There where many ribald remarks made about my treatment. The treatment room was open for one hour each evening and one evening while Tompkins, the first aid man in charge of the hut, was closing up for the night Spr Middleton, a bit of a bully, tried to push past. Middleton who was much bigger than Tompkins, soon found himself on the floor locked in a judo hold needing one

more twist to break his arm. That was the first inkling we had that besides first aid, Tompkins also knew quite a lot about judo.

Most of our schemes were to attack enemy positions and advance, but some were exercises on the defense of territory and we accidentally blew up a bridge on one of these defence schemes. To hinder attacking forces our section was detailed to blow up a small bridge in a side road. While Cpl Murphy and a few sappers prepared and placed the explosives in position and wired them back to an explosives box, the remainder of the section with L/Cpl Dippy took up covering fire positions. We were using real explosives and detonators and after umpires had inspected our preparations the detonators should have been removed. The Umpires, during their inspection, chose Cpl Murphy and two sappers as casualties and they were taken away by a medical team to have their imaginary injuries attended to. When a runner came to us with orders to destroy the bridge and retire to the platoon, Dippy, with a theatrical gesture, pushed down the handle of the exploder box and to everyone's amazement away went the bridge. We all thought Murphy had removed the detonators before being taken away as a casualty. Luckily no one was near the bridge at the time of the explosion but the smoke and dust had hardly settled before a number of officers, including one Maj. Broome and the C.R.E. Lt Col. Miller were at the scene. There was also a very angry farmer there complaining that the only direct access to his farm was now destroyed, and how the hell did we think that he could get his milk away. Lieutenant Colonel Miller told us that we had done a very good job of demolition and now the platoon must erect a temporary bridge for the farmer's convenience. This kind of happening must have cost the country enormous amounts of money in compensation payments.

The planned period of training schemes which had begun in a

small way had now reached its last big scheme in which the 6th Guards Tank Brigade joined in with the 15th Scottish Division for a large assault exercise. The battle began with a big barrage from the divisional artillery. The flashes from the blank shells lit up the night sky along a wide front. It was described a being like a miniature Alamein. The barrage at the beginning of that battle was the largest known up to that time.

We were on reduced rations for this scheme. Two hard biscuits with a little margarine and a mug of tea was breakfast and then nothing more until the evening meal of stew and tea often eaten in the field. I became so ravenously hungry that I tried to eat a piece of mangold thrown out for some sheep. It tasted awful and was too much for my rumbling stomach to face. We built and demonstrated several Class 40 Bailey Bridges, ferried for the 44th Lowland Brigade and cleared gaps in minefields for the tanks. It was a very exhausting exercise carried out in mixed weather conditions. Sleep was snatched at any odd moment. While on one of the ferrying jobs Sgt Greenway lost his crash helmet. Sergeant Greenway moved around to ensure that platoon sections received their rations. Having made contact with our section on this ferry he was conferring with Cpl Murphy, leaving his crash helmet lying beside his motor bike. Minutes after it was seen floating down the river. How did it roll down the bank? Although he never admitted it we reckon Spr Richardson helped it on its way. Sergeant Greenway had booked him for insubordination the day before while we were in the lagaar with the platoon and we were sure that this was Richardson's way of getting his own back on the sergeant.

At the end of the exercise the 15th Scottish Division assembled round Rothbury race course; the course being used as an arena for

fete-at-arms where the special skills of the differing corps within the division were displayed. Our company put on a display of Bailey bridge building to represent the skills of the Royal Engineers. There was a small stream running by the race course and over this we built a 100 ft class 40 Bailey bridge and at the same time announced that we were attempting to beat a record of forty minutes to build this bridge made by a team of Royal Engineers at Chatham.

The Royal Corps of Signals had erected a loud speaker system round the arena and over this Capt. White was going to give a running commentary on our the progress of the bridge building and since he would be in a tent well out of sight of the bridge he hoped that we would be within the forty minute record on which he was going to base his progress report. The bank preparations for the bridge supports and the rollers on which the bridge was built were prepared in advance. Caswell and I were in one of the panel parties of the chosen team, a task in bridging that I liked best. From the word go a furious pace was set with plenty of encouraging bawling from the N.C.O.'s. Lieutenant Baron was bridge commander, and he did his share of the shouting. Panel parties more or less controlled the pace of the building. Until a panel was in position other parties couldn't do their jobs and the faster we went, the faster they had to go to keep up with our work. With footwalks completed and a R.A.S.C lorry driving over the bridge our time was given as forty-two minutes and our exhaustion was forgotten as we heard the spectators' cheer after the time was announced. The C.O. and captain were so delighted with our performance that they gave each man in the team vouchers to spend in the NAAFI paid from their own pockets. It was only two shilling per man but a medal could not have been more appreciated.

The finale of the fete-at-arms was a display given by the divisions

massed bands of pipe and drums. The sun shone for the occasion picking out and brightening the many colours of the tartans of the ceremonial dress worn by the bands and a wonderful change from the khaki battle dress. Watching these guardsmen countermarching in the sunshine and listening to the music of the bagpipes was one of the most spectacular events of my life.

Another privilege leave followed this scheme, the last major exercise I took part in. There were company schemes to keep us well trained and physically fit.

All our vehicles had to be modified and sealed so that they could be driven through several feet of water. Exhaust pipes were lengthened and turned upwards to clear the water and, using a special sealing compound, vulnerable parts of the engine were encased in the material to keep away the water. Infantry regiment drivers also had many hours practicing the loading and off-loading of invasion barges and for this purpose the Engineers built special training areas. These were raised platforms of earth with ramps to represent the barges and a track circuit with deep water troughs built into it to test the waterproofing of the vehicles. These tracks, from constant use and wet weather, plus the water brought onto the track after the vehicles had been through the troughs, often became far too boggy for training and we needed to carry out maintenance work on the areas to keep the usable. A concrete track would have been ideal but that would have destroyed the need to be able to keep going over rough terrain.

No. 2 platoon was sent to one of these areas to improve conditions there and I was with a team of sappers fetching hard core from a nearby quarry to drop into the boggy parts. The broken stone was far too big for shovelling and we loaded and threw it off the truck by hand. Our C.R.E. was making himself a nuisance at this site which,

not being particularly well drained was giving us some trouble. He was not only harassing Lt Baron and the N.C.O.s but he was also stopping sappers to ask them questions on the R.E. training manual and if the right answer wasn't given you received a reprimand and ordered to swot up the Manual. I was one of his victims. I didn't give the correct answer to an explosive question. Having come back from the quarry with a load of stone we saw the C.R.E. standing next to a puddle of water and Diamond said 'Let's shift the old so and so'. With our backs to the end of the truck Diamond, Caswell and myself, began tossing the stone between our legs and dropped some into the pool of water. The result was rather more than we had anticipated for the C.R.E. was drenched with muddy water. He stormed up to our truck, rattled its side with his cane and ordered us down. From his looks I'm sure he would have loved to rattle us with his cane. Trying hard to keep straight faces we stood stiffly to attention while he raved at us for careless and dangerous behaviour. By now Lt Baron and Sgt Cawfield had joined him and the C.R.E. told Lt Baron that we three were confined to camp for seven days. The C.R.E. went away to get changed and we were all able to have a jolly good laugh and that included Lt Baron and the infantry officers. We didn't see the colonel again on that job.

In November L/Cpl Diaplo, myself and a few more C&J sappers from the divisional R.E.s were sent to a Ministry of Supply depot at Selby. Here there were mountains of broken bunks, chairs, benches and Office desks and our job was to show some Italian P.O.W.s how to cannibalize materials from the more serious damaged articles to repair those that were least damaged. They were P.O.W.s from the North African campaigns and told us that they were pleased to be out of the war and away from the bullying Nazis. By volunteering for this kind

of work they received extra privileges. Many had some knowledge of English so communication wasn't too difficult and their keenness to please enabled them to quickly grasp what they were expected to do here. The Pioneer Corps, they were not Royal in those days, were responsible for their security and marched the prisoners from their quarters to this small workshop set up for the job and generally kept an eye on them. For us it was a miserable detail. We were given a Nissan hut by the perimeter fence for our quarters and using broken unusable wood from the pile of damaged articles we kept the hut nice and warm, but the lighting was so dim we could hardly see to read. It was like prison for us since we were more or less confined to this hut, even our meals were brought to the hut. If we went out at night, and that wasn't often for there was no entertainment in Selby, you were searched by the guard on the gate and searched again when you returned. I was glad when, after about two weeks on this detail. I returned to Otley.

It was going to be another Christmas away from house and family and without the joy of giving and receiving those little presents associated with the season. Sergeants bringing round the buckets of tea well laced with whisky began another army Christmas Day and, after a long morning, we had a dinner of tinned turkey and tinned Christmas pudding washed down with free beer from the NAAFI. The afternoon was spent quietly in camp and after tea it was beer and Housey-housey in the so-called recreation hut. It was normal duties again on Boxing Day but this Christmas was certainly better than the one spent in Maryhill last year. In January I had eight days of privilege leave and little did I realise that this would be my last official leave home for twelve months. As a small compensation for not having presents to send home at Christmas I had collected a sizeable

amount of chocolate and best toilet soap. It was one of the joys of leave to watch Cynthia delve into my pack and unearth the chocolate and by now Garth had developed a strong liking for the sweet meat.

After this leave I was posted to Chatham to take the army carpentry and joinery course which, if I passed, would entitle me to a bit more pay.

Chapter 7

Tradesman's Course at Chatham

Four of us were going to Chatham to take tradesman's courses. Harry Goddard, of No. 3 platoon, was joining me on the carpentry and joinery course Spr Menzies, also of No. 3 platoon, was taking a course in bricklaying and Frank Cooper of H.Q. platoon was taking a blacksmith's course. Frank, due to length of service, was senior sapper and had charge of our travel documents. and since his home was in Gillingham he was quite familiar with the train journey. Not being in a hurry to get to Brompton barracks which were on the outskirts of Chatham we had a leisurely snack at London before catching our connection to Chatham and on arrival there we spent some time looking round the town and drinking tea in the service's canteen. Our heavy

kit was left at the station while on this tour. The last bus for Brompton was missed and it was past lights out when we reported to the guard room of the barracks. Too late to be taken to our quarters and we were put into the Detention cells for the night. Fortunately there were no detainees in there so we were not locked in. A wooden platform about twelve inches high with a wooden head rest ran along one wall and on this we tried to snatch some sleep. Without blankets and palliasses it was a most uncomfortable night and it was with relief that we heard reveille being played over the loud speaker and were able to go to our quarters. Harry and I managed to get beds next to each other Menzies and Cooper were in blocks on the opposite side of the square. Our room was spacious and bright and furnished with single beds tables and chairs. Although centrally heated the room wasn't very warm, the water in the system was just warm enough to prevent freezing pipes. There was a big cast iron fireplace in the centre of one wall but fires were forbidden. Tantalizingly a large cast iron box full of coal stood in front of the fire place and the coal had to be dusted every morning. The grate and the iron box were polished every day using our supply of boot polish. The wooden floor was also 'bumpered' each morning before 08:00 hours. To bumper a floor a large slab of stone covered with felt and cloth smeared with brown boot polish was vigorously rubbed all over the floor. The stone fitted into a frame that was attached by a swivel to stout broom handles. These chores were amicably shared out between us and all this bull was accompanied by some strong comments. There was a plentiful supply of hot water for showers and ablutions and the food here, prepared and served by A.T.S., was very good.

Elderly sergeants, time serving men who had been due to retire when war broke out, were in charge of each class. Our Sgt Timkins

'Timmy' for short was quite an individual, strict on discipline, but not very communicative. These sergeants marched us about the barracks to our differing periods of instruction and to the dining hall for meals. They were also responsible for our standard of spit and polish. All the new intakes who had come to receive training in the various trades that took place were assembled in the lecture theatre to hear an introductory talk from the major of the establishment. He emphasised the bull that would be needed from us while we were on the course and from his talk I learned that no short leave passes were issued from here. Wednesday afternoon we were told was an afternoon of compulsory sport for everyone. and our names were taken for whichever sport we chose to take part in. Frank wished to play football and when the question of boot sizes arose Frank, who was about six foot three inches tall and well proportioned, asked for a pair of size twelves. The major said 'I don't have size twelves will two pairs of sixes do?' Frank had to play football wearing his ordinary boots which were in the special boot category. Harry and I chose to do the cross country run. This was my idea. After hearing the course laid out for the run, I reckoned that we could be back in barracks showered and changed before the team games ended and crowded the showers with muddy players.

In small parties we were taken for an F.F.I. examination and for this we had to march to a nearby naval barracks. After being shown into an empty first floor room Timmy, our sergeant, told us to strip down to our birthday suits and wait to be called into an adjoining room for the M.O.s inspection. While nakedly waiting for the M.O. there was a bit of playing around until someone looked out of the window. In the opposite block grinning Wren's faces were crowded at the windows and there was a rush by us to grab shirts and tie round

our middle. To finalise our visit the M.O. was a Wren officer.

Harry, like myself, was a carpenter in Civvy street and used to building construction work so we both found the course very elementary. The course was in two parts, theory and practical, and marks obtained in these two parts put together with marks for notebooks, in which we had to rewrite the rough notes taken down during lectures, decided whether we passed or failed the course.

Staff Sergeant Grant, a school teacher by profession, lectured us on the theoretical part of the course using a text book on Building Construction written by Charles Mitchell. The same book was used in the building construction classes I attended at night school in Leamington as a teenager. The morning period in the classroom was broken by a P.T. session taken by another time serving sergeant. Our P.T. period ended at NAAFI time and regularly the sergeant managed to get us at the bottom of a long steep bramble covered bank for the end of the period. The NAAFI hut was at the top of the bank. His words of dismissal were ‘Right the quicker you climb up that steep slope the longer you will have to drink your tea so go!’. We were almost too puffed to consume tea and waddies.

The practical part of the course began with making some simple joints. Using short pieces of timber the class was asked to make a mortice and tenon, a half lap, a dovetail and a tusk tenon. Harry and I raced through these and a few more similar exercises and were so far ahead of the rest of the class that the W.O. in charge realising we had nothing to learn from the course gave us a typing desk to make for the offices. The only other member of the class who claimed to be a tradesman was a Welsh mining carpenter who was only used to timber shoring and pit props in the mine. The other members were amateur woodworkers. We nursed the making of the typing desk, which had

a knee hole between a cupboard on one side and a nest of drawers on the other, until the end of the course.

The classroom, unlike our barrack room was nicely heated and was open for our use until 20:00 hours. Most evenings were spent in the classroom entering into our exercise books the rough notes and sketches taken down during the lectures followed by a visit to the NAAFI for refreshments. Harry was a beautiful writer but very slow. I envied his copper plate style of writing which was such a contrast to my almost illegible scribble but I did score over him with my explanatory sketches. Because of Harry's painstaking care with his writing I was so far ahead with my book that I often went out by myself on Saturday or Sunday afternoons while Harry did some writing. On these occasions I visited Rochester Cathedral to admire its unusual style of architecture and to look at some flying boats moored in the Medway, hoping to see one take off. I believe they were 'moth balled'.

On Saturday mornings there was a special room and kit clean up for a midday inspection, the polishing and cleaning occupying most of the morning. If the room was not up to standard we had to do it again in the afternoon. In Sunday morning we had church parades.

The runs on Wednesday afternoon were not too difficult and out of the sixty or so runners I usually managed to be in the first twenty to get back to barracks. There was one exception. The run took us past a naval hospital and on this particular afternoon I bumped into a naval medical orderly who turned out to be a fellow I knew while working on the Alvis maintenance staff. He was off-duty and going my way for an afternoon in town and I walked along with him talking about old times and what we were doing in the services. When I realised that no runners had passed for some time, I shook hands with, him, wished him good luck and raced off hoping to catch up with the tailenders. I

didn't make up the lost time and reached the gate sometime after the last man. An irate P.T. sergeant was waiting for me and greeted me with 'Where the bloody hell have you been ?' Between puffs I told him that I had developed a stitch in my side and had walked part of the way. I could sense that he didn't believe my story. He then went on to say 'I'll be watching for you next week and if you are not up with the leaders I'll see what a few boxing lessons in the gym can do to your stamina.' That threat put wings to my feet for the next run.

With the course nearing its end thoughts of leave were gathering in my mind but these thoughts were completely shattered when it was announced that all leave for service personnel in the U.K. was cancelled.

Thinking we would be returning to Otley at the end of the course Harry and I began planning ways to break our journey and have a little time at home. Harry lived at Nottingham. Feeling depressed and low in spirit about the leave cancellation. I was going into Chatham alone one night and making my way to the main gate. 'Retreat' began to play over the loud speaker. The calls of reveille retreat and lights out were played from records which were now so scratchy and worn that it was difficult to recognise them. I was miles away and failed to notice retreat being played and continued walking instead of halting and standing to attention the recognised thing to do when in barracks. My dreamy state was shattered with a loud roar of 'Stand still there!' from the provost sergeant who was just behind me. That almost made me jump out of my boots. After retreat had finished playing over the loud speaker he caught up with me and while telling me what he thought about me and my ancestors. I stood silently thinking about what I thought of him. I reckon scores on either side were pretty even.

The pass marks for the course were pinned to the notice board.

I had 86% for both theory and Practical and 80% for my notebook, came top of the class and was remustered as a class II C&J. Harry also had 86% for his theory and practical but having lost valuable marks for a spoiled note book he was a little lower on the list. He also remustered class II C&J to get class I another course had to be taken.

Harry spoiled his book by accidentally burning hole through several pages of his finished notes. Harry was a victim of 'Lady Nicotine' and craved for cigarettes which were chain-smoked. Smoking was permitted in the class room and Harry quickly went through his supply of cigarettes. I enjoyed a pipe, was never short of pipe tobacco and all my spare cigarettes were given to Harry who couldn't get on with a pipe. When we were both out of cigarettes Harry became very miserable and such was his craving that he would scratch around for ends to re-roll into a smoke. One night, while rewriting our rough notes into our specimen books, Harry turned to talk to me and failed to notice a glowing cigarette end roll onto his book. When he turned back to continue writing a hole had been burned through some pages of finished notes and several of the pages were badly scorched resulting in his lost marks. Had he been a fast scribbler he might have had time to rewrite his notes into a new book but his lovely copper plate lettering, written so slowly, ruled out that idea.

Instead of returning to our companies the whole class was escorted by officers to a holding unit at Cowley. This appeared to end my plans of sneaking home and also to meeting my friends in 278 Company for we had been informed that in our absences the company had recently been made up to full strength. Frank Cooper and Menzies were luckier than us since their courses were shorter than ours and they had already joined 278 Company.

Chapter 8

Holding Units

The holding unit at Cowley was a miserable looking camp of tents and huts; tents to sleep in and huts for administration offices, cookhouse, dining room and stores.

The detachment was handed over to a Company Sergeant Major of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, again a time serving soldier who, but for the war would now be on Civvy street. He became known to me as 'Old Dukey'. It was about tea time and before dismissing us to a tented area he told us to be on Parade at 18:00 hrs for rifle inspection and we were confined to camp.

Oxford was temptingly near to Kenilworth and I wondered about the possibility of getting home. I found a very informative lad in camp who told me that absenteeism was a regular thing here. There were about fifty names of absentees posted outside the sergeant major's office and I gathered that punishment for those who returned

voluntarily was fairly light. There were several places in the perimeter fence through which one could get out of camp and not have to use the main entrance.

My mind was made up. I told Harry that after rifle inspection I was going home. He had given up the idea of going ‘absent’ and called me a bloody fool for doing so. Leaving my gear unpacked and placed in a corner of the tent I shook hands with Harry and wished him good luck. As we shook hands he said ‘So long kid, have a safe trip, I don’t expect to see you again.’ And through the wire I went.

M.P.’s had been informed made spot checks at Oxford railway station so I needed to keep a watchful eye for them and while waiting for a train I hid in the shadows. Nona was very surprised when I arrived home and we had these lovely days together before I returned to Cowley.

Harry and all the familiar faces of the Chatham detachment had left the camp and I suddenly felt miserably lonely. My kit lay where I had left it and after making sure that my name was on the list of absentees I reported to the sergeant major. After explaining that my name was on the board outside he picked up his cap and said: ‘Right lad I had better take you along and introduce you to the R.S.M.. I’m sure that he will be pleased to see you.’ Sarcastic so and so. The R.S.M. another old soldier of the Royal Engineers asked why I had been absent. He listened to my story about not having had leave for over four months, that my wife was having many problems with our children’s health and finding myself so close to home I couldn’t resist the temptation to visit them. He lectured me about letting the corps down, asked why I hadn’t taken my problem to him, maybe he could have arranged compassionate leave. I thought a ping of salt was required for that sting. I’m sure that I would have been posted away

along with the others. Telling me not to get lost again and be on the C.O.'s parade at 09:00 hours the next morning, he dismissed me.

A very clean shiny sapper paraded with two other defaulters outside the C.O.'s office, where the sergeant major made a quick inspection. My turn to appear before the C.O. came , and with the usual rapid barked orders from the sergeant major of 'Cap off! Quick march, left right, left right, left right, right turn, left turn, mark time, halt!' I stood before the C.O. The sergeant major read out the charge. 'Absent without leave, and missing a posting.' I was asked if I had anything to say and I repeated, more or less, what I had told the Regimental Sergeant Major . The C.O. then spelled out the gravity of missing a posting while on 'active service' a charge he said which amounted to desertion and a trial by court martial. As he rambled on my spirit was sinking lower and lower until he asked if I would accept his punishment. I cheered up then, because I knew there were limits as to how much punishment he could give me. To loose three days pay and get seven days C.B. I thought was a small price to pay for those stolen days at home.

After first parade and roll call, those who were not on postings were taken for a route march which lasted until midday and the afternoon was spent mooning around about camp, Men were coming and going all the time so making friends was almost impossible. Defaulters had to report to the provost sergeant at Cowley barracks, the establishment of the Oxford and Bucks light infantry regiment, a little way along the road from the camp. I was surprised to see so few men on defaulters parade and thought this must be due to the frequent postings. For my first night of 'jankers' I was sent to the sergeants' mess in the barracks to peel potatoes. Reporting to the duty cook he said 'You are not peeling spuds here. You janker-wallahs leave so

many eyes and blemishes in them that it is just as quick to peel them on my own! He made a pot of tea and I sat yarning with him, drinking the sergeants' tea ration and eating their biscuits for an hour before returning to camp.

On the second night I was detailed to scrub out Dukey's office another cushy job, I thought, for his office was only about eight feet square. Armed with a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush and some sand bag material for a wiper. I had hardly started when Dukey came in to do some paper work. He looked at the water in the bucket which was discoloured after rinsing the wiper and growled 'You can't get a clean floor using dirty water go and change it.' The nearest tap was some fifty yards away outside the cook-house, from then on I only had rinsed out the wiper a couple of times and Dukey would say 'What did I tell you about using dirty water lad? Go and change it! The floor was still only three-quarters scrubbed after and hour and a half and I had lost count of how many times I was made to change my water. Dukey then asked me if I had been to the NAAFI. I was flabbergasted and replied: 'Sir, how could I? You have had me running after water all night.' He laughed, told me to wet the rest of the floor and clear off. Thank goodness he wasn't a thought reader.

My third night of jankers was a stinker. I was sent to the camp cook-house and the sergeant cook gave me two of the dirtiest greasiest bins he could find to clean out. Cold water and hessian were not match for the filthy grease. Large quantities managed to attach themselves to me. Still struggling with the bins at the end of my jankers period. The sergeant told me I could leave them and report to him at 05:00 hours the following morning. Not daring to go to sleep that night I lay on my bed smoking and thinking about jankers.

It seemed strange that the provost sergeant didn't call a roll on

the defaulters' parade. I wondered if, because men were constantly on the move at the camp, a defaulters' roll was never made out and thought this reasoning was worth putting to the test by not reporting for jankers the following night. I felt sure I could make up some excuse if my absence was queried.

At 06:00 hours I presented myself at the cook-house. Several other men were there and while waiting for the sergeant we had a mug of tea. A cook-house never seemed to be without a brewing of tea. The sergeant organised us into a sort of production line, making sandwiches to be packed into haversack rations for the days' postings. Large army loaves of bread were cut into regulation slices of even thickness on a machine, then passed to myself and another buddy for a coating of margarine. We had a large bowl of margarine warmed until it was like cream which we brushed onto the slices of bread with shaving brushes. We then passed them along to receive coatings of cheese or meat paste.

Although I didn't report for jankers that night I thought it wise to stay on camp. No questions were asked about my absence from parade and no more horrible fatigues came my way. A few days later, with ten other sappers, I was posted to a holding unit on the Salisbury plain, a much larger unit than the one at Cowley.

The unit had the appearance of a P.O.W. compound. A six foot high wire fence topped with barbed wire surrounded the camp and the perimeter was constantly patrolled. The area inside was subdivided by more wire fences forming separate compounds for officers on posting, infantry men and men from other corps of the British Army. This was the kind of camp I had heard rumours about where large numbers of men were now encaged and closely guarded.

Our small party of sappers were escorted to the area occupied by

R.E.s and there was the same activity here of men coming and going as there was at Cowley. We had parades for roll calls each morning and afternoon, postings were read out and fatigues given to those not on posting. I was detailed to be a batman in the officers' compound. My duty was to collect hot water from the cook-house at reveille and take it to the officers I was looking after for his wash and shave. Their tents were numbered for identification so really you attended to that tent regardless of which officer might be occupying it. After breakfast I then went back to make up his bed, they had folding bed frames, tidy up the tent, clean up after his ablutions, folding up his collapsible work stand and packing it away. When I was handed some socks and handkerchiefs to wash out I thought, 'Fredrick, this is no job for you.' I found L/Cpl Andy Jamieson and two sappers from 278 Company and to them I had a moan about my Batman fatigues. They had been here for several days and had a regular fatigue of checking and repairing any gaps made in the fence by men going on the 'run'. Andy said: 'Join our gang, no one bothers about what you are doing, the main thing is to claim you have a job and look occupied. I wasn't missed from the batman detail and until I was posted again, a few days later, I stayed with Andy's party on wire fences.'

With a small squad of sappers and Cpl Keogh I was sent to another holding unit on Aldershot race course. When getting off the truck which had brought us from Salisbury plain and sorting out our kit the camp R.S.M. came up and began bawling us out for our untidy appearances. The following day he had us on parade for what he called a smartening up session. It was a mad half hour. He was one of those clever individuals who thought that giving rapid drill commands to make the squad look ridiculous was a great idea. Thank goodness the small number of R.E.s in this unit were well away from

his chosen beat. The infantry reserves, who were the greater number here, received most of his attention. We were taken out on route marches to fill in some of the time. Digging weapon pits, filling sand bags and preparing defense posts were other tasks given to us and executed half heartedly. To look employed, I found, was a good way to avoid fatigues. My favourite dodge was to have a sandbag, with a few oddments of paper and a cigarette packet in it, and look as though I had been given the job of tidying up the area. I was caught one day when standing with one hand in my pocket and I failed to see the Q.M.S. coming up behind me. As he passed he said, 'Follow me sapper.' And took me to a huge marquee serving as the quartermaster stores. Here the quartermaster handed me over to the sergeant in charge and said, 'This man has cold hands, find him some gloves.' I was then taken to a pile of gloves and instructed to sort them over putting right hands in one pile and left hands in another. Our kit was gradually being scaled down and it was sorted and bundled up in this marquee ready to be returned to permanent stores in the depots.

The first Sunday here was very warm and sunny. After dinner, I spread my blanket outside the tent and with only a pair of shorts on I lay down to do some sunbathing. Unfortunately I fell asleep and over did the cooking. My thighs and shoulders were bright red when I woke up and the rough blankets rubbing on the soreness made sleep impossible that night. Worse was to follow for on our route march the next morning my thighs were aggravated by my trousers. The webbing straps of my equipment and my rifle at the slope brought agony to my shoulders. At the end of the march I felt quite faint and ill, but I dared not report sick to get some soothing ointment to rub on my sore areas. Sunburn was classed as a self-inflicted injury, a punishable offense. Never again did I sunbathe to that extent.

I met a Coventry lad, Bill Simonds, in camp and while talking about leave he told me that he had been home the week before. Since all leave had been cancelled I asked him how he had managed that. He explained that forty-eight hour passes were available here which allowed you to travel up to twenty five miles from camp, he had applied and been issued with one of these passes and had then travelled up to Coventry. He was going again the following week so I applied for a pass to travel with him. A local train from Aldershot took us as far as a little used station within the twenty-five mile limit where we could get onto the Underground system and travel to Euston. M.P.'s were always on patrol here especially in the main hall and around the booking offices. A friendly lady porter on the Underground station platform, noting our careful look round, asked us if we were dodging M.P.s. When we said we were and trying to get on the Birmingham train for Coventry, she took us up on the luggage lift which came out on No. 9 platform of the main line station, about half way along the Birmingham train which was standing there. We thanked the lady and made a quick dash across the platform and into the train, where we sat hoping that M.P.s wouldn't come along to check passes. The train pulled out and after its regular halt at Watford a ticket inspector walked through the coaches checking and punching tickets. When he came to us we glibly told him we hadn't had enough time to get our tickets at Euston and gave him the money for our fares. He was rather puzzled as to how we had managed to get through the barrier at Euston without tickets. We arrived in Coventry and home was reached to give Nona an unexpected surprise. I got back to Aldershot without being stopped and with hopes of being able to attempt the journey again.

When travelling on the Southern lines I had seen rows and rows of

Army vehicles of all kinds wheeled and tracked . They were parked nose to tail along wide streets and in open spaces, all well camouflaged against air recognition. I wondered how soon they would be in action. Our planes were constantly flying about and on many nights the drone of bombers could be heard as the flew on their bombing missions. It was at Aldershot that I saw my first jet aircraft. One flew around which must have been on test flights from Farnborough.

Simonds was posted from the camp when I got my next pass and I did the trip alone. I had a bit of a scare at Euston when the ticket inspectors on the barriers saw service men come off the baggage lift and get on the train. One of the inspectors began walking through the coaches, checking servicemen's tickets and I wondered how I could dodge him. In one compartment there was an Infantry man sitting alone surrounded by his kit obviously on a posting. When I explained my position to him clothes and gear were spread out more untidily and I lay on the seat minus my blouse, pretending to be asleep. when the inspector slid open the door and asked for our tickets the infantry lad said, 'We are on a posting', and began to fumble at his pockets for his travel warrant. Without checking the warrant, the inspector said O.K. and left us. Just in case he stayed on the train for the journey to Birmingham. I thanked the infantry buddy and moved to another compartment. I didn't wish to get him involved in my escapade more than necessary. I paid my fare to another inspector as on the previous journey. He appeared to have some sympathetic understanding about the devious methods of travelling we service wallahs had. Home was reached and another surprise for Nona. Enjoying my stolen hours at home I got up on the sixth of June and switched on the radio for the morning news to hear that our troops had landed in northern France and were fighting fiercely to obtain a beachhead. This time I thought

that my luck must surely run out and I would be picked up on my way back to Aldershot, but again I got into camp safely to find it full of activity.

A large contingent of reinforcements was being assembled and I was in the detail of the Royal Engineers led by Lt Dewacre. Our kit was greatly reduced. I now had one battle dress. Denims were withdrawn along with P.T. gear and other small items were handed in. Medical records were checked to ensure inoculations were up to date and M.O.s gave us a quick check over. Ammunition was stowed in our pouches and each man received two twenty-four hour emergency ration packs which were not to be opened before landing in France. On the morning of June 11th, dressed in marching order and kit bags at our feet, we paraded for roll call and to hear the commanding officers parting speech. He asked if there was any man on parade who thought he should not be sent overseas to step forward. Two men stepped out, their reasons for being, as they thought, unsuitable for overseas were: one was waiting for his special boots and the other was waiting for dentures. Both men were dismissed from the parade. A band appeared from somewhere to lead this first contingent of reinforcements out of this camp for the march into Aldershot in the first leg of its journey to France. Those left in a camp cheered and waved us off with shouts of: 'Good luck, we will soon be joining you!'

There was a sizeable movement of troops from Aldershot that morning and a crowd of cheering civilians were outside the station to see us off. R.T.O.s packed us like sardines in tins into coaches of a waiting train. So tightly squeezed in were we that it was impossible to fall over when the train pulled up sharply at signals set at danger. It was a warm day and the air in the coaches, in spite of all available windows being open, soon became stale and smoke laden. Who were

the more fortunate: those sitting in seats or we who were standing all laden in our marching orders? It would be hard to say. With relief the train pulled into Newhaven station and we detrained. The main body of men formed up and marched away leaving our detail of Royal Engineers behind with instructions from the R.T.O. to wait at the side of the station until called for. It was an opportunity to eat our haversack rations given to us back at camp and to replenish our dehydrated bodies with water. We could see vessels in the dock being loaded with troops, equipment and stores and tied up alongside were several submarines. Late in the afternoon the R.T.O. came for us and conducted us along the dockside to a flanked walk across some of the submarines which led to steps on the side of a ship called 'The Isle of Thanet'. The steep, narrow steps were not easy to climb with our equipment and with only a rope hand rail to clutch at I was afraid of falling over. On reaching the deck we were issued with the famous Mae West life preservers and led down to a cabin large enough for all of us to spread out and rest. Before leaving the docks we had life boat drill and each man was required to know which life boat station he must make for if there was an emergency. There didn't appear to be enough boats for the crowd of men I saw mustered on deck and I wondered how on earth I would find my way from our cabin down below in a blacked out ship. When the boat drill was over we returned to our dimly lit cabin and tried to get comfortable for a doze. Sitting on our packs relieved the chill of the steel decking, but leaning against the steel sides soon had a chilly effect on my shoulders. I don't know how far down in the ship we were. We had climbed down many ladders and I felt sure I could hear water lapping against the wall I was leaning against. Hearing this lapping noise didn't inspire me with confidence as to what protection the wall would provide if we ran into trouble.

Chapter 9

Normandy

There were about twenty five of us in the reinforcement detail of Royal Engineers led by Lt Dewacre. The only ones I knew in the group were the four from my tent. They were Cpl Keogh, Sprs Coleman and Tandy and one who had been called Shakespeare. He was called Shakespeare because he was always reciting bits from the Bard's plays and claiming to have been a Shakespearian actor in civvy life. A bum actor I reckon and an awful bore in company.

After boat drill we sat chatting and smoking in the dimly lit cabin and listening to the various announcements coming over the tannoy system, normally directed to the Canadian infantry battalion which we had seen going aboard while waiting at the dockside at Newhaven. The battalion and its equipment appeared to fill the Thanet and we wondered why we were even mixed with them.

Strong vibrations through the ships structure indicated that we

were on our way to France and, during quieter periods when everyone appeared to be snatching some sleep my imagination began to run riot with such thoughts as: ‘Could we be torpedoed? Was it possible to hit an undetected stray mine?’ and above all ‘What are the Normandy beaches going to be like?’ News about the invasion had been rather scanty for us since no newspapers reached our camp at Aldershot and since D-Day we had been confined to camp. All we knew was that our troops had landed in Normandy, some advances inland had been made and fierce fighting was now taking place to hold the positions they had gained.

When I no longer felt the ships engine vibrations I assumed we must have crossed the channel. This was soon confirmed when we Royal Engineers were ordered on deck.

On reaching deck I was met with such a scene that was entirely different from anything my fanciful mind had imagined during the crossing. The early morning sun was burning away the sea mist. The ‘Isle of Thanet’ was anchored about two hundred yards away from the coast, one craft in an armada of shipping of all kinds. Above this armada floated a cloud of barrage balloons to deter low flying enemy aircraft from making attacks. Looking seawards it was possible to see the occasional flash of gun fire as the Royal Navy’s big guns pounded at some inland strong point. The water between the larger ships and shore was alive with smaller craft ferrying men, stores and equipment ashore. Most of the activity was away on our right in the area I later learned was Courseulles.

On shore there were none of the exploding shells and mortar bombs that my imagination had built up during the crossing, but there was, however, plenty of evidence of what had taken place six days ago. Wrecked armoured vehicles and landing craft were scattered about

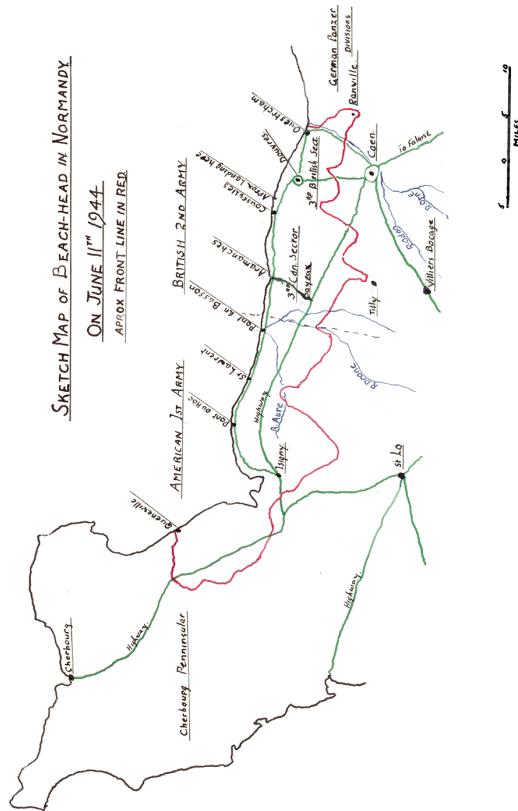


Figure 9.1: The beach head on June 11th 1944.

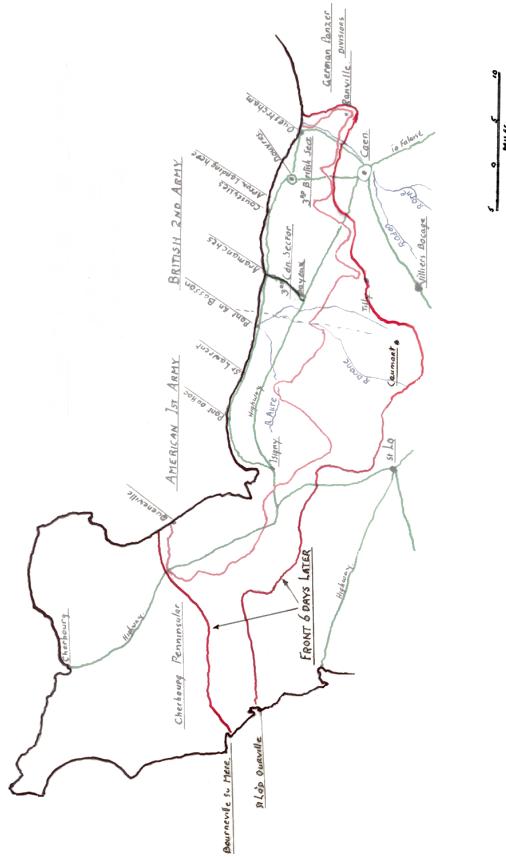


Figure 9.2: The beach head on the author's arrival in France.

the shore line and on the beach squads of men with bulldozers were working hard to clear them away. Anti-invasion obstacles could be seen sticking out of the water and through cleared ways amphibious DUWKS were coming ashore with stores.

A motor boat hooked into a ladder built on the side of the Thanet and we clambered down into the boat, not an easy task with our gear. While heading to some improvised jetties built from empty oil drums with boards lashed on top, a piece of loose rafting cordage wrapped itself round the boats propeller and stalled the engine. Without power the helmsman was unable to steer alongside the jetty and the boat drifted to a halt a few yards form the beach. After paddling ashore through ten inches of water, we were met by a beach master who had no knowledge about the unit we had to report to but insisted that we 'Keep moving and get off the beach.'

To get to the coast road we had to go through a belt of sand dunes which Jerry had mined. Gaps had been cleared through the minefield which were marked by tapes and Lt Dewacre led us to one of these gaps where the tapes had become a bit loose and were blowing about in the breeze. In single file and keeping to a path that was central to the pegs of the marking tapes we reached the road which was full of filled in shell holes and flanked one side with battered buildings.

Sappers were working to make the road more useable and to them Lt Dewacre hopefully went to get information. From the officer in charge he learned that we were in the 3rd Canadian sector. Now we realised why we were on a ship bringing in Canadian Troops. We should have been in the 3rd British sector the other side of Courseulles. We had been put on the wrong ship. It was suggested that we travelled across country using sense of direction to get into the 3rd British sector and find our unit.

We crossed into what had been a cornfield which sloped gently away from the road. The corn was now all smashed to the ground by vehicles and trampling feet. There were some craters in the ground and several rifles with helmets hanging on their butts marked the graves of allied and German soldiers killed during the landing. After battle debris lay around, evidence of the resistance put up by the Germans to halt the invasion. Except for those sandwiches we ate at Newhaven while waiting to embark, we had not eaten since leaving Aldershot some thirty-six hours ago and it was decided to find out what the emergency rations had to offer. Each pack designed to provide sustenance for twenty-four hours contained a tablet about $3'' \times 1\frac{1}{2}'' \times 1\frac{1}{2}''$ of dehydrated meat, a similar tablet of oatmeal, cubes about the size of Oxo cubes: a mixture of tea sweetener and powdered milk. Hard biscuits, a bar of vitamin chocolate, a collapsible tin stove with methaldehyde fuel tablets and a few sheets of toilet paper. For this snack I put half my bottle of water into my mess tin and placed it on the lighted stove to boil. With the hot water I made tea and soaked the oatmeal block. The tea was quite a good drink abut the oatmeal mush hadn't a lot of taste. I tried to eat some biscuit that had been broken into mouth-size pieces by hammering them with my jack knife. After putting a piece in my mouth it took ages to suck and soften enough for swallowing. Most of the broken pieces were put into a pocket to be sucked at leisure. The vitamin chocolate, although bitter and strong tasting, wasn't too bad to eat. The concentration of the food was sufficient to take away the emptiness of my stomach and gave me renewed vigour. What a picnic site this was. From here I could look down onto the beach where we had landed in what appeared to be a small cove. 'The Isle of Thanet' had come inshore and at low tide was now aground. She would refloat on the next high

tide. The Canadian Troops were disembarking, clambering down the steps in the side of the vessel, wading ashore through the shallow water, forming up on the beach and marching away towards Courseulles. How their equipment was to be unloaded puzzled me. Behind I could hear the rattle of small arms fire and machine guns together with the louder explosions of artillery. Round about the field there were those grim reminders of those who had lost their lives in this conflict.

Our meal over, we moved across the field in what the lieutenant thought was the right direction. The inhabitants of a small village we passed through, mostly women, children and elderly men, eyed us rather warily. The houses seemed to be in good order but the church tower had lost its upper part. The people's unfriendliness at this time was understandable. They were not sure the allies had come to stay and were afraid to show too welcoming an attitude in case the Germans pushed us back into the Channel and reprisals would begin.

Hindered with so much gear, our progress was slow. Lieutenant Dewacre seemed to have twice as much as we had; besides his marching order he had a folding camp bed and collapsible wash stand. It was unnaturally free of any Military presence since we were so near to the front line. We met no one after leaving that one village.

When we came to a badly battered collection of farm buildings in the late afternoon Lt Dewacre called a halt for the day. The estimated depth of the beach head around here was about five miles and not being sure about how far we were inland, he decided that we should stay where we were for the night and in the morning he would go alone to search around for information.

The farm well water was tasted and appeared to be uncontaminated so we had a good wash and shave using odd utensils we found lying around, after checking for booby traps. Water was heated and

from the remains of the emergency pack another meal was made. The soaked dehydrated meat cube produced a mess of tasteless mince. I ate the remains of my chocolate and washed it down with tea. Bits of biscuit were in my mouth for most of the evening.

We were hoping to bed down for the night on hay in a corner of the barn but the lieutenant thought that the farm was too obvious a target for enemy patrols and artillery so he took us some distance away from the farm and we spent the night in a dry ditch. A watching rota was drawn up which gave each pair of men about half-an-hour of alertness. The watch was hardly necessary since I doubt if anyone slept that night. I know I didn't. I lay there listening to the noises of battle which, in the darkness, sounded uncomfortably close. Occasionally the sky was lit up with flares and coloured fairy lights and overhead I heard the drone of planes which I hopefully assumed were our bombers either going on a mission or returning from one.

We had an early breakfast from our second emergency packs and Lt Dewacre left us in the charge of Cpl Keogh while he set out alone to try and contact a military unit. In a couple of hours he was seen coming back along the road with a box on his shoulder. Lady Luck had been on his side for he had made contact with a R.A.S.C. ration company, who not only knew where our unit was, but had offered transport to take us there and had given him a box of rations for us to eat while waiting for the truck.

The wooden box was a fourteen man twenty four hours ration pack which was quickly broached. We retraced our steps to the derelict farm, soon had a fire going and had a meal from the variety of tinned good in the box. These 'camper boxes' contained quite a selection of tinned food, such as bacon, M&V, corned beef, puddings, fruit and sausages. There was vitamin chocolate, biscuits (hard) and cigarettes.

All boxes had the same amount in them but were packed together to give a variety of diet. What we couldn't eat we shared out to be stowed in our packs for another time.

The R.A.S.C. truck arrived and we were taken to a field on the outskirts of Douvres in the 3rd British sector. All military movement appeared to be along this road between Bayeaux and Douvres and explained the quietness of our journey through the fields and lanes between here and the coast. H.Q. of the reinforcement unit, a little way inside the field was in a hole about eight feet square and three feet deep, covered by a flimsy roof of old corrugated iron, torn ground sheets parts of gas capes and camouflage netting, supported by a rickety structure of timber.

The field was divided into two parts. In the large part were infantry reinforcements, while the smaller part to which we had been directed was for corps reinforcements: R.E.s, R.A.s etc. We were told to get into a trench, there were some empty ones in our area, or alternatively dig one for ourselves. We were not to bunch together or stand in groups about the field and we were always to be ready for action. Not liking the look of the trenches already dug. I decided to dig my own shelter. The soil was quite easy to dig out and it didn't take me long to excavate a hole three feet by two feet and some two feet six inches deep, carefully packing the loose earth on three sides. In the corner of one of the three feet sides I tunnelled until it was long enough to take my legs and trunk so that I could lie flat out with my chest and head in the hole. Leaving a platform for my chest and head I lowered the rest of the floor another twelve inches. I now had somewhere to put my feet while sitting on the platform and also a sump to collect water seepage. From odd pieces of wood, turf and soil I built a lean to roof over the hole to keep out the rain, a precaution I

was truly grateful for later on. A few shelves cut into the sides of the hole took care of my kit and I reckon I was as comfortable as any on the field. Its major fault was the awful claustrophobic feeling when lying down to sleep. It was a bit like lying in ones grave. All kinds of ingenious devices were used by some men to get a bit of cover over their open trenches, but there were many who seemed to think that the fine weather we seemed to be now enjoying would last for ever, or were perhaps hoping they would soon be moved to more favourable conditions. For us a quick move from here didn't materialise. It was however a different story for the infantry boys. Infantry casualties were getting heavier. At one time during the battle for Caen and Cau mont, four hundred replacements a day were required to keep battalions up to fighting strength, so infantry reinforcements hardly had time to unsling their equipment before being posted.

There were no parades here. Corporal Keogh checked the number of our party each morning, reported to Lt Dewacre, who then handed in his report to H.Q.. The clanging of an empty shell case hit with a piece of iron summoned us to meals which were brought to the field by a P.U. truck and served outside H.Q. dug out. N.C.O.s controlled the ration queue to make sure it didn't get too big and attract the attention of wandering enemy aircraft. We were attacked one day. I had collected my ration of biscuit, M&V stew and tea and was taking it back to eat in my shelter when a cry of 'Enemy aircraft!' and the chatter of machine guns sent me flat on the ground spilling my rations in the act. Those queueing at the ration truck scattered and some, in their hurry collided with the supports of H.Q.s roof which collapsed on H.Q. personnel. A few men even fell into the dugout. No one was injured in the raid, the raider only made one strafing run but many meals like mine lay scattered on the ground. Dry biscuits and a few

sips of water had to do for my midday meal that day.

Drinking water was scarce, as was any water come to that. A water carrier came over once a day and issued one pint of water to each man. Not much to wash and shave in or provide a wetting for a dry, dusty throat. To try and save water for drinking, washing water was saved and used over and over again. Empty tins in which to save this water became a well sought for commodity and were jealously guarded. I managed to get two biscuit tins about ten by six inches and two inches deep for my washing water.

Without parades of fatigues to do the days here were quite boring which may sound strange when we were only four or five miles from the front line. To while away the time I moved from trench to trench chatting with the sappers I knew or watched the card schools at play in someone's trench. Sometimes I went over and chatted to the crews of a squadron of Sherman flail tanks laagered under the trees in our end of the field. I was interested to know how the flails had worked in the minefields. A few of the flails looked worse for wear. The crews stories about their action of the early days were full of interest.

All day long the noise of war came from the east and south of Douvres. The German Panzer divisions were putting up strong resistance to our advance from Ouistreham and Ranville. Caen, the gateway to the Seine which Montgomery had hoped to take quickly was being fiercely defended by the Germans. We could feel the ground tremble when our bombers dropped their heavy loads of high explosive bombs in and around Caen.

On afternoon I was sitting in my shelter cleaning the dust from my rifle when I heard a whistling noise followed by explosions. Putting on my helmet I poked my head up to see what was happening but quickly bobbed it down again when I realised the field was being

shelled. When I thought the shelling had ceased I grabbed my rifle and ammo pouches and climbed out ready to join in the defense of our patch.

The Sherman tanks were already on the move and clanking out of the field. Officers at H.Q. assured us that we were in no immediate danger. The small German light armoured reconnaissance patrol that had been shelling the field was now being pursued by our armoured vehicles. Casualties from the raid were two men killed by a direct hit on a trench and some had been injured by shrapnel. These enemy reconnaissance patrols often caused us to be on alert but they were usually wiped out before doing much damage. One larger and heavier armed patrol almost succeeded in cutting the bridge head in two at Bayeaux before it was broken up and destroyed.

When rapid advances were made, small enemy strong points, not considered to be of strategic importance, were often left isolated for back-up troops to eliminate them. Douvres had been an important radar station for the Germans and was surrounded by strong points. One of them lay between our unit and the sea and was still occupied by a German garrison. Surrounded as it was by our troops it was being left for them to surrender but the garrison commander was in no hurry to do this. Perhaps he was hoping that we would be pushed back and he would be able to rejoin his German friends again.

One of our aircraft, flying back from an inland mission, flew over the area. His plane had been hit and was trailing black smoke, it was loosing height all the time. The pilot thinking he was now in an area where he could land in safety abandoned the aircraft and in his parachute began to drift slowly to earth. A few shots from an automatic weapon rang out. Someone in the bunker had fired at the helpless pilot dangling in his parachute but luckily failed to hit him.

Everyone in the unit was furious and wanted to mount an attack on the Germans. The squadron of Shermans did get permission to join other tanks and shell the bunker into submission. It must have been hell inside that bunker as shell after shell crashed into the concrete walls. The tank crews told us that when the Jerries finally came out their faces were whiter than the flag of surrender. I bet they had a rough journey to the P.O.W. compound.

The dust from blasted buildings mixed with the acrid smell of exploding shells and bombs and the stench of death gave the air a peculiar smell. Dead farm animals lay around unburied and two dead cows lay fly ridden and rotting in the field behind us. Until the animals had been registered by the authorities for compensation claims, we were not allowed to bury them. We could only pray for the wind to blow their stink away from us.

In the middle of June the dry spell of weather came to an end and we had periods of heavy storms. Gales in the Channel for this time of year were the worst for over forty years and almost wrecked the building of the Mulberry harbours. The harbour being built at Arromanches, completed in a great struggle against the elements enabled vital supplies of men and material to be landed in the beach head.

Instead of the clouds of dust raised every time the wind blew our field became a horrible slushy mess of mud. Trenches became water logged and even those with improvised roofs required constant bailing out. The sump I had dug out was invaluable for this and my bed platform remained dry or rather dryish for now everything became very damp. Shakespeare was one of the lazy ones who had not thought out an idea to give him protection from the rain. He now sat in his trench, on a compo box, huddled under his gas cape and ground sheet, wet through and shivering with cold. Each day his moral appeared to

sink lower and lower. If you went to try and cheer him up he began crying and moaning, 'I can't go on, I can't go on.' When we moved to another camp we managed to haul him from the trench and get his gear on. After staggering a few yards he slipped in the mud, fell into a trench and lay there with tears in his eyes saying 'I can't go on.' He wouldn't move out of the trench and he was left in the care of H.Q.. What happened to him we never knew. He was a pathetic sight and among us there was more sympathy for his condition than there was for his lack of courage. After all we each had some fear within us if we were honest with ourselves.

A lot of troop reorganizing was taking place and Lt Dewacre with our detail plus another detail of sappers and Lt Kingsley were moved to another camp nearer Bayeux.

In drizzling rain we trudged across country to this new camp situated on a fairly large farm. As we went through the farmyard entrance we were counted into groups of fourteen, given a compo box and directed to tents erected round the perimeter of the farmer's field. In the count I became separated from Keogh, Coleman and Tandy and was with a group of thirteen less familiar faces. The tents were an improvement on the trenches at Douvres and certainly less claustrophobic than my shelter there. Before claiming bed space the tent floor had to be lowered by eighteen inches to give 'blast protection' from bombs or shells landing close by. The drop also gave more head room to the tent. During one raid a dud anti-aircraft shell dropped and exploded outside our tent. We were not harmed but the tent was made useless by the shrapnel holes in the canvas. Until we had cleared out a barn and made it a cook-house and mess room we heated up the rations of the compo boxes in vessels of hot water on communal fires. The most messy item in these boxes was tinned bacon. The bacon was

in a long strip rolled up in a kind of paper between strips to fit neatly in the tin and topped up with a very greasy watery liquid. Before placing the can in the hot water two expansion holes were punctured in one end. When the tin was hot the liquid was drained off but there was always sufficient of it left over to make a greasy mess for sharing round. Many cans of rations exploded in the boiling water when expansion holes were forgotten.

For a few days I had a dour Scotsman from the Hebrides lying next to me. He was an early riser always on the move before reveille and his rifle and equipment were kept immaculately clean. He was an odd character. Although he didn't smoke himself he always had his cigarette ration which he would not sell or give to those who cheekily approached him, but if he knew anyone in the group who was genuinely out of cigarettes he would give them some. I never heard him swear or moan about any fatigue he was given, he just silently plodded on. Along with many other sappers he was posted to companies building the Bayeux bypass; built to take the heavy volume of military traffic away from the town centre and its narrow streets.

In one corner of our field there was a Capt. Campbell R.E. who played his bagpipes outside his tent every evening. Voices from the sappers tents pitched round the field perimeter shouted various suggestions as to what he could do with his bag pipes. A weapons pit had been built by his tent and a Bren gun mounted on a tripod was manned there from dawn to dusk. I was not unusual to see a German plane being chased by our aircraft over the area. On one of these runs Capt. Campbell almost went berserk because we hadn't fired at a German plane chased by a Spitfire when within our rifle range. He calmed down when it was pointed out that while firing at the Jerry plane we could have hit our own aircraft.

While having a natter and a smoke one evening, a lone raider on a suicidal mission, for the area was saturated with Bofors guns, flew over with machine guns stuttering. Our group split up and dived for the ditch. Keogh had the misfortune to dive into a piece of ditch that had been used as a makeshift latrine before proper latrines had been dug out and it was only lightly covered with soil. Keogh didn't smell very pleasant when he climbed out of the ditch. Water was still on ration and he was unable to wash the smell from his clothes. He wasn't pleasant company for many days and claimed he would have been better off to have been hit by a Jerry bullet and in need of hospital treatment. Being ostracised by his friends didn't please him.

From Arromanches and Port-en-Bessin on the coast to the Bayeax area inland there was now a large concentration of troops and equipment. What a target it would have been for the Luftwaffe if our air forces had not held our supremacy.

Parades were held each morning and again after dinner for roll call, postings and fatigue details. There was no shortage of fatigues here and on some of my details I joined parties emptying the night bucket. These were buckets placed at night outside each tent for the use of weak bladder-bods. Improvements for camp comfort cleanliness and defense always provided us with jobs.

After a few days on that kind of fatigues I was sent to a small chateau about a mile and a half from camp. The chateau was being made into a mine school where new types of mines could be studied and refresher courses given on those normally met. I was given quite a bit of carpentry work to do here which I found agreeable. Most of my journey was across fields but a short part of the way I had to walk along the Caen-Bayeax road, always full of traffic, and twice while walking on this piece of road General Montgomery's convoy, led by

two M.P.s on motor bikes calling for the traffic to give way, passed me. He had been to the Caen-Caumont front and was returning to his H.Q. at Port-en-Bessin.

This detail to the mine school was a lucky break for me. Some of my mates back at camp had been sent on two awful fatigues. A tent hospital in fields nearby had fatigue parties from our camp and one of their tasks was to attend to the incinerator where dirty dressings and amputated limbs were burnt. They told me the stench of burning flesh here was nauseating. Another party had been sent to dig up some isolated bodies and take them for re-internment in a temporary cemetery.

At the mine school I saw dogs trained to sniff out buried anti-personnel mines that were constructed from wood and plastic and were difficult to locate using the conventional mine detector. The dogs were mostly Airedales and their ability to sniff and find hidden explosives was miraculous.

I had seen several aerial combats between our planes and the Luftwaffe since arriving in Normandy but until now I had not witnessed the end of a fight. As I was making my way back to the mine school after having my midday meal at the camp a Messerschmitt with a Spitfire on its tail flew low over the fields and bursts of fire from the Spitfire's machine guns were failing to score a hit. The planes momentarily vanished from my view behind a clump of trees and when they reappeared they were flying towards me. The Messerschmitt, by some clever move, was now on the Spitfire's tail with his machine guns chattering away. A burst of fire from Jerry scored a hit and smoke began to trail from the Spitfire. The pilot climbed until he gained a bit more height and then bailed out. The Messerschmitt now alone in the sky was receiving attention from the many ack-ack

weapons that were in the area and before I lost sight of the plane it also began to leave a train of smoke.

While on picket duty one night I was patrolling the perimeter of the transport park and in the darkness I saw what I thought was the dim light of a truck shining through the hedge. The slitted hoods fitted over the trucks head lamps showed very little light through them. Thinking that some unauthorised person was meddling with a truck, I slipped a live round into the breach of my rifle and called a challenge. Nothing moved and the dim light still showed so I cautiously approached to investigate. The light disappeared and looking around I couldn't find anyone about or see any interference with the vehicles. My mate hurrying from the opposite direction wanted to know why I had shouted. After telling him about the light we made another search of the park but found nothing amiss. The incident was reported to the picket sergeant when I came off duty who laughed about the light. He opened a tin and showed me several large glow worms. He said in the darkness he could read the time from his watch with these glow worms. They were quite large creatures and afterwards I saw many more glowing in the night.

I met Andy Jamieson again in this camp and we spent many hours in the evening at the side of the Bayeux-Caen road hoping to see some one from 278 Field Company. We knew that the 15th Scottish Division was in the area and was much involved with the battles at Tilly Caumont and Caen to break out of the bridge head. We saw a lot of divisional transport collecting supplies from Port-en-Bessin and Arromanches but never saw anyone we knew. I met Company Sergeant Major Duncan from 278 Company one day. He was just leaving the unit as I came in from the mine school for my midday meal. We were both surprised with the meeting and I noticed the rather drawn ex-

pression on his face. He asked me what I was doing here and when I told him that both Andy Jamieson and I were here as reinforcements awaiting posting he said he wished he had known he would have asked for us on his replacements list. During the crossing of the River Odon the company had lost one officer and ten O.R.'s killed and eighteen O.R.s had been injured. Among those killed was Ted Ketnor one of my NAAFI tea drinking chums and Cpl Wilkinson of 2 platoon. The officer I didn't know. He had replaced Lt Shaw of 1 platoon before the invasion. It was a chilling reminder that had I not been sent on that course at Chatham I could have been bridging across the Odon. S.M. Duncan didn't have another chance to get me back to 278 company for I was moved to another unit on the Arromanches side of Bayeax.

This was a small unit of R.E.s. There were about fifty of us here mostly about my age group. Being a small unit there were few fatigues and for most of the day we moved about the camp and faces changed daily as men were posted and others moved in.

In the small marquis serving as a mess tent I met a sapper I recognised as a man I knew in Major Bell's company at Darlington. He was then acting sergeant major of the company. When I approached him and said I had known him at Darlington and wondered why he was now a sapper, he excused himself on the grounds of having to go to the cook-house and hurried away. From then on he avoided me as if I had the plague. He and a very tall lance corporal seemed to be on permanent cook-house and mess tent duty here.

During my short period with this unit I was detailed to build a black out cover over the ovens of a R.A.S.C. mobile bakery company operating nearby. Bread was not part of our general ration issue; we were still on biscuits and would be for many weeks. This mobile

bakery was making bread for hospital use only and with the increasing demand the company wanted to work at night. The Luftwaffe were still making some raids over the beach head so black out restrictions were still being enforced and the glow from the diesel fueled ovens had to be shielded. From a pile of rough sawn wet elm and corrugated iron sheets I managed to build a satisfactory rough shelter round the ovens with help from R.A.S.C. buddies to lift and hold timbers in place. The company supplied me with my midday meal and what meals they were. Company cook had been a chef and with the aid of extra rations he was able to get, such as flour and yeast he worked marvels with tinned goods in the compo boxes. Compo boxes had codes on them to denote their contents and from these codes the R.A.S.C. ration companies were able to choose the best boxes and no doubt some of the better boxes found their way here in exchange for a bit of bread. My tent mates were most envious about my meals when I tantalizingly described them in the evening.

It was now about eight weeks since I landed in Normandy and not once had I been able to get a decent wash all over. I felt crummy and dirty. My underwear was a disgrace. Dirty laundry had been exchanged for clean on a few occasions but in these conditions it was dirty before you wore it. Whoever thought of the idea to issue us with white towels and underwear must have been crazy. Mine, no longer white, had a perpetual brown appearance.

Since May I had been in six different holding and reinforcement units and I was beginning to wonder if I was an army misfit and with the changing of faces round me I never had the chance to get really pally with anyone. How my letters found me while moving about all the time amazed me. The army postal services did a magnificent job over there and delivered mail quite promptly. Letters home also found

their way home to the U.K. without too much delay. I had worked out a little code on my letter to Nona and she always had a little idea of the area I was in. It was a dangerous thing to do for had I been rummled I could have received a stiff prison sentence.

At last I was posted to a company where I now hoped to settle down with regular companions. The Artisan works company to which I was posted, its number I cannot remember, was based on the St. Lô side of Bayeax and I became a member of its No. 2 platoon. Odd how No. 2 platoon and No. 2 Section was so often part of my Army address. No. 2 platoon's commander, Lt Bailey had been left behind in England when the company embarked for France having broken his leg a day before embarkation and the platoon was being run by Sgt Wilcox when I joined it. Lance Sergeant Webster, a Brummie, was my section leader who was aided by Cpl Dawson, a Geordie, and two lance corporals. Lance Corporal Bates was a southerner and L/Cpl Munroe was a lowland Scotsman.

The platoon and personnel of H.Q. company were in tents erected in a cider apple orchard and the H.Q. office and Officers' mess were in a cottage on the opposite side of the road. It was at this cottage that I had my first job with Fred Harper, another carpenter, we made and fixed black out shutters to the windows and attended to the doors. Hornets had nested in the masonry above the front door and it was amazing how quickly everyone passed through that doorway. Hoping not to attract the attention of the hornets; they were large and vicious looking insects.

In our tent there were three Freds. Myself, Fred Harper, and Fred Newman so nicknames were in common use 'Wuff', a nickname given to me by one of the teachers at Leamington Tech and used when I worked at the Alvis became my title here. 'Wuff' had no

doggie connection, Mr Clift, our science master gave it to me because he said whenever he travelled by train and the train halted at Kenilworth station all he could make from the porters' call of the station as they moved along the carriages slamming doors shut was 'Kerwuff, Kerwuff.' with emphasis on the 'Wuff' and that was how I became know as 'Wuff'. Fred Newman our section truck driver, being a tall fellow, was called 'Lanky'. In the next field we had a platoon of Canadian Engineers for neighbours and what a chummy crowd they were. Their rations, like the American rations, were much better than ours and for the few nights we were together they brought their beer, cigarettes and other goodies to share with us in our camp and to have a good natter. I was sorry when they moved on.

Our company, one of many working on lines of communication, became involved in keeping a petrol supply route clear to the forward units, now preparing to break for the River Seine. This entailed a lot of travelling about and working in small groups. For a short period our platoon came close to the front lines, close enough to get within the range of Jerry's artillery, especially when working in the Tilly area. Tilly was a shattered town and its roads so badly mauled or buried under debris that new routes were bulldozed through the wreckage. Villages round about were now heaps of broken brick with bits of walls poking through here and there. Looking at the devastation one wondered if Normandy would ever be the same again. What amazes me was the number of civilians who had survived the onslaught and were trying to bring a little organisation into their disrupted life. To see an old lady sitting milking a cow in this war torn countryside seemed nothing short of a dream.

Rubble wasn't an ideal material for filling in shell craters. The brick and soft stone easily crushed into dust under the wheels and

tracks of military vehicles and required constant attention to keep them filled so that the roads remained useable.

It was still possible for Jerry to lob a few shells over into the area where our section was now working in an attempt to disrupt supplies and we had a narrow escape on one occasion. We were working in the suburb of Tilly collecting rubble for our road repairs when Jerry sent a salvo over. There wasn't much cover available here and when a shell exploded nearby we were covered with dust and debris. A large chunk of masonry dropped on Wally Waldrous's leg and broke it and Chas Timpson dislocated his shoulder when he dropped some timbers.

It was a new experience for me to be moving about the country on this road repair work and a pick or a shovel always seemed to be in my hand those days.

When I had my medical before call up, one of the things I was asked was what my hobbies were, such as wireless, photography or first aid. My reply was that gardening occupied my spare time. I now wondered whether good at digging had gone into my records that I was engaged with so much shovel work in Normandy.

The Royal Artillery had mobile batteries of guns that travelled about firing salvos of shells into the German lines and moving off after each shoot. The idea being to prevent Jerry getting a fix on them and retaliating. From the artillery point of view that was O.K. but not so good if they chose to shoot near where we were working, when our fingers were crossed and we hoped Jerry had not fixed the spot for a return firing of shells.

I had the fright of my life one day from one of our artillery positions when we arrived at a section of road to improve its surface. Before starting work I obtained permission from L/Sgt Webster to break



Figure 9.3: The author gardening while on leave with the assistance of his daughter Cynthia.

away for a nature call. Unknown to us a battery of artillery were camouflaged behind some stunted trees and ruined buildings about two hundred yards away. With a shovel I climbed into the field and moved towards a wrecked bard to get privacy for my needs. As I approached my objective there was a terrific explosion and shells whined over my head. As I fell flat to the ground I had visions of my head joining these shells which of course were high above me in their trajectory towards the Germans. This was one time when I blessed the scourge of constipation which we were all suffering from due to our concentrated rations.

While working on these road works projects, I saw the damage that our bombers had made when a large force of Lancasters escorted by fighters had, in daylight, bombed and destroyed a big concentration of German armour at Villers Bocage. I had seen this formation fly over me and in the distance saw them circling around before making their runs over the target. Then I was in the holding unit between Bayeux and Caen and had felt the ground tremble under me as the tons of bombs exploded amongst the armour. Jerry had cleared away some of the wreckage but many battered hulks remained.

Wrecked German tanks were often seen among the rubble of cottages. These tanks drove through the cottage walls and came to a halt in the living room. The remaining walls provided camouflage to their presence. Gun flashes eventually disclosed their position and some accurate shooting by our artillery knocked them out.

In those early weeks of August we moved form one bivouac to another making roads usable for the supply convoys. The rail system was so badly damaged, both by the Germans to delay our advance and by us to prevent reinforcements and supplies reaching German front line areas, that it would be a long time before the system could ease

the traffic load on the Normandy roads. Railway companies of the Royal Engineers were working flat out to get the trains running again. Bombed bridges were one of the main obstacles they had to overcome and Bailey bridge equipment was used extensively on these repairs.

The allied advance was now moving so rapidly that we were left far behind the fighting and our platoon returned to the camp in the cider apple orchard, H.Q. company having been there all the time. Road maintenance was still our main employment and we made a temporary move to a farm near Caen. In all the carnage that had taken place one often saw a one off place that appeared not to have been damaged and this farm was one of those places. While working in this area on work which occupied us for a couple of weeks, we billeted on the top floor of a barn with only one small window too dirty for light to penetrate. Reading and writing was virtually impossible. To overcome this problem we all had a tin of diesel oil soaked rag with a strong wick threaded through the lid to provide illumination. Clouds of sooty diesel smoke filled the barn choking nostrils and throats. Below us were the remains of last years harvest of marigolds, many of which were beginning to rot filling the air with a sickly stench. However these two faults failed to make the barn less comfortable than a bivy in a field. One evening Sgt Wilcox, we were still without a platoon officer, told me not to join the working parties the following morning but to report to him with a carpenter's kit. After roll call and the dismissal of the parade to duties Sgt Wilcox took me behind the farmhouse to the dairy. The dairy door and frame was in a bad state of repair and Wilcox said 'Do your best with the repair, the old boy is very co-operative about our stay here.' True, for cigarettes and tobacco, eggs, butter and milk were available.

By late afternoon I had the door working again and the farmer was

delighted. He invited Wilcox and myself into the parlour for a drink. Three very small glasses and a bottle of light coloured liquid came from his cupboard. When I saw the size of the glasses I thought this isn't going to be much of a drink. The glasses were carefully filled and with a murmured toast he tossed the drink down his throat in one go. Fred, not to be out-done, did likewise and with disastrous results. The liquid was like red hot metal. It took my breath away, my eyes watered and it seemed as though steam was escaping through my ears. The old farmer went into peals of laughter as I choked and gasped for breath. Wilcox, more canny than I, had sipped his drink, but he too was enjoying my discomfort. That was my introduction to the drink of calvados.

Petrol and oil was coming ashore at Port-en-Bessin having crossed the channel through pipes laid under the ocean (known by the name PLUTO). From Port-en-Bessin it was then transported by road in petrol tanker lorries to the forward areas. There were also many reserve dumps in the bridge head area where petrol was stored in cans. Before the introduction of the now familiar Jerry can, oblong cans holding four gallons were used to store the petrol. These oblong cans, built from tin plate with soldered seams, were easily punctured and the seams often leaked with the result that thousands of gallons of petrol were lost from damaged cans. I was in a detail sent to one of these dumps to dig a spillage ditch around it and improve the tracks into the dump. Webby and Bates were N.C.O.s in charge. Now and again the odd lone German plane flew over the vast concentration of military stores and equipment dropping bombs here and there and sometimes coming in low to machine gun the area. They were more of a nuisance than a danger and I'm sure a high percentage of them never returned to base. One of these raiders managed to start a fire at

this petrol dump and with out special equipment fires in those dumps were impossible to put out. There were some army fire-fighting units in Normandy who were trained to deal with these situations but they were based around Port-en-Bessin where there was a greater risk of fire. Before the blaze became too hot and dangerous many loads of petrol were taken away by hastily confiscated lorries, but eventually the area had to be evacuated. From a safe distance it was an impressive sight as cans exploded and sent cascades of flaming petrol in all directions. An exploding can of petrol had the equivalent power of 80 lbs of explosives blowing up. The column of black smoke was visible from our camp long after we left the dump.

Our platoon was sent to reinforce a stone built bridge in the petrol supply route which was showing signs of collapsing due to the pounding it was receiving from the heavy petrol tankers. The road could only be closed for forty-eight hours and we needed to work round the clock to carry out the repairs. Rapid hardening cement was used in the concrete mix which had to be placed in position quickly before it set. We were all getting a bit tired and jaded by the middle of the second day and when the ration truck arrived with our mid-day meal Geordie Henderson, the mixer driver, forgot to make sure his drum was empty before leaving work for his meal. When we resumed work the bit of concrete left in the drum had set round the blades and the mixer wouldn't work. We had to hand mix the concrete to finish the job and work fast while the cement was plastic. We cursed Geordie for this mishap but others of us could have checked out the mixer before leaving for our meal. On returning to the orchard camp we were given a day of rest, that is except for Geordie who was given a hammer and chisel and sent to chip the cement out of the mixer drum. Although Geordie lost the skin off most of his knuckles in a valiant

attempt to free the blades, the mixer was ruined and was charged to company funds.

Drinking water was still rationed and often it was so chlorinated that tea made from it was almost undrinkable. Less sterile water for washing purposes wasn't too plentiful either. When we could, we stripped off to have a wash down in any stream we happened to be working near. All to often there would be a muddy patch to negotiate so dirty feet went straight into socks to keep our towels reasonably clean. Always at the back of my mind was the thought that some dead farm animal might be lying in the water higher up stream. At some of these impromptu bathing spots just outside Bayeaux the little stream ran under a viaduct which carried the Bayeaux-Caen line of rails and while we were having a wash down in the nude a bunch of railway company sappers came along the railway on a bogey. They stopped to make fun of us and quite a good humoured slanging match took pace.

To get hot water for washing we had what was known as a 'lazy-man's boiler'. This contraption ensured that hot water was available for everyone while the fire was maintained. An open vessel of water over a fire quickly went dry. Too many would take hot water and not replace it with cold. An empty oil drum was rapidly prepared for the boiler by cutting a hole in the side of the drum for filling. At the top of one end of the drum and on the same plane as the filling hole another hole was made cutting in three sides only so that the flap of metal could be bent down and formed a rough spout. Small walls of brick or stone with a few iron bars laid across were built to support the drum and to raise it high enough for a fire to be built underneath, the drum now lying on its side. It was filled with water until it ran from the spout and while we were out on works details camp orderlies lit

the fires to heat the water ready for our return to camp. To get hot water you needed two containers. An empty one was placed under the spout and a container of cold water was poured through the filling hole. The cold water immediately sank to the bottom to be heated displacing hot water which flowed into the empty container equal in quantity to the amount of cold water poured in. This method made sure that as long as there was a fire burning under the drum hot water was available for everyone.

Mobile bath units began operations in the area one morning L/Sgt Webster took the platoon to one based near our camp. So great was on demand on these units that we only had this one unit. The shower room was a medium sized marquee and a tarpaulin covered floor and rigged overhead with a network of perforated piping giving a jet of water for each square yard of flooring. A diesel fueled boiler outside the marquee heated water brought in by a relay of water trucks. The hot water from the boiler went into a mixing tank where it was cooled to a temperature bearable for washing and from the mixing tank it was pumped by hand through the system of perforated piping in the marquee for us to happily soap each others backs under the jets of water. After almost ten weeks without a decent bath or shower this was sheer luxury. No time was allowed for soaking under the warm water for there was quite a long queue of men waiting for their turn under the showers. Each detail of men undressed dried off and dressed in the open and I wondered what happened if it was a wet day, fortunately for us the weather was fine.

To move road repair materials about on large jobs we had little dumper truck which had a nasty habit of tipping over if one tried to turn too sharply or went too fast into a turn and there was some competition between us to see who could turn the fastest or the sharpest

without overturning. I was having a drive on one of these dumpers while attending to a road surface near a Brigade H.Q. and rolled over with a load of gravel just as the brigadier's car was leaving. The brigadier wasn't very happy about being delayed while the drive entrance was cleared and he wasn't very complementary about my driving skill either.

When two or three sappers and an N.C.O. were sent out on small jobs they were often taken out by transport to the work site and then left to make their own way back to camp. Sometimes these jobs only took a few hours to complete. Lance Corporal Bates, myself and two other sappers were returning from one of these small tasks and, having reached a road used by American transporters ferrying stores from the Mulberry Harbour to the Carentan Peninsula, we began to look for a lift. The 'darkie' drivers of these vehicles drove fast and furious but were ever ready to give one a lift, they were really great guys. A 'Mack' truck driven fast as usual came round a bend in the road about a half a mile from us and four thumbs went into action. As the truck approached we noticed a flicker of flame underneath the engine. The driver pulled up ready to give us a lift and 'Batey' told him about the fire under the engine. When the driver heard the word fire he gave one yell, opened his cab door and dashed off. We stood their speechless for a second and then lifted up the bonnet to see what was on fire. It was oil soaked dirt that was burning and a few shovels of dry earth put it out. We signalled O.K. to the driver who sheepishly returned to his truck and we asked why he had dashed off. He said 'I have a load of explosives.' When we heard that we wondered who would have been the front runner had we known about the explosives.

To show his appreciation for dousing the fire he went out of his way to drop us off at our orchard camp. I had a near mishap myself

on one of these hitched lifts. The truck load was such that I needed to rest my feet against the tail gate of the truck. As we whizzed along bouncing and bumping at the potholes the tail gate began to fall down. The pins had not been secured properly. I was saved from a nasty fall by my companions who grabbed me as I slid down the load.

Boil like sores developed on both my arms and the ointments in the platoon medical kit failed to heal or stop them spreading. We now had a Lt MacKay as platoon commander and he sent me to the nearest R.A.P. for treatment. Here the M.O. diagnosed a form of blood poisoning probably caused by fly bites. The filth and decay lying about was a paradise for them in which to breed and feed. There were swarms of them everywhere. Pills and ointment prescribed by the M.O. cleared up the poison leaving my arms covered in white scars which show up when my arms get browned by the sun.

There was now a vast amount of military traffic in and around the areas of Arromanches and Port-en-Bessin since the bulk of the supplies for the allied armies in Normandy were still being landed here. New routes were constantly being organised to try and create a steady circular flow of traffic and a minor road about three miles long with exits at each end to major roads was required in the re-routing of petrol tankers. The road wasn't wide enough for two tankers to pass so it had to be widened and resurfaced. The road was closed to traffic and Nos. 2 and 3 platoons with Lt Charlton in charge were detailed for the work. Lieutenant MacKay was organiser for materials. The road was only expected to be in use for a short time and was intended for wheeled vehicles only.

Building rubble topped with four or five miles of coarse gravel rolled by a heavy roller was used to widen the road and the surface of the road was then covered with about three or four inches of finer

gravel, finished off with a layer of hot tar and sand, again well rolled. The final finish was rather like a well kept drive to a country mansion. Charlton was so proud of it and enjoyed walking up and down the finished part of the road that we called it Charlton's Drive. To keep out unwanted traffic there were barriers at each end attended day and night by pickets who also guarded the tools and lit the fire in the tar boiler and sprayer. It was one of those very old fashioned things with iron wheels and was pulled along by a horse. We had no horse and man-handling it when full of boiling tar especially when coming out of the field we used for a depot could be dangerous. One comment passed by us one morning when dragging it onto the road was heard by Lt Charlton. The comment was something like: 'One of us will get scalded to death with this bloody tar splashing out.' Charlton shouted: 'Keep the damned thing moving, we have allowed for ten per cent casualties.' The road was about three-quarters completed when the barriers were left unmanned by the picket one night and a Churchill tank came clanking along Charlton Drive picking up huge pieces of the finished surface and tossing them to the rear. When Charlton arrived with the works party the following morning and saw the trail of damage he almost had an epileptic fit. He stamped about, crumpled his beret into a ball and threw it on the ground muttering that he would have the picket shot. They were dealt with by the C.O. who gave them fourteen days of extra drills and duties. Some nights later I was a member of the picket and on duty with Ted Rawlins. Two bulldozers drove up to the barrier and the R.E.M.E. sergeant in charge demanded to be let through. Even though he waved a paper which he said was an order giving him permission to use the road we still refused to move the barrier. Our orders were no vehicles to be allowed in. After some argument he ordered the bulldozers to crash

through the barrier and there was nothing we could do to stop them. In horror we watched them drive along tearing out great chunks of road with their tracks. The damage done by one tank was enough but the damage from two bull-dozer's was unbelievable. Ted and I wondered what our fate would be in the morning. I almost felt like deserting. About 06:00 hours Sgt Wilcox drove up with one of our trucks and collected all the members of the picket who happened to be from No. 2 platoon, the platoon had been ordered to move out immediately. When Wilcox saw the damage and heard our story he laughed his head off. He was no friend of Lt Charlton's. Wilcox said: 'You know this damage could have taken place after we left. Jump aboard and lets get moving.' We heard no more about the incident but I would have dearly loved to see Charlton's face that morning.

Chapter 10

Building a Hospital at Bayeax

We moved much nearer to Bayeax and set up camp in another cider apple orchard about two and a half miles from the town centre. The ground here was very stoney and made hard work of digging out the tent floors, not for blast protection, which was now unnecessary for we were something like three hundred miles behind enemy lines and to be bombed by the Luftwaffe was now very unlikely, but to get extra headroom inside the tent. A small, empty, single storey cottage with out-buildings stood at the entrance of the orchard. Doors and window frames had banished, vandalised for firewood I suppose. The largest room of the cottage, when cleaned up and with hessian tacked over openings became the cook-house and ration stores. Meals were

severed through a window and taken away to be eaten in our tents. Lieutenant MacKay and the sergeants used the out-houses for their quarters.

The platoon had been sent here to start the operation of building a huttet hospital in fields opposite to the orchard. Survivors from D.C.R.E. came to mark out the site and fix the building levels and for a while I was attached to Cpl Wilkes of D.C.R.E. pegging out Nissan hut bases and the connecting pathways between huts and Romsey hut wards. Hedges alongside the road were pulled out, the ditch was piped and filled in and huge mountains of sand and gravel were bought to the road side by R.A.S.C. tipper trucks. A battery of concrete mixers were lined up by this aggregate, with tons of cement staked alongside and water was piped to the mixers form the town supply. On cold mornings these diesel mixers were devils to start. The starting handles, situated very close to the frame work of the mixers, required some vigorous turning by relays of men to turn the engine over and get them to start. Often back fires occurred throwing the handle out of the dog and causing one's knuckles to come into contact with the framework. Skinned knuckles and much swearing often began the mornings work.

The rest of the company moved into similar camps to ours round the hospital site, which soon became a hive of activity. A company of German P.O.W.s escorted by Pioneer Corps guards were brought from their compound each day to help with the work. Many had served part of their service on the Russian front and were without either fingers or toes lost through being frost bitten. Some were still a bit pro-Nazi but the majority were only too pleased to be P.O.W.s and enjoy the small comforts of their compounds. The hard cases were gradually whittled out. One such case spat in Sgt Webster's face when being

detailed to work. With great control Webby overcame the urge to smash the prisoner's face in, who was put under arrest and taken away. Heaven knows what happened to him; he was not seen on the site again. The Pioneer Corps sergeant told Webby that the prisoner would be suitably punished.

Teams of P.O.W.s directed by sappers stripped off the turf from the hut bases and wheeled it away. Dozens of other P.O.W.s wheeled barrow loads of ready mixed concrete to the shuttered bases to be tamped and screeded by sappers. I was now in a detail with L/Cpl Munroe shuttering bases and erecting posts to carry the roofing over the covered ways between huts and wards. There was still road work to be taken care of and one day I was with a gang working close to the Mulberry Harbour. An endless flow of vehicles were coming and going at the harbour where several ships were berthed unloading stores and equipment and reloading with P.O.W.s and wounded.

It was difficult for me to believe that those large concrete structures had been fabricated in England, towed across the channel, sunk, and assembled to form this artificial sheltered harbour in such a short time. The day was warm and having time to spare before our transport was due Sgt Webster, who was in charge of the party, suggested we clambered down to the beach for a quick dip in the sea. An odd character in our platoon known to us as the professor didn't want to go into the sea and was left to look after our clothes. We called him the professor because he had thin sandy hair fringing an almost bald dome, he wore steel rimmed glasses which were frequently on the end of his nose and was always theorising or arguing how work should be done. While we were bathing the professor made tea, using some scrounged materials he had in his haversack such as tea cubes, Methylaldehyde tablets and a stove for heating the water. He made two

mess tins of this brew and he appeared to enjoy drinking it. I was invited to have a drink. It was vile tasting and I quickly spat it out. Webby, who had also been offered a drink, swallowed some of it before getting the taste. He gagged and swore the stuff was poisonous. The tea had been made with sea water slightly tasting of diesel oil and was sweetened by strawberry jam to camouflage the taste. The professor was quickly debagged and tossed into the sea.

There was a shower room in Bayeax and once a week we were marched there by sections for a shower in warm water. This weekly outing was eagerly looked forward to and with clean laundry appearing more regularly personal hygiene improved. We had a piped supply of water in camp but fuel for our lazy man's boiler was difficult to get and ablutions had to be made in cold water.

A cider press appeared in the orchard and a couple of elderly men gathered the apples in large wicker baskets, even picking up those from the ground that we had thrown at each other. They were put into the press in alternating layers of straw mats and apples, then by screwing down the press slowly, every drop of juice was squeezed from the apples to drain in a trough round the base of the press and then to be baled into barrels. Apparently this mobile press, owned by these two men, travelled round the district pressing apples for the orchards respective owners who then made their own special brand of cider from the juice. They made a potent brew, nice to drink, and when sitting down it seemed to have no effect on the body, but, as soon as you went into the air, legs became very rubbery and difficult to control.

A small NAAFI hut was opened between our camp and Bayeax, so poorly stocked and over-crowded that I seldom thought it worth going in. Later when a large Romsey hut replaced the Nissan and a

larger selection of goods became available it became a stopping off place when taking a walk to Bayeax. Three sappers I frequently went out with were Fred Harper, Arthur Neal and Ted Rawlins. When I wanted to be alone my favourite place for a visit was the Cathedral where I spent many hours admiring the beautiful work in there, especially the work in the side chapels. The famous Bayeax Tapestry was another piece of work I enjoyed looking at. This was a replica of the original which had been placed in a safe place but even so the artistry of the needlework could be appreciated. I had read or heard somewhere that the tapestry could well have been a pictorial representation of our invasion of Normandy and how true that statement was. The illustrations of William's preparations to invade England in 1066 could have been a cartoon of our preparations in England to invade Normandy in 1944. and so right through the tapestry I found the comparisons.

The town of Bayeax, hardly touched by the fighting during the landing offensive, was an interesting place. So many of the streets I discovered still had that medieval look. They were narrow and cobbled with open and disgusting looking drains running down the middle of the road and many of the houses were half timbered. A few stalls in the market square sold vegetables and fish, some of the weirdest and most revolting looking fish I have ever seen.

Autumn rains made camp life under canvas most uncomfortable. The ground churned into a muddy mess, especially on the site. Blankets became very damp and musty smelling, I seemed to be always dressing in cold, wet clothes and my foot wear began to fall to pieces. I had sent one pair of boots to be replaced at H.Q. and they should have been returned to me in a week, but after several weeks there was no sign of them. The missing boots had been reported to Sgt Wilcox,

now in charge of the platoon, and he had been unable to trace them. Eventually my remaining pair began to fall to pieces and the flesh of my feet started to go white and soggy, the first signs of trench foot. One night, when leaving the hospital site, Sgt Wilcox picked me up and drove me to H.Q. to show our C.O. the condition of my boots and feet and to explain about the lost boots. What happened behind the scenes I don't know but I was issued with two new pairs of boots and socks and my feet began to improve.

There was little we could do in the longer dark hours of the evening except read or play cards in the dim light given by our crude diesel lamps. Reading material was a scarce commodity and a pocket bible given to me by Nona was often read, especially old testament stories. Sapper Dickson in our tent wrote home and asked his wife if she could rake up some magazines to sent out, he nearly exploded when he received a bundle of Women's magazines. Women's magazines or not they were still well read before being discarded. It was fun chasing after numbers to continue reading the serials.

Our platoon officer Lt MacKay wasn't an inspiring leader. There were times when I wondered how some of the officers got their pips.

Sergeant Wilcox ran the platoon most of the time and he was ably supported by L/Sgts Webster and Bibby with Cpl Dawson and Wimpey (a nickname he was given for having worked with the firm of Wimpey) and L/Cpls Munroe and Bates. Many mornings as we paraded for roll call at 08:00 hours and were dismissed to works, Lt MacKay would be seen sneaking out of camp with a ratty old bike he had found to cycle into Bayeaux for mass. He was a Scottish Catholic and appeared to be more concerned about his soul than the running of the platoon. When he did take the 08:00 parade he invariably came out with 'A wee word about the job' meaning the hospital

project. His talk was seldom constructive to the job and his words were usually ignored. The exception was when he told us that the R.A.M.C. colonel was getting a bit worried about his patients having to spend winter under canvas and that our C.R.E. said it would be a wonderful gift to the wounded if we could get them into huts by Christmas. The huttet hospital was nowhere near finished but we accepted the challenge. We were almost exhausted every night when we finished work. Lance Sergeant Biddy had charge of all carpentry work and as part of the program we were to hang six doors a day in the nursing staff Nissans. complete with all fittings, stops and achitraves. I had a young P.O.W., a very willing and helpful worker, to fetch all I needed from the dump. The P.O.W.s were now adopting those they wished to work with and if detailed elsewhere went to great lengths to get to their original work. The system pleased us as for we got to know each others signs of communication. Although not completed, by mid-December the hospital became far enough advanced for the R.A.M.C. to take over and bring in their staff, stores and patients. It was a wonderful reward to our frenzied effort to see the wounded and sick patients in a warm draught proof Romsey hut wards and the nursing staff housed in Nissan huts. Covered concrete footpaths between huts and wards were also nearing completion, an improvement on the duckboard walks of the tented hospital.

The failure at Arnham to complete the corridor into the Ruhr planned by General Montgomery and the difficulties encountered to capture the Port of Antwerp, the taking of which would have shortened our supply lines, meant that the German armies could not be beaten into surrendering before winter, so the high command were forced to implement a winterisation programme. More huts became available to replace tented camps and more buildings were requis-

tioned for billets to house our troops. Our platoon moved into wooded huts further along the road from the orchard. The huts had slow combustion stoves in them and we had a reasonable supply of coke from the hospital stocks; now we could dry our clothes and keep blankets aired. The hospital had its own generators for making electricity and we were connected to their system enabling us to read and play cards much easier.

My third army Christmas was approaching which looked as though it would be the most miserable of the three. True our accommodation had now improved but moral was a bit low. Much speculation about how successful Runstedt's breakthrough at Ardennes would be and whether we could become involved in the fighting areas again. Also we wondered what effect it would have on the rumour that leave to the U.K. was beginning in the New Year.

On Christmas Eve, feeling a bit unsociable and not wishing to go to the NAAFI, I walked into Bayeax to a church army canteen. It was only a small place where you seldom found more than a dozen bogs having a cup of tea and joining in the discussions led by the chaplain. The chaplain come in late that evening and he said that he called in at the NAAFI and found it unusually quiet. He thought everyone appeared to be homesick. He suggested that we should go there and sing a few carols to try and introduce some Christmas spirit. We all agreed to his suggestion and soon the NAAFI was resounding with carols. A further suggestion was made of carolling round Bayeax and a group of about thirty made for the town. At each point where we stopped to sing, the civilians gathered round and tried to join in. There was soon a crowd of a hundred or more walking to various vantage points to sing carols. The crowd, although merry, was not boisterous in any way and the carols were well sung. A few bottles of cognac

and cider were passed round helped to keep throats lubricated. In a square surrounded by large houses occupied by various Army H.Q.s staff officers came out to join in the singing and one brigadier was full of praise for the Church army chaplain's brilliant idea. The people of Bayeax must have talked about that night for a long time afterwards, for me it was one of my more memorable Christmas Eves.

Leave rumours became a reality, pay books were called in to find those who had priority for leave. To be eligible one had to have served six months overseas and last leave home was taken into consideration. If too many men of a company were eligible then ballots were drawn. I had six months overseas service and had not officially had leave for nearly twelve months. My A.W.L.s were not recorded so I was high up on the list of eligible personnel. Most of the company had been on leave shortly before D-Day. U.K. leave began on Jan 1st 1945 and I was issued with an eight day leave pass for 11th-19th January.

The rough treatment my battle dress had received during the past six months had not improved its appearance. Hard brushing to remove mud had left it stained and threadbare. Tears were not exactly invisibly mended and it looked decidedly tatty. Full of high spirits about going home, and ignoring my appearance I walked into Bayeax early on the 9th of Jan to be picked up by a troop transporter that was touring round collecting leave personnel. A leave camp had been set up in Calais and our journey there was a very cold and uncomfortable one. Stops were made along the way for tea and sandwiches and to stretch our legs, also to rendezvous with other transporters. We were now in a convoy of leave transports and arrived in Calais late in the afternoon. The welcome we received at Calais was very different from the reception I had experienced at the other camps. We were quietly ushered into our code numbered leave groups without

the usual bawling and shouting from N.C.O.s and led to our sleeping quarters. The Nissan huts, furnished with double bunks and centrally heated, were most comfortable. Ablutions and showers with hot water were plentiful and after allowing us time to freshen up we were escorted to the Dining Hall for a piping hot meal. After the meal I had a mooch around and found a NAAFI plentifully stocked with goodies and my stock of chocolate and soap to take home was quickly increased. ENSA had a show on in the Romsey hut and to while away the evening I sat and listened to the near blue jokes and patter of the ENSA artists and joined in with the sing-song. Vera Lynn's 'Blue Birds over the White Cliffs of Dover' and 'Till we meet again' being two very popular ones. After breakfast the following morning we were taken to Q.M. stores and issued with new battle dress. Unfortunately my size of blouse being a popular size was not available and the one I received had too big a collar with a chest that was much too full. My hair needed some expert attention so I paid a visit to a barber's shop in the camp run by a Frenchman. My French was rather week and their English was just as poor and after nodding my head to their various hand signs I ended up minus on hundred francs (then equal to one pound in English money) smelling like a perfumery and with my hair plastered down with hair cream looking like a pimp. A souvenir photograph was a must and I joined a queue to wait and have my photograph taken which was promised to be ready at the end of the day. With a few pins my ill fitting battle dress blouse was made to look a fit then the camera light flashed. The end result was not a 'pin up' photograph and for some time afterwards when Nona showed it to Garth he meowed like a cat.

My leave boat was leaving Calais at 08:00 hours the next morning so I had an early night. The ferry boat was crowded, there were so



Figure 10.1: The souvenir photograph taken in Calais.

many men on deck that you could hardly see the planks and below was just as crowded. The crossing was calm which suited me for I lay no claim of being a good a sailor. At Dover we passed through the customs sheds without being checked and boarded trains for London. Banners of welcome and flags of all kinds fluttered from buildings along the way and at Victoria station, also ablaze with banners, W.V.S. ladies served us with tea and buns. At Euston I caught a train for Coventry and sat back to relax. What a welcome when I reached home. The children had altered and grown so much during those six months, especially Garth. Soap and chocolate was soon emptied from my pack. Nona was looking rather tired and drawn having had quite a spell of nursing Cynthia and Garth through whooping cough and ear problems and was grateful for the little help I could give her. Eight days went like lightening and all too soon I was on the return journey to France. At Victoria station I sorted out the code number of my leave group and got onto the appropriate train which took us to Folkestone. It was pitch dark when we arrived there and drizzling with rain. We were taken to requisitioned hotels on the sea front, cold miserable billets where the bare necessities were provided which didn't help to relieve my after leave miseries. After a breakfast of bangers and beans we embarked for Calais, where I spent the night before joining my group to return to Bayeux on Jan 21st.

Austrian P.O.W.s with very strong anti-Nazi views were in a special compound close to our camp and parties of them worked in the hospital. The German P.O.W.s who had earlier helped with the construction work no longer came here. These Austrians were a well disciplined group and security for us was a formality. After their days work one of us was detailed to escort them back to the compound, a detail I had on one or two occasions. Odd bits of wood were collected

for their fires but they always asked permission before taking it, their code of discipline among themselves was very strict. One evening, while escorting a small party across the fields, to their compound, a prisoner asked me if he could get a small piece of wood the other side of the hedge. They all spoke pretty good English. I said he could before I had seen a Frenchman in the field who came running across yelling 'Dirty Boche! Dirty Boche!' Brandishing a stick with which I thought he would strike the prisoner. I thought 'Blimey, I am going to have a situation here, but to my relief the Austrian, twice as big as the Frenchman, ignored him and quietly returned to the party leaving the wood on the ground. The Froggie followed us along the hedge like a maniac and I felt like thumping him myself. I was impressed by the Austrians' camp's cleanliness and orderliness. Tents were in a perfect line and evenly spaced. Pathways marked by short white painted stakes with ropes attached to them and on the small patch of ground in front of each ten regimental badges had been marked with a mosaic of coloured stones. Noting my curiosity I was invited to look in some of the tents. The floors had been dug down deep enough for these tall men, not one was under six feet, could stand comfortably upright. Ingenious stoves fashioned from ration tins provided some warmth - the reason they collected oddments of wood. Smoke from the fires was conducted through the earth wall at the rear end of the tent by pipes made with round ration tins joined together. There was no guard on the camp. They had their own men at the gate to check parties in and out.

On Sunday mornings it was practice to give blankets a good shake and, if weather permitted, to air them outside. We also attended to what we called housekeeping. I no longer slept on the floor. From ration boxes and a few loose boards I had the making of a bed, in fact

most of us had acquired a bed of sorts. On this Sunday morning I was sitting on my bed sewing on a few buttons, an endless job, for without elasticity army braces buttons were forever pulling off. A voice called in from the hut door, ‘Is Fred Lawrence at home?’. I looked around and there was Bill Shirley, my next door neighbour from Kenilworth. His wife had written to tell him I had been home on leave and that I was in the Bayeaux area. Bill who was a despatch rider in the R.A.S.C. had brought some dispatches to Bayeaux and had called at the NAAFI for refreshments. Seeing a corporal of the R.E.s standing at the counter he asked by any chance if he knew a Fred Lawrence. To his surprise Cpl ‘Wimpey’ said ‘Yes I do, there is a Fred Lawrence in my platoon of R.E.s and we are in huts a little way along the road.’ Bill and I had a lot to talk about, we hadn’t seen each other since call up in 1942 and having been home on leave I was able to fill him in with home news.

The winter of 1945 was quite a hard one, lots of heavy snowfalls and periods of severe frost. Thank goodness we were in huts and able to have fires for warmth. During one particular hard spell of frost our water supply froze up and we were unable to wash or shave for several days. The cookhouse and hospital had water brought in by carrier and our crafty sergeants scrounged water from the cookhouse for their shaves. Sergeant Wilcox all neatly shaved said to me one morning ‘You haven’t shaved Lawrence’ and laughed when I said ‘No sarge, I couldn’t find my three stripes to pass me into the cook-house for shaving water.’

Many roads in Normandy were lower than the surrounding fields and now, with so much of the land drainage system ruined by war, these roads became water logged and churned into deep, muddy tracks by military vehicles. Often they were impassable for ordinary traffic.

We were sent out on various missions to try and improve drainage, work we didn't enjoy. One of our impossible tasks was at an ordnance dump. In getting out the stores, much of it in heavy packing cases and loaded onto vehicles for transportation to dumps nearer the fronts, the ground was turned into a muddy morass, three feet deep in places. Having listened to stories of World War I when men and horses were drowned in mud I could now believe that those stories were true. Sergeant Webster and Cpl Wimpey with a party of fifteen sappers were sent here on a ditch digging exercise to try and ease the water problem. The land was so evenly contoured that efforts to improve drainage appeared to be hopeless and eventually the remaining stores were abandoned until conditions for their removal became more favourable. I rather think that the amphibious vehicle drivers regretted the decision for they seemed to enjoy driving at speed through the muck, towing strong sledges loaded with stores and sending out waves of mud behind them. Too bad if you happened to be in the path of these waves.

Close to the dump there was an abandoned farm house, partly surrounded by a moat, and we were using one of the buildings to store our tools and eat our midday haversack rations. It was about the nearest point to the dump that our truck could get in safely. On the moat a home made punt floated and each midday break we had a play with it. The punt seated two and because of the moats muddy banks, the second passenger had to push it off. I was pushing with Webby seated in the punt when my feet stuck in the mud. I lost my balance tipping Webby into the moat and falling face down into the water myself. A fire built from a few pieces of wood didn't produce enough heat to dry any clothes or keep us warm and our transport to take us back to camp was more than welcome that afternoon.

Chapter 11

Calais

In March we moved into a shuttered school building in Bologne. What a dump. The upper part of the building was in ruins and the few remaining rooms on the ground floor now became our billets. Without glass in the windows and most of the doors missing the place was terribly cold and draughty, too draughty for our scarce candles or diesel oil lamps to stay alight. A few hurricane lamps helped us to grope around for ablutions and to see to eat our meals. Rain showering though the open windows and water dripping through the cracked floors above added to our miserable plight. This was much worse than being in tents. These were only temporary billets we had been told, a statement we hoped was true. Our work was at the Calais leave and transit camp and to get there and begin work at 06:00 hours, reveille was half an hour earlier at 05:30 hours. It was dark when we left the billets and dark when we returned so I didn't see much of Bologne.

After a week of misery we were moved into a small lace factory in Calais, a two storey building not far from the camp site. The ground floor of the factory, from which all the machinery had been removed by the Germans to help with their war effort, became our mess room and cookhouse and on the upper floor we spread out our beds between steam pipes and cylindrical radiators that criss-crossed the floor. This floor had been the drying room of the lace, washed after production on the machines below. While concentrating about tripping over these pipes and radiators it was easy to crack one's head on the low drying beams from which the lace had been hung. Small windows on one side of the room provided light during the day and low powered electric light bulbs illuminated the room at night. Company office, officers and sergeants' messes and Q.M. stores where in the lace factory offices and stores, fronting the quiet road where we paraded. Transport was garaged in an empty mineral water factory nearby.

Calais had taken a lot of punishment from bombing and shelling both by the Germans dislodging us in 1940 and by the allies during the German occupation and the final retaking by the Canadians in 1944. There were several points round our billets where fresh flowers in jam jars were placed by the French people to honour the men of the rear guard who gave their lives in 1940 to halt the German advance on Dunkirk where the remnants of the French and British forces were evacuated.

Round about the factory there were islands of repaired houses occupied by citizens who had returned after the battle to drive the Germans out of the city. The people of Calais were more friendly than the Normans and seemed more pleased about being liberated. The area around the harbour was a shambles of wrecked buildings and

it was not uncommon to unearth grisly human remains when clearing away the rubble.

To accommodate the thousands of troops expected to use this camp in the future extensions were being built all the time, work in which our company was engaged. Large areas of the surrounding land was sown with mines, some fields were marked as mine fields but much of the ground needed to be treated with caution. Although notices were freely placed around the camp warning of the danger of wandering from marked safe paths, many inquisitive servicemen were either killed or injured by stepping onto mines in forbidden areas. There were many ruined brick built shelters and anti-aircraft gun emplacements beckoning the nosey ones to explore them. Lots of dummy anti-aircraft guns built from barrels and poles and anti-parachutist devices were scattered about the open spaces. With camouflage netting covering the dummy guns the area was meant to appear more heavily defended to reconnaissance aircraft than it really was.

Three incidents when dealing with mines in Calais stand out in my memory. Lance Corporal Bates, Spr Rawlins and myself were checking and repairing a wire fence marking a mined area at the side of a narrow lane. The fence was three strands of barbed wire nailed to wooden posts with danger markers hanging on it. A Frenchman riding up the lane was seen to get off his bicycle, climb over the wire and begin walking to a ruined building for what we assumed was a call of nature. He was a few yards into the mined area when we were able to make him understand the danger he was in and get him to stay where he was. By now his realisation of being in a mine field was sufficient to freeze him to the spot where he stood. Luckily we had our bayonets on our belts. They were a useful tool for probing

in search of mines. Lance Corporal Bates and myself inched forward towards the terror stricken Frenchman probing and feeling out trip wires and mines. Rawlins followed behind marking our path with any object he could find. There were no trip wires and we found one mine over which the Frenchman must have stepped and it was marked so that we could see it on the return journey. In single file we led the Frenchman to safety and he almost choked us with thankful embraces before remounting his bicycle and riding off. From his smell I believe his nature call had been answered.

Incident two: Lt MacKay had been posted from the company soon after our arrival in Calais and No. 2 platoon had a young Lt Morris in command. He was only with the company for a few weeks and Lt Bailey who had broken his leg in England returned to take over the platoon. He must have pulled a few strings to get back. Lieutenant Morris was in command of 2 and 3 sections, detailed to clear mines form a patch of ground in preparation for a new camp extension. Some anti-tank mines we had found were stacked in a ditch before being defused, the pressure plates having been secured. Anti-personnel mines were temperamental things and were defused as they were found. A booby trapped anti-tank mine was found and Lt Morris ordered it to be pulled. This was common practice where conditions allowed and safer than trying to neutralise the booby trap. To pull a mine a long cord was attached to the mine body and led to a safe position. A strong pull on the the cord was usually sufficient to set off the booby trap which in turn exploded the mine. We were now all under cover by sheltering in the ditch. The booby trapped mine exploded and those we had in the ditch exploded in sympathy stunning those that were nearby, my ears buzzed for days afterwards. Thankfully anti-tank mines were not shrapnel loaded and except for deafness no-

one was injured. There had to be a court of enquiry into the incident.

The third case was the most horrible. Fearing the Pas de Calais was to be the invasion area, Jerry had sown mines everywhere, even on cleared bombsites between houses. Some sites had been cleared but others were still only marked by flimsy wire fences with a few warning sings hanging from them. I was in billets one evening playing cribbage when there was a loud explosion which appeared to be rather close. On going out to investigate we found that a young child had entered one of these areas to retrieve a ball, an action that had no doubt happened before without disastrous results, but this time a mine was stepped on. The mangled remains of the child and the screaming injured playmates lying around wasn't a pleasant sight. Medical help was soon on the scene and the injured children were take to hospital leaving behind many weeping women and children who lived in the houses around the mined area. This ground was not high up on the list of priorities for mine clearing and we asked for and were given permission to clear this ground in our own time so that children might play in safety.

With a group of company personnel, I went to see the big guns of Calais. Those same big guns that had disrupted life in Dover with their salvos of shells. It was claimed that on days of favourable weather conditions watchers could see the Calais guns when they were fired and have the people of Dover making for cover before the shells arrived. The verges of the approach road to the emplacements and the open ground round about was full of mines, trip wires, booby traps and high explosive shells buried with just their nose caps showing above ground and wired to detonating devices. With weeds and undergrowth growing over the mine field someone was going to have a sticky time clearing that lot away.

There were three of these large guns in separate massive concrete emplacements. The long gun barrels were now split and distorted by explosive charges placed in them by the Canadians when they captured the stronghold. Bomb craters made by the bombs dropped by allied planes over-lapped each other on the surrounding ground but the thick concrete dome shaped roofs of the emplacements showed little damage.

The breach ends of the guns were like the tenders of huge locomotives and full of dials, levers and handles belonging to the mechanism to load, sight the gun and move the mighty weapons along tracks similar to railway lines. Powerful hydraulic buffers absorbed the shock of the gun's recoil. Hydraulic lifts brought up the heavy shells from the armoury down below and were transferred to bogies which ran right up to the gun's breach for reloading. The underground system of armoury, stores and quarters for the men manning the guns were about thirty feet below ground and were reached by climbing down vertical iron steps built into the concrete walls of shafts. Again, this labyrinth of rooms and passages were untouched by bombing raids.

The few months that we were in Calais were comparatively pleasant ones. The billets were reasonably comfortable, the weather was generally good and there were plenty of NAAFI facilities and ENSA entertainments at the leave and transit camp to which we had free access. With such a vast number of service personnel channeling through the camp and with black market activities very prevalent in the area there was always a strong force of M.P.s patrolling about. I was stopped by them twice, once for improper dress, one button undone, and once to show my pass book and prove where I was billeted.

My regular companion was now Arthur Neal, a new posting to the company from the 8th Army. Fred Harper was escorting a French

girl around and Ted Rawlins was posted. Arthur was a bit of a comic, always teasing me about getting my knees brown, a torment used by all 8th Army wallahs who had worn shorts in the deserts of Africa and to infer a sort of inferiority they felt for us in the 2nd Army. He hated N.C.O.s, a dislike which proved to be embarrassing to him later.

Besides the Camp NAAFIs there was a large one between our billets and the Camp in what had been a French entertainment hall. There was a stage on the ground floor used for ENSA shows and a dance floor above opened once a week. The seating on the ground floor had been removed to make way for NAAFI tables and chairs. The weekly dances had no attraction for Arthur and myself; all too often drunken brawls were started and M.P.s had to sort out the chaos.

Sitting in the NAAFI on evening a hand clasped my shoulder and a voice said 'Fred Lawrence I presume'. and there stood Charlie Baker, a carpenter I had worked with at Alvis who was now in the R.A.S.C. His company was removing and tidying up a petrol dump just outside Calais and Charlie had come in on a Liberty truck for an evening in Calais. I have never ceased to marvel how providence brought me face to face with men I knew in civilian life, it seemed miraculous that out of all the thousands of men in the forces spread all round the world these familiar faces kept popping up.

A few shops had a limited supply of goods on display and for sale in their windows. Seeing a nice silk head scarf in one window I thought it would be a nice present for Nona. It had no price tag on it and from my phrase book I worked out the questions I thought I would need to ask the shop assistant. My French and pronunciation was quite limited. I entered the shop and to the lady who appeared to attend to me I straggled through my French to ask how much the particular scarf in the window was. To my surprise and embarrassment

the lady said in perfect English ‘Very good Tommy, keep at it, you will soon learn to speak French’. From then on it was easy to converse and I bought the scarf with francs and cigarettes (the common exchange in black market circles).

From the bomb wrecked buildings around the harbour I picked up a piece of oak panelling from which I made a box to hold cigarettes and to fill in time I carved all the faces of a box using a broken pen knife blade. On the loose front of the box forming the lid and fastened by a shaped French franc I carved the cap badge of the Royal Engineers. On the top I carved the shoulder flashes of the 15th Scottish Division, the 21st Army Corps and the 2nd Army H.Q. On the sides I carved the cap badges of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. As a symbol of supremacy, I put a broken swastika on the bottom. The box, well polished and holding a few souvenirs, now stands on a window sill in the hall, a small reminder of World War II.

There were some very hot spells during the summer and refrigerated meat containers at the camp, exposed to the sun, were unable to keep the meat chilled sufficiently to keep it from going bad. Our section, with Cpl Wimpey in charge, was given the task of building a shelter over the containers to provide shade from the hot sun. The containers were near a service entrance to the camp and while we were working there the gates were left open and unguarded and bunches of children gathered to watch us work and hoping to receive gifts of chocolates, sweets or chewing gum, gifts they invariably had. Some tainted meat from the containers had been stacked by a wall near the gate and an attempt had been made to burn it with diesel oil. It wasn’t a success and the meat lay there waiting for transportation to incinerators. Children playing at the gate must have mentioned this pile of meat at home for a dozen or so women suddenly appeared

dashed through the gate and began sorting the meat over and running out with large joints. We did nothing to stop them, we thought that if they were prepared to make use of it good luck to them. I couldn't imagine knowingly eating a meal made from the meat myself, but the French have a reputation for cooking so I hoped they enjoyed what they had taken.

Calais went wild on May 8th V.E. day. We had the day free from duty and joined with the crowds of civilians and servicemen celebrating in the streets. Drink flowed everywhere and there were many sore heads on parade the next morning. There was still the struggle to over come the Japanese and when my pay book was returned with 'Eligible for the Far East.' marked inside, my spirits dropped a little. Pay-books had been called in by company office to be updated after V.E. day and my demob group number 37c was also marked inside. With demobilisation only just beginning and allowing about two months between groups being released I had visions of at least two more years in the army, time enough to be posted to the Far East. There was something about the mention of a posting to the Far East and the Japanese that gave me the shudders. Beside the sadistic brutality of the Japs I pictured the horrible leeches and snakes of the jungle and thought about the dreadful diseases associated with the area.

The first to be demobbed from our company were the sergeant major and the quartermaster sergeant who were in group 1 and they were given a rowdy send off. 'We Love you Sergeant Major' and 'The Quartermaster's Stores' with the appropriate army verses were sung over and over again.

Short leaves of forty-eight hours to Paris were organised and I put my name down for a pass. Taffy Lewis in three section and his pal

Taffy Evans from one platoon joined me on on this leave. We travelled by road to Lille where we boarded a train to Paris. So much rolling stock had been destroyed by air assaults on the railways that usable carriages were in short supply, those we had on this train had wooden slatted seats, no glass in the windows and no lighting. We arrived in Paris in the early hours of the morning and were taken by coaches to hotels. The Taffies and I kept together and landed in a bedroom with three single beds in it. After a wash, a shave and a good breakfast a W.O. II briefed us about our stay here. There were coach tours we could join during the day but the evening entertainment was of our own making. The meals we had here were superb, quite different from the rations we received in Calais. On the coach tours we saw the familiar sights of Paris such as Notre Dame Cathedral, the Church of the Sacred Heart, the Triumphal Arch and the Unknown Warriors Tomb. The Eiffel Tower was only accessible half way up. Higher up was out of bounds where a military radio station was installed. The view from there impressed me. The avenues were so symmetrically laid out. After the evening meal the Taffies and I set out to explore the city. Using the Metro, which was free for service personnel, we went round in circles without achieving our objects and decided to wander around on foot. Going into the first club we saw advertised we soon realised we needed to be careful about our money. After buying a cognac at the bar just inside the entrance we had a look around. Music, dancing and laughter could be heard but over the doorway leading towards the sounds of merriment a notice said 100 francs to pass this doorway. The price of cognac this side was pretty steep, what they were charging the other side we didn't stop to find out. From then on we chose the poorer looking cafes for our drinks and by the time I reached our hotel my head was a bit swimmy. The coach



Figure 11.1: April 1945 Paris leave. The author is without a Cap in the second row standing, under the tower. First row standing, 2nd from right Taffy Evans, 3rd from right Taffy Lewis.

to take us to the station for the return journey was leaving the hotel at 22:00 hours on the second day of our stay in Paris so we decided not to wander to far from the hotel. While having a quiet drink in a cafe, a Canadian serviceman came in and joined us. He had a fistfull of money and wanted us to join him to spend it. We explained about the termination of our leave but stayed as long as we dare to keep him company. On our way back we passed another cafe with sounds of music floating from the door. The Taffies said: 'Come on, let's have one for the road.' But I insisted we hadn't time. However, in they went asking me to get their gear into the hotel lobby for them. The coach arrived and began loading, all were accounted for except the Taffies. I told the sergeant checking the load list that they were sure to be along any moment. The driver waited as long as he dare but finally I had to leave the Taffies packs with the sergeant and we drove away without them.

On the train there was some lost sleep to catch up on and various positions were taken to get some degree of comfort. The fellow seated by me was fairly short so he lay on the slated seat while I tried to get comfortable of the floor by a partition. There were no lights in the carriages and I woke up in the darkness to find my side was quite wet. 'Some dirty so and so had urinated in the carriage I thought' but was happy to discover in the dawn light that a corkless bottle of mineral water had fallen over and rolled down to me.

A few days later two dejected Taffies arrived in Calais and appeared before the C.O. for punishment, they received twenty-one days C.B. and were not allowed any more privilege leaves. They told me that when they found the coach had left without them they had tried to get to the station before the train left. American M.P.s, noting their lost look as they wandered around the station, apprehended them and,

not being satisfied about their story, took them to an American detention centre for further investigation. After getting confirmation on their story the Taffies were released, without breakfast, to make their way back to Calais. The Taffies didn't speak too highly about their treatment at the American detention centre.

Another ten days U.K. leave was granted to me in June. Ten short days as all my other leave periods were. It was some comfort for Nona to know that European hostilities were over and that we had a demob group number to look forward to.

In July on Sgt Bibbie's recommendation and on his insistence that I accepted it, I was promoted to lance corporal. He had seen my records that I hadn't accepted the promotion offered to me at Fulwood. My promotion was an embarrassment for Arthur who had his grudge of N.C.O.'s. After some deliberation he told me that since he enjoyed my company he was going to make me an exception and continue to come out with me.

Rumours began to go round that the company was shortly going into Germany; amazing how rumours of all kinds circled round. One rumour I took note of was that the French franc notes were going to be scrapped and new notes with new values were being presented. Having some francs that I couldn't exchange through the company without awkward questions being asked, I looked around for an outlet on the black market. My francs had accumulated by selling cigarettes and tobacco. On the black market I discovered that quite a decent wristwatch could be bought with francs; although cigarettes were preferable. A high price in francs, 2,000 altogether, was being asked for the smuggled wristwatch. I had 1,500 francs and Arthur was only too pleased to lend me the balance on the understanding that I payed him back in marks if and when we went to Germany, the cunning

hound. The change of currency became fact and I was glad that I had off loaded my old notes. The watch I bought had hard wear for about fifteen years when Nona bought me a new one. The old watch is now amoung the souvenirs in the ‘Calais box’.

Chapter 12

Aachen

The company moved to Aachen, a key city in an area that had been fiercely defended by the Germans trying to stem the American advance into the Rhur. When the American forces had surrounded the city, terms of surrender were offered to the trapped garrison, hopefully to spare the city from further destruction and save civilian lives. The garrison commander rejected the offer and the Americans began to bombard the city with shell and mortar fire, trying hard to be selective with their targets and avoid known concentrations of civilians. House to house fighting gradually broke down the German resistance and they were forced to surrender. Twenty thousand prisoners were taken in the action and ten thousand civilians emerged from shelters and cellars. All this had taken place almost a year ago and some services such as gas, electricity, water and sewage were now functioning in parts of the city and much repair work and cleaning up had taken

place.

Our billets were in the remains of a school in the suburbs of Aachen and had formerly been occupied by the Americans. Being on the outskirts, the damage here was lighter than it was further in the city. Blocks of flats, although scared by shrapnel and damaged by blast, were still standing and were overcrowded with citizens. All that remained of the school was this one building, our billets, with a narrow side street running down its side. Small terraced houses were on the other side which had probably saved this part of the school from destruction. The other three blocks of buildings, built on the sides of a large square, had been flattened and set on fire by the American shelling.

The habitable block had been made into a cosy billet by the Americans, having central heating and lashings of hot water for ablutions provided by a boiler in the basement.

Aachen was rather an anti-climax after Calais. There was still a relaxed form of no fraternisation in existence and civilian and service folk eyed each other in an unfriendly manner. We were warned not to be out alone after dark because gangs of D.P.s were roaming around committing every crime in the book. Although their victims were usually Germans, lone servicemen were easy prey. There was a D.P. centre in blocks of flats about a mile and a half from our billets. The D.P.s here were mostly Russians or Slavs, some of Germany's forced labour who were now being gradually repatriated or moved to other D.P. centres. The flats were urgently needed to house Aachen's civilian population.

A combined local government consisting of allied military personnel and German civilians had been formed to try and bring about some normality to the running of local affairs and they controlled a

labour force to which all men and women requiring work had to register. Housing was a major problem. There was so much damaged property that accommodation was hard to get and the overcrowding was aggravated by returning refugees who had fled from the city during hostilities.

When the last of the D.P.s left the complex of flats, our platoon was sent to supervise a gang of Germans sent to clean up the building. What a nauseating job it proved to be. How human beings could live in such disgusting filth when there was no excuse for uncleanliness is beyond my understanding. A sanitation unit was attached to us and before entering the buildings we were liberally dusted with anti-louse powder. A hearty puff of powder up each trouser leg, a puff up each sleeve and for luck a puff down the top of the trousers was a hopeful barrier to all lice and fleas. At the end of the day I had a long hot shower scrubbing well with Carbolic soap. I also washed my clothes, getting them dry was no problem here. Clean denims were provided every day.

Except for a few personal effects, the D.P.s had to leave everything behind and the German workers were organised to move through the buildings and throw every movable article out of the windows and burn it on bonfires. Inside the blocks the stench of dirty verminous bedding and old clothes, stale food and excrete in all corners was unbelievable. Two decomposing bodies were found in one basement hidden under piles of rubbish: murder victims or dying from natural causes was never disclosed. When the flats were cleared the sanitation men sealed all doors and windows and lit fumigating canisters, locking the doors behind them. After these canisters burnt out the sanitation men in gas masks moved in to open all windows and when they declared the rooms were safe to work in dozens of buckets, brooms

and scrubbing brushes arrived and the Germans began scrubbing the flats out. In the party I was supervising there was a young German who gave me cause to complain about his work. As I spoke to him he made a lunge at me with his broom and I was almost caught unawares, since the youth had always shown a willingness to work. As he lunged, my little knowledge of unarmed combat flashed through my head. I sidestepped, grabbed the broom head and tried to wrest it from his grasp. The handle snapped and the broken end struck him in the face, cutting his lip. His short burst of anger had now subsided and he was now in fear of punishment, fear aggravated by angry remarks from his fellow workers, afraid they might lose their jobs. I took the youth to our platoon first aid man to get a dressing put on his cut lip and reported the incident as slipping on a wet concrete floor, breaking the broom handle which had caused the injury. The young German and his work mates were very grateful for not being disciplined and from then in I had no problems with them.

Arthur Neal was posted soon after we came to Aachen and I missed his companionship. We had taken a few walks together but had quickly got tired of viewing piles of rubble and the sullen faces of the Germans.

Falling tiles and masonry loosened by the weather made it dangerous to walk along the paths and if walking in the road, one needed to watch for missing drain and manhole covers.

There was no NAAFI in Aachen. For the first few Saturday afternoons, Liberty trucks took us into Maastricht. There we were allowed to visit the American canteen where we could buy delicious doughnuts, coffee, chocolate and cigarettes. The people here were quite friendly and ever ready to shake hands and try to converse with you. Some complaints by the G.I.s about us buying up their supplies put a

stop to these visits which were greatly missed.

A workshop next to the boiler house had a nice carpenter's bench and vice and I began to spend some time down their carving pieces of oak. I had acquired a couple of small gauges and a small flat chisel from a German and I carved out some of the seven dwarves and a few sailing boats. Others in the company tried their hand with crafts. Corporal Dawson embroidered the Royal Engineers cap badge on the back of his pullover thieving coloured wool from the ends of blankets for his work. So often one heard a cry of 'Bloody Dawson's been at my blankets.' after finding that coloured wool of the blanket stitching had been unpicked. Another sapper using various weird media for his work painted a large cap badge over the fire place in a room used as a recreation room. It was furnished with chairs and tables, one or two armchairs with stuffing sticking out everywhere, an old piano and some gymnastic equipment, all salvaged by the Americans from bombed buildings. We held competitions to see who cold lift the heaviest weights on the bars and tried some club swing exercises. Sing-songs round the out of tune piano and card playing became normal entertainment. Corporal Dawson, L/Cpls Munroe, Bates and myself played endless hours of crib.

Cleaning redecorating and repairing the flats occupied the platoon for several weeks. Occasionally I had a break form the work and went with Sgt Bibby to assess the viability of repairing buildings for the use for troops who would be part of the army of occupation. These reports went to the town Major's office for consideration.

German ex-servicemen with no homes or families to go to, were organised into Labour units living in small huttet camps and were employed on repairs to the city's roads and services. A request for help from one of these units came to the company. They were having

problems with building two Nissan huts and I was detailed to go and sort them out. Collecting haversack rations from the cookhouse, a P.U. truck took me to the unit and was calling back for me in the afternoon.

H.Q. of the unit was in a fairly large house situated in open country and a British army captain was in charge. Having reported to him he sent off for the German in charge of the hut building, who fortunately spoke good English, and he was instructed to follow my instructions. Before leaving the office, the captain asked what arrangements I had for my midday meal. I told him that I had sandwiches and was hoping to get a mug of tea here. I was told not to bother with my sandwiches, a hot meal would be provided and he would instruct an orderly to fetch me when it was ready. Following the captain, who took us through the cookhouse, I saw the staff preparing the unit's meal. Oats, turnip tops, potatoes and heaven knows what else was being tipped into a huge steaming copper pot and a man with a wooden handle stood on a platform stirring the mixture round and round. At the huts I discovered that the building sequence had gone astray and they couldn't get the inner lining in place. I explained that some dismantling was necessary and the English speaking foreman soon had the gang organised taking the huts to pieces and making a fresh start. At midday an orderly fetched for dinner and I had visions of a nice British style meal similar, I thought, to the captain's meal. I was seated at a small table covered by a white cloth in a little room opposite the cookhouse and when the orderly brought in the meal I nearly died. It was a bowl of the goulash I had seen being prepared in the cookhouse. As soon as I was alone I tasted the stuff, it was something like thick wallpaper paste with flecks of green in it and bits of meat here and there. I didn't really fancy it and would have preferred

my cheese sandwiches. There was nowhere to dispose of the stuff and, thinking the captain might have a liking to it, I pushed it down my gullet. I refused afters, I wasn't taking any chances in that, and vanished to the hut buildings to nibble at my sandwiches. Now the building sequence was fully understood the huts quickly took shape and I was able to leave them with the knowledge that they could finish without further help.

Having had earache for several days I called in company office to have my name put down on the following morning's sick parade. At 06:00 hours that morning instead of the orderly shout of 'Wakey! Wakey!' Sergeant Webster, orderly sergeant for the day, poked his head in the room and said: 'Stay in you beds, today is V.J. day, you have the day off and breakfast will be served at 08:00 hours. Just my luck I thought, no lay in for me. I had to leave my bed made up, kit laid out and with my small pack report to company office at 08:00 hrs. Ear drops prescribed by the M.O. cured the inflammation in a few days.

There were no celebrations here for V.J., none of the gaiety we had enjoyed in Calais on V.E. day. Mooning about the billets and playing cards occupied the day. Forty-eight hour leaves to Brussels became available and I took advantage of this opportunity to get a pass and visit the city. My travelling companion was Spr Horn from No. 3 platoon. We travelled by troop transporters and were taken not to a nice hotel, as we were in Paris, but to a building with two large rooms on the ground floor. One room, full of two tie bunks, was our sleeping quarters and the other room, furnished with tables and chairs, our dining hall. The food was similar to that served back in Aachen. There were no sightseeing tours laid on and very little information about places to visit. Manikin Pig was the only place we knew about.

We rode on the trolley buses free of charge but without knowledge of the language we found it hard to find the right stopping places and often had to jump from moving buses, a practice which proved to be disastrous for me on our second day in Brussels. A little rain had made the cobbled road a bit slippery and as I hopped off a moving bus my studded boots skidded from under me and I slid along the wet road getting my backside soaked in the process.

For me the Brussels visit was a bit disappointing, perhaps after Paris I was hoping for too much. The Belgians didn't have the same spirit as the Parisians.

While packing my gear for our return to Aachen the next leave intake arrived and who should walk into the room but sapper King, 'Kingy' of training days in Preston. He was in the Welsh divisional engineers and we had time to chat about 'Blacky' and our days of training at Fulwood barracks before my transport arrived.

A day trip along the Rhine was arranged and enough bogs put their names on the list to fill three trucks. Haversack rations were issued and we left Aachen on a fine sunny Sunday morning to head for Cologne, cross over the Rhine, travel down to Bonn to recross the river and return to Aachen. On the way to Cologne we drove through the remnants of Duran which had received saturation bombing. There was nothing to see but bricks and rubble. The bumpy bomb cratered roads were lined with walls of broken masonry built six to eight feet high to contain the rubble. Knowing that thousands had died in that one raid I couldn't say 'Serve you right for what happened at London, Coventry and other towns and cities.' The punishment was severe.

Cologne, where we made our first stop, was another terrible sight. Here three-quarters of the largest city in Germany lay smashed to pieces. Due to some fine precision bombing the Cathedral was almost un-

marked and there it stood like a lighthouse among acres of desolation. The railway station behind the cathedral was a heap of broken concrete and twisted ironworks. A little way beyond the famous Hohenzollen bridge across the Rhine blown up by the retreating German Army lay rusting and blocking the river. It was rumoured that a German officer was shot on the spot for failing to obey an order to detonate the charges.

Cathedrals attract me, I love to wander round admiring the beautiful craftsmanship put into the building of them. Cologne cathedral is a fine building and some enjoyable time was spent looking round it. The black market activity on the cathedral steps was now the big attraction of the city. For cigarettes and tobacco I obtained an antique bracelet studded with garnets, which Nona is afraid to wear in case the garnets fall from their settings. Crossing the river here on one of the floating Bailey bridges our convoy of three trucks drove along the Rhine towards Bonn. Being a nice day we had removed the canvas covers of the trucks and we had an uninterrupted view of the lovely country side. Many sunken, rusting craft lay in the river and there were battle scars along the banks, one day I hope to have the pleasure of seeing the river without the reminders of war. By another floating Bailey bridge we recrossed the river at Bonn and returned to Aachen. I enjoyed this one day out more than my leave in Brussels.

In early October I had another privilege leave to the U.K. and travelled most of the way to Calais by rail. The channel was in an ugly mood. An autumn gale was blowing and our sailing was delayed. The weather appeared to be improving and permission to leave harbour was given. The crossing was pretty rough, I believe our ferry boat was the only one to cross the Channel that day. Most of us were sea sick, my first experience of this malady and sometimes I could not

have cared if the boat had been sinking. How quickly one recovers on dry land, before the train reached London I was feeling fine again, a bit empty and ready for a snack at Euston. There were the same happy days at home, helping with the chores and visiting relations.

Reporting to the R.T.O. office at Victoria on the return journey I was informed that due to bad crossings on the Channel there were delays and my leave group would not be leaving Victoria until the next day. Local lads in the group went home for a few more hours, but men like myself, too far from home to make the journey in time, were directed to one of the large halls requisitioned to provide accommodation for these situations. The hall was warm and the bunks, although blanketless, were comfortable. A decent breakfast was provided and haversack rations were given for the journey to Calais. For this trip the Channel was reasonably calm. I had eaten my sandwiches on the boat and the meat patty they contained wasn't sitting too well. When the ferry began its manoeuvre to reverse into harbour the little swaying and slipping made me ill again.

On the train journey various steps were made to allow leave men to get off and while stationary civilians ran up and down the coaches offering coffee, minerals which often proved to be clear water and other items in exchange for a cigarette. One civilian who stopped by my open window had some eggs. Fresh eggs were a rare commodity, I considered myself lucky to be able to barter for two. I had two tins of cigarettes in my pack. I emptied the cigarettes out, then carefully stowed my two eggs in the tins with bits of paper packing. When we next had bacon for breakfast I took my two eggs to the serving hatch and asked the corporal cook if he would drop them in the hot bacon fat. The A.C.C. corporal came back with a sour look on his face and asked if I was taking the Mickey out of him. He gave me

my two eggs back and said 'These bloody eggs are hard-boiled.' I was disappointed not to have fried eggs for breakfast and I also had to endure some leg pulling about how I had carefully nursed these hard eggs on the journey back to Aachen.

Children who lived in the flats round about were rather a problem, it was impossible to keep them out of the billet area. As fast as one hole in thick wire fence was repaired they made another one to crawl through. They played in the ruined school building's lighting fires that were difficult to put out. At meal times they crowded around the mess room doors to grab for the scraps of food left on our plates and search through the waste bins for anything eatable. I wonder they didn't choke on fish days for batter and bones were stuffed into their ever open mouths. Some began to bring cans with them to collect scraps, taken away I supposed for younger sisters or brothers, gradually more than scraps were left on plates and scraped into these cans. The rations for the Germans were quite low but I believe it was higher than rations recently allowed by the Nazi regime.

After a fairly large fire in the ruins while I was guard commander, the orderly officer sent me to the nearest block of flats to warn the parents about the consequences of the children trespassing. I found an elderly man who understood some English and through him I explained to the little gathering of women threat they should try harder to keep the children away from the billets. I had such a tale of woe telling me about the overcrowded conditions in the flats and the inadequate rations they were receiving. When I said that they had themselves to blame for the plight, they all claimed to be anti-Nazi. How then I asked did you allow them to have such a strong grip on you if you were not in agreement about their methods. Fear was the explanation. Strong party people were put in each block of flats and tenements.

They reported anyone showing signs of being anti-Nazi and often the reported person was arrested and vanished. It appeared that the fear of being reported by a neighbour or a family member to these Nazi spies ensured the party's success.

The fraternisation ban was officially lifted so meeting with civilians became easier. Our company, due to demobbed men and postings, was getting smaller (Lt Bailey and Sgt Wilcox had been among those demobbed) and some civilians were employed in the billets which relieved us of many fatigues. The civilians were washing up in the cookhouse, attending to the boilers and keeping the area clean. They were not overworked on tasks and the two men who looked after the boilers and sweeping up had time to spare while waiting for their transport. I found them in the workshop making a trinket box and a fruit bowl. The one making the trinket box was using several different coloured hardwoods to make a mosaic lid and his friend, after roughly chipping away unwanted wood, was scraping flutes in his fruit bowl using pieces of broken glass. Their patient work resulted in two respectable articles.

Chapter 13

Euskirchen

With a detail of ten sappers, Lance Sergeant Bibby and myself were sent on detachment to Euskirchen, a town about thirty miles from Aachen where a Wehrmacht barracks was being repaired and made habitable for a battalion of Guards. We were billeted in a maisonette in the barracks' married quarters. Leaving the men to sort out kit and settle in, Bibby and I went to the garrison engineer's office two or three miles away to report and get our instructions about the project. Some of these garrison engineers and town majors could be quite officious and to give a good impression we entered the engineers office and gave a smart salute. Captain Watson casually acknowledged our salute and told us to cut out bull. Work was his interest, not wearing his arm out in saluting, but added that he thought we would know the occasions when better discipline would be required. We were told to drag up chairs and smoke if we wanted to. Bibby was a non-smoker

but I lit up and Capt. Watson began to put us in the picture. German civilians claiming to have various building skills and supervised by a general foreman, Herr Bacht, were engaged to carry out their restoration of the barracks which was now far behind schedule. He said that although Bacht appeared to show enthusiasm with the work when he was around he suspected that he was in league with the men to drag out the work using all the excuses he could think of to explain the delays. We had been brought in to sort out the material problems and to organise and get better productivity out of the workers. Having given us this short briefing he said he had arranged a meeting at the barracks for us to meet the Guards colonel. He also said he had a few crates of champagne under the stairs and we could have a few bottles cheap. We checked him into selling us a couple of dozen bottles for a few marks, two or three marks a bottle I believe we paid. We suspected it was black market stuff.

The colonel and his H.Q. staff were accommodated in the undamaged part of the barrack office block and a platoon of Guards on security duties were billeted in one of the partly finished blocks of buildings.

This was a time for saluting which we did as we entered the colonel's office to meet him and his senior W.O. II Sergeant Major Macdonald. We were all invited to sit down and Capt. Watson explained what he hoped we would achieve here. From the colonel's talk we could see how disappointed he was about the slow progress in repairing the barracks saying that no blame could be attached to Capt. Watson who had received little help on the project. The German work force, he considered, were not working efficiently and he was desperate to get his first company of Guards, formed long ago in England, established over here. Any help he could give by way

of transport to fetch supplies we had only to ask for it and turning to S.M. Mac told him to see we had priority with any requests. His parting words were 'My office is always open to you if you think I can help with your problems, now get my barracks habitable.' S.M. Mac, although a strict disciplinarian with the Guards, and always bawling at them to get smartened up, was not the S.M. Ogre with us. In fact he became a very useful ally during our stay here.

We left the colonel's office and Capt. Watson took us on a tour of the barrack complex, explaining as we went along where our priorities lay. Herr Bacht had joined us and hinted that he thought he should have been at the Colonel's meeting. He looked very deflated when Capt. Watson told him from now on we were in charge of the work and he would take orders from either L/Sgt Bibby or L/Cpl Lawrence. While walking round I noticed groups of men who did not appear to be fully occupied and when I asked why, Bach quickly said that they were waiting for materials. Captain Watson raised his eyebrows at us and said: 'See what I'm up against, I hope that you can sort it out.'

Our billet was on the second floor of the building and two middle aged civilian women had been engaged to cook our meals and keep the place clean. The captain had a mug of tea with us and looked round to make sure his requests had been carried out before leaving, he said he would look in later.

Our team of sappers were all tradesmen and while Bibby and I sorted out our plan of campaign they were sent out to find out what materials were readily available in the barracks. Bibby said he would look after our rations and getting materials and detailed me to organise and supervise the civilian workers.

Some buildings in one block in particular were severely damaged by shelling and were being cleared of rubble. Unstable walls were

pulled down and usable materials salvaged for use elsewhere. Two blocks of barrack rooms and ancillary buildings were our priority and except for glazing and painting part of one block was almost serviceable. The sappers search for materials revealed that glass was high on the list of shortages and was most urgently required. Sapper Horn, our tradesman painter, travelled miles picking up crates of glass that had been hidden. The Germans tried to conceal glass stocks for their own use and it was highly valued on the black market. M.P.s were constantly unearthing hidden stocks of glass, paint, plumbing and heating filaments.

Grabbing Herr Bacht to interpret for me, I began a systematic tour of the workforce and where I found groups of men without work because they had no materials I supplied them with shovels and barrows and sent them to clear up severely damaged buildings. They protested about tradesmen being given labouring work and Bacht tried to back them up. 'O.K.,' I said 'You will be dismissed because we are short of materials. I'm sure the town major has other work for you and I will get some unskilled men to replace you for this clearing up operation.' Not wishing to loose what I'm sure had been a cushy job, they sullenly went away with shovels and barrows. I then turned on Bacht and told him in no way were these men going to drag on the work and from now on I would expect a reasonable day's output. He whined that I couldn't expect the men to do more than they were because they were weak from low rationing. In reply I asked how much food had the Germans given to the forced labour units made to do heavy work in unfavourable conditions and what about the rations given to the inmates of the concentration camps. There was no reply to that, only a further shining of dislike in his eyes. Afterwards Bacht made a show of spurring the men on while we were around but I felt that I

had not quite got a grip on them.

With the advance party of Guards in the barracks, the civilians were trading goods for cigarettes. Most of our cigarettes were marked H.M. Forces only and they could be confiscated from civilians who were in possession of them. I asked S.M. Mac if he would have the workers searched once or twice a day as they left the barracks and explained my reasoning for it. He readily agreed and when marked cigarettes were confiscated a howl of protest went up and we were called 'thieving Tommies' Bacht and a couple of spokesmen approached Sgt Bibby to complain about being searched at the gate and Bibby told him: 'This is Cpl Lawrence's province, you must talk with him.' I told Bacht and his complainers that when I would see some improvement from the workers I would have a word with Guards' sergeant major about the gate searching.

In a couple of months the colonel was able to send for his first company of Guards and young, newly appointed, officers in the company expecting and receiving from the Guards salutes at all times began complaining about the sappers disregard of saluting. Royal Engineers standing orders on saluting stated that when we were on works we saluted officers on first parade and from then only saluted if directly approaching an officer to make a request or if an officer approached you with a directive. Sapper Crouch looking after the central heating part of the project was pulled up and berated by one of these new officers for not saluting him and Crouchy complained to Sgt Bibby. The other members of the team said that if saluting was enforced contrary to our standing orders then they would begin to make sure there were no meetings in the barracks between them and the officers. Bibby asked to see the colonel and after he had stated the reason for the interviews the colonel said 'Yes, I have had complaints

about your sappers' lack of saluting.' Bibby quoted our standing orders but the colonel said: 'You are now in a Guards establishment and if my men see your sappers not saluting I fear discipline might suffer.' Bibby replied that if saluting by the sappers at all times was insisted on despite standing orders then he feared they would begin to hide away from the officers and work would suffer. Pondering a little while the colonel said: 'I have to give way to your standing orders and I will speak to my officers but for heavens sake don't let work slack up now it is beginning to show signs of improvement.'

Sergeant Major Macdonald laughed when Bibby told him the story of saluting and said: 'I have the young gentlemen on the square this afternoon for a drill session. I'll warm them up for you. He did too. I watched that parade from a discreet viewpoint and Mac certainly gave the officers a hard session of drill. I was glad I wasn't part of it.'

When Spr Crouch told us that the part of the officers' mess where the junior officers were quartered had to be isolated from the heating system because of a faulty valve gasket we suspected but could not prove that he might be getting his own back on the officers. It was a few days before we were able to get a replacement of this particular valve gasket and the officers shivered in their quarters. We were now getting sharp frost sand flurries of snow. For those officers who had been decent with us in the early days I rustled up a few oil stoves to heat their rooms. I'm sure we were suspected of engineering the breakdown for we had no more interference from these new officers.

The women engaged to cook and clean for us were dismissed. They would insist on mixing in caraway seeds with the cabbage and potatoes which no one liked. They were supplying the caraway seeds, which I think they considered to be a fair swap for some of our rations that went missing. Knowing what the hungry kids were like

back in Aachen and thinking they had young families to feed we were prepared to accept the missing rations but caraway seeds every day were too much. With the extra Guardsmen coming into the barracks we were able to get the women engaged in the Guards cookhouse. A cook's assistant, Norman Higgs, was sent from Aachen to do our cooking. He was a confectioner in civvy street and was a general dogsbody in the cookhouse — washing up most of the time. He moaned about being here and spoiled so much food that we soon sent him back. One time he put so many dried peas in a vessel to soak overnight that the floor was covered with peas the next morning which were ruined.

Taffy Lewis, the same Taffy Lewis that had been on leave with me in Paris, was here doing general duties. He volunteered to try his hand at cooking as well as being billet orderly. He was quite a success at cooking.

Sometimes Bibby was invited to join the Guards senior N.C.O.s and officers on hunting trips in the Aachen Forest and he would return with either hares or pieces of wild boar meat. Both were delicious to eat. The hares were the biggest I have ever seen. They were twice the size of English hares.

To relieve my boredom of the barrack walls I sometimes went out to collect materials and had two eventful rides while doing so. One of our Guards drivers was an alcoholic Scotsman who drove recklessly with the accelerator pedal hard on the floorboards. With him as my driver we were travelling along a country road, which was just about wide enough for two vehicles to pass in comfort. We caught up with a horse and cart quietly plodding down the centre of the road and no amount of horn blowing could get the driver to move over let us pass. I imagined that he was sitting their and thinking some-

thing like ‘Let them wait’. The verges were neither wide enough or suitable to mount and get by and Jock, not known to have patience, mumbled ‘I’ll shift the bugger’ then quietly eased up to the rear of the cart and accelerated. The horse had to wake up and gallop or be run over by the cart and Jerry driver came to life waving and shouting at us. In a few yards he was trying to steer his horse and cart into a side road where we left him singing our praises. I bet he moved over the next time a horn sounded behind him. The other eventful trip with Jock was some days later. Taking a corner much to fast the truck went into a slide and we ended up with the trucks nose in the sitting room of a cottage. Without checking the damage. Jock engaged reverse gear and backed out bringing down more wall and leaving the roof sagging. We were unhurt but shaken and the study Austin truck was driveable, so after leaving the college occupants particulars as to whom they should report to we drove on. Our story at the court of enquiry that an uncontrollable skid on loose gravel had caused the accident was accepted and no further action was taken. We were lucky that there were no witnesses to say we were travelling too fast.

Although every effort was made to keep drink away from Jock he did occasionally get stoned and violent and was hidden away to sober up. Jock was never disciplined for his drunken bouts, just carefully kept out of sight until he was quiet again. From bits and pieces of talk the full story was never divulged, we gathered that Jock had distinguished himself during the fighting. He had been a tank driver and, the colonel unable to get his courage rewarded, wanted to keep Jock’s army record clean. Jock was soon due for demob and I believe his addiction to alcohol began during the campaign. When sober, he was a good companion and S.M. Mac said he was an ideal soldier, but oh dear, when he craved for a drink he was quite embarrassing.

Had it not been for the pressure of work here, life would have been even more boring than at Aachen. Our evening meal was a time when we were all together and it was taken leisurely, discussing the work programme, relating our day's adventures or talking about more general things.

Sapper Bill Heath told a good story about one of his trips. The owner of a sand pit had invited Bill to have a drink and he was taken into the house where Christmas decorations and the Nativity scene were being prepared. In our mixture of English and German words Bill asked what they would have for Christmas dinner and the man pointed to a plump dog lying on the hearth and said: 'Gut essen, Gut essen.' Whether the dog was eaten at Christmas I don't now but Bill said that he felt ill thinking about it and come to think of it I think we all did. For an excited debate politics and Winston Churchill was all that was needed to get Bill almost foaming at the mouth. He hated 'Winnie'. His victory V sign, he said, was an abnormality to his fingers caused by holding his big fat cigars. Except for those political scenes we were a harmonious group. Sapper Godwin, a Cumbrian man, was a monumental mason in civvy street and his talk about how stone was quarried, selected and worked interested me a great deal and Spr Jenkins, a plaster caster, was another tradesman I enjoyed talking to. He made some pictures to hang on the wall using old photographs from magazines then casting a plaster back to them using saucers for moulds.

We returned to Aachen each weekend to exchange laundry and pick up mail, leaving Euskirchen after work on Friday and returning at 08:00 hours on Monday. Familiar faces were disappearing each week as postings and demobilisations took effect. For a few weeks a new sergeant major was attached to the company and one Saturday

morning he had a special junior N.C.O.s' parade. After drilling us on the square for a while he said: 'I will call out a name and ask that N.C.O. to give the squad a specific drill order.' My name was called with an order to change the squads direction. I didn't hear him and the squad with grinning faces carried on with the last order until the sergeant major called a halt. He gave me a sergeant major's kind of dressing down but later apologised when someone told him I didn't hear very well.

The second company of Guards moved into the barracks in early December and we were informed that our work here would end at Christmas and that the company was being disbanded in the New Year. Some of the company funds were spent to buy extra fare for our last Christmas as a company. Five geese were brought and so afraid were we that they might be stolen that a volunteer picket was organised to watch over them.

Sergeant Bibby and the other sappers left Euskirchen early on Christmas Eve but because our rations from the Guards would not be ready until after midday I was left behind to collect them. I now discovered Bibby was drawing rations for two more men than we had in our party and now understood why he wanted me to give him the rations before handing them into the cookhouse. The Guards tried hard to persuade me into spending Christmas with them but although I'm sure I would have had a marvelous time with the, I declined the invitation on the grounds of wanting to be with my friends probably for the last time, a feeling they readily understood. In the rations there was a leg of pork, and before giving them to Bibby, Sgt Whitehouse of 3 platoon offered me a bottle of whiskey for it which I accepted. Bibby was mad with me but there was nothing he could do about it. I had played him at his own game. The whiskey I shared with the

rest of the Euskirchen party. There was a lot of eating and drinking during the Christmas break, then larger postings took place. Many of the younger men went to maintenance units in the Bailey bridges over the Rhine.

In January I was given another U.K. privilege leave and had a cold, long journey to the Hook of Holland. A huttet transit camp had been built about a mile from the harbour and looked as though it was a temporary arrangement. It was small compared to Calais and had no NAAFI facilities. Duck board paths between huts and Mess hall were laid over muddy ground and the whole place was prison-like and cheerless. Ferry boats from the Hook were larger than the ferries of the Channel and it was arranged that we had one night at sea and landed at Harwich in the early morning.

Garth was almost two years old now and was changed each time I saw him. Cynthia was a second little mother to him but got quite cross with him when he found and ate some of her hidden chocolate. Garth was still unable to make out who I was. He had been told I was his Daddy but to him I was just another man and he often asked his mum when I was going home. On the journey back I spent several days in the transit camp at The Hook and was away from the company for over three weeks.

The company had shrunk drastically in those three weeks. I was now the only occupant of our room. It was a safe bet that your turn for a nights guard or picketing came on the following night of your return from leave. Whether it was thought that night duties gave you more time to reflect on the good time you had enjoyed on your leave I never understood. The duty usually made me feel more browned off. I was guard commander the night after this last leave and about 23:00 hours. I went out to check the man on the gate and couldn't find him.

All kinds of thought went through my mind. Had he been kidnapped or murdered and hidden away. I put another man on guard and sent others in pairs to search the area. In a short time the missing man, Spr Joycey showed up and I immediately put him under arrest. The stupid nut, playing on the lax conditions of the depleted company, had gone down the road with a 'pro' hoping that he wouldn't be missed for a short while. Knowing he was due for demobilisation in a couple of weeks I decided to consult the C.O. before logging the incident in the guard report. The C.O. was very lenient with Joycey who could have been court martialled and gave him a lecture and had him locked in a room until his demob release.

I was having a quiet read and a smoke one evening when an officer orderly came to my room to tell me the C.O. wanted me in the office. The C.O. handed me some papers and said 'I have had a request from H.Q. to look for a suitable candidate to take a staff sergeants course and I find you have the required qualifications. 'Take these papers away, fill them in and return them to the office in the morning.' In my room I carefully read them through trying to understand the small print and after the episode at Preston looking for unexpected conditions. The six months course was being held in England which I found rather tempting but a heading on one of the papers I had to sign puzzled me. There was a hint about the cost of the course and suggested that unless I was a complete dolt there was a reasonable chance of passing out as a staff sergeant and I would be placed in some unfamiliar form of army service. This sounded to me that when my demob group release came through I would still be retained for service. I popped back to the office and fortunately the C.O. was still there with Sgt Whitehouse who was acting sergeant major. I explained my dilemma and my reluctance to sign the papers. The C.O.

felt sure I would be released when my group no. was announced but Sgt Whitehouse, after reading the paragraph being questioned, had his doubts. The C.O. rang the H.Q. for clarification and the answer was yes, my signature to accept a place on the course was also a signature to signing on for another three years in the army. 'Sorry sir, I cannot accept those conditions.' I said and promotion passed me by again.

A few more dreary days dragged on and then, with L/Cpl Jack Thompson, I were posted to D.C.R.E in Soest.

Chapter 14

Soest

Jack Thompson from No. 3 platoon was about two years older than me. Although we had met in the company and knew each other by sight we had never been on a project together. Like me he was married, had two children, was a carpenter in civvy street and enjoyed a quiet life. His home was in Hastings and we became great friends at Soest. We were both a bit apprehensive about this posting to a D.C.R.E. unit and wondered what our role would be in Soest.

D.C.R.E. H.Q. was in a quiet suburban type of road on the outskirts of the town, lined on each side with Lime trees and a few houses. Our billets were in one of these houses opposite to the offices. There were fourteen sappers and N.C.O.s in the billet and Jack and I shared a small bedroom on the first floor. The other N.C.O.s in the billet were Cpl Manton and L/Cpl Garrat who shared a room opposite to ours and were both demobbed a few weeks after we joined

the unit. The other sappers shared rooms in the attic, on the first floor and in the basement. The ground floor was our mess room.

Three women were employed to cook our meals and keep the billet clean, working in shifts to cover the house between 06:30 and 18:00 hours.

Our C.O. was Capt. Scott, a short, tubby, little man who liked his drink. He wasn't a strict disciplinarian but was full of weird and exciting ideas. The office staff were a mixture of civilians and Royal Engineer personnel supervised by Sgt Atkins. There was a transport pool in a warehouse behind the offices and all the drivers were civilians with a civilian mechanic to maintain the vehicles and act as garage foreman.

Fifty yards or so along the road from the office there was a complex of three storey buildings built round a large asphalt square. These barrack like buildings seemed to sprout up all over the place and were, I believe, military schools for Hitler youth. The buildings were partly occupied by Slavic D.P.s and Polish ex-P.O.W.s. Other houses in the road, all part of this barracks complex were over crowded with German civilians.

Jack was detailed to assist Sgt Feaney and they spent most of the day away from the office. A large room on the first floor, furnished with several desks and bookcases was a general office where civilian supervisors and staff sergeants gathered to make out their reports and one desk was allocated to me. My first job was to check why a small Royal Artillery unit in our area had indented for a large number of electric light bulbs. A P.U. from the pool with a civvy driver drove me to the unit and after counting the number of light fittings I reported that I thought the number was excessive and recommended that the quantity asked for should be reduced. One of D.C.R.E.s functions

was to sanction and control the materials indented for by military units in our zone and I found that one needed to be vigilant about black marketeering. Although I had done some estimating of work and materials in the building trade I felt a bit overwhelmed when I was detailed to get out an estimate to repair and redecorate the D.P. centre.

There was a very good library of Army manuals and directives in the book cases in our office and the knowledge I obtained from the carried me through the estimating detail and many other unfamiliar projects.

To do my estimating I needed to look in all the rooms occupied by the D.P.s and often found it difficult to explain my presence there. The D.P.s viewed me with suspicion, suspecting I was spying on them, in the same manner that their former Nazi and Gestapo masters had done. Some of the Polish P.O.W.s understood a bit of English and were quite useful as interpreters. All these people were afraid to return to their now Russian occupied home lands for fear of reprisals. It is sad to know that hundreds of these D.P.s were shot when they returned home having been condemned as collaborators. There were some families with young children living in these rooms and it was pathetic to see how they all coped in one room. Cords tied to nails driven into the walls had old sheets or blankets draped over them to get little areas of privacy. The D.P.S. had a kind of hopeless expression on their faces and showed no signs of relief of being freed from their forced labour. The Polish ex-P.O.W.s were different, happy to be free and hopeful for the future and maintained a high standard of cleanliness in their quarters.

There didn't appear to be any urgency about this estimating for I was often sent out on other missions and I had some peculiar snacks

from hospitable German material suppliers. The Schnapps they gave me was quite drinkable after I got used to its bite. The Ertzat coffee was quite unpalatable and the black bread with raw pickled bacon or raw pickled herring I found hard to chew and swallow.

Soest was a quiet, little, fortified, medieval town and parts of the old thick walls were some feet above ground and were wide enough to be made into walks. One of the gateways which arched over the footpath of a road near our canteen was three storeys high and in a very good state of preservation.

Not having any major industry or being of military importance the town had escaped war damage, but one had only to travel a short distance to see the havoc caused by our bombing raids. Hamm, Dortmund, Dusseldorf and Wuppertal were all within a forty or fifty mile radius and these places had been heavily bombed. There were not many B.B.C. bulletins that hadn't referred to raids on these cities and towns.

There were many half timbered buildings in the centre of Soest and one of these, a restaurant called 'Der Wilden Mann', was now a forces canteen where Jack and I spent many tea drinking hours. No alcohol was served here so it was a relaxing place to visit. The interior was full of old black oak beams and panelling and the dark oak furniture of tables and chairs sparkled from years of polishing. A German violinist was allowed to play here and he wandered through the tables playing pieces of better known light classical music. For a few cigarettes he would play requested tunes. If he wasn't familiar with the tune asked for one only had to hum or whistle a few notes and he could play what you had requested.

After the ruins of Calais, Aachen and Euskirchen it was nice to wander round a town that had not been battered by bomb or shell and

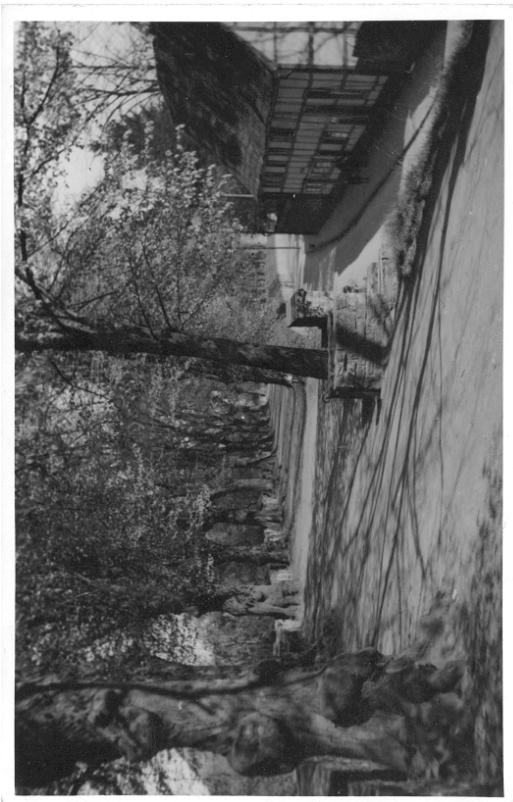


Figure 14.1: The walk on the old walls in Soest.



Figure 14.2: The old gateway in Soest.



Figure 14.3: The old gateway in Soest.



Figure 14.4: Der Wilden Mann, the forces canteen in Soest.

to temporarily forget about the ravages of war. There was a football ground on the edge of the town and not many days passed without a game of some sort being played there. Teams of civilians and teams from the various military units played against each other.

German beer gardens were out of bounds to service personnel except for certain nights of the week, to give the civilian population a feeling of not being always under surveillance and help them towards a more normal way of life. Jack and I went to one beer garden near the canteen a couple of times, but found it too rowdy for our liking. The noise of the Jerry drinkers banging their tankards on the tables while they sang was deafening. The beer they served tasted like soft water and how they managed to get merry on it I couldn't understand. The only effect it had on me was to overwork my bladder. We were talked into these visits by two sappers in the billet. Sapper Harrison had an idea that he could sing and was forever torturing our ear drums in the billets and he, after a few beers sang at the beer garden which seemed to please the customers. His pal, and ex-8th Army sapper called Hobbins, did a presentable sand dance act and he too performed at these beery sessions.

Because there was no alcoholic drink in the canteen we had a NAAFI ration of beer in the billets. Every Friday our ration truck brought in a nine gallon barrel of this tasteless German beer and most Friday nights turned into a sing song with Harrison and Hobbins doing their acts. Harrison could get very bad tempered if he saw us sniggering about his singing. By midday Saturday what was left in the barrel was poured away, it became so flat it was undrinkable.

Captain Scott was tipped off that a German architect was coming to the labour bureau in Soest to seek work and Scotty wanted to get him in the D.C.R.E. staff. He called me into his office, gave me a

note with the man's unpronounceable name written on it and told me to get him before he was put onto other work. With help from the desk corporal at the bureau I located Fritz, my name for him, waiting with others to be interviewed by the officer in charge. Telling Fritz to follow me I jumped the queue, took him into the office and showed the officer Capt. Scott's note. Fritz was given some papers to sign and a work card and he became a member of D.C.R.E.s civilian staff. From then on he became an embarrassment to me for he thought it was I who had got him this job.

The present plans for housing the occupation forces, which had changed constantly, were such that two small detachments were intended to occupy the D.P. centre and each one was to have its own independent kitchen. Captain Scott detailed Fritz to make drawings for the conversion of part of the ground floor of the blocks of buildings at the D.P. centre into a kitchen with an estimated number of men it should cater for. If Fritz had any queries, he came to me, and I often needed to refer to our library of manuals. I told him how many ranges he would have to put in to meet the catering corps standard requirements. Afterwards when Fritz told me he had planned for extra ranges, I told him he would be in trouble and asked him why he did it. He said: 'My reason, corporal, is that soon Germany and England will be joining forces to fight the Russians, more men will be billeted there and the necessary ranges will be installed to accommodate them.' What Scotty thought about that is anybody's guess. The work was not started while I was in Soest.

This idea of Britain and Germany joining forces to fight the Russians was very prevalent in the area. Bruer, an ex-school master now employed as office interpreter felt quite strongly on the subject. He also explained to me that although he was anti-Nazi he had to teach

the Nazi doctrine in school for his family's sake. Failing to obey would most certainly have meant his disappearance into a concentration camp.

A railway line passed in a big curve behind the offices and Capt. Scott thought it might be feasible to take a branch line from the main track and make a siding by the large building we were using for a garage. This he thought could be made into a stores warehouse for the occupation troops who would be in the area. I almost panicked when he asked me to look into the project. I had as much idea about railway construction as I had of flying. Again the library of manuals was consulted, especially those of the Royal Engineer railway companies. One of the German drivers, seeing my interest in the railways, proudly told me that before the war he had been a plate layer on this section of the line. With Braer to interpret for me I questioned this ex-plate layer who confirmed my opinion that because of the gradient and the curve of the track a branch line was not practicable. Captain Scott was rather disappointed when I reported back to him.

The only night duty we had was to man the telephone switch board. During the day a German girl was on duty there, she spoke very good English and was a keen Shakespearian. Knowing that I lived in Shakespeare country she was amazed that I had little interest in his plays. The night watch from 12:00 to 08:00 hours at the switch board was a boring duty. There was a couch in the room for us to lie on and a fair amount of sleep was possible during the night. All calls came via the town exchange operated by the Royal Signals and we arranged with the duty operator there to ring long and loud if any calls for the D.C.R.E. came in and also to give us a rousing call at 06:00 hours. One of the operators became quite friendly over the phone and we had long chats together between his needs to attend to

other calls. sometimes he used to say 'Hang on, keep quiet and listen to this'. He knew his callers and we would listen to officers dating their girlfriends in the nursing, A.T.S. and NAAFI services. From his voice I formed an idea of what their operator would look like if I met him and what a surprise I had when we were able to meet in the Wilden Mann canteen. He was much shorter and slimmer in real life than the image I had built up round his deep strong voice.

I was sent to a small Belgian unit to deliver a kitchen range, explain how the parts fitted together and how to install it. I felt quite ill on the return journey to Soest. It was a warm day and I thought my dizziness and sick feeling was due to a combination of warmth and diesel fumes in the cab. I couldn't face my evening meal when I got back to billets and went straight to bed. Jack fed me with aspirins and after a semi-delirious restless night I reported sick. I was so dizzy that I could hardly walk straight and Jack rode with me to the R.A.P. in town. The M.O. gave me a quick examination and ordered me to bed in the sick bay. I couldn't eat any of the food brought to me by the orderlies but drank large quantities of water. The following morning I was put on a stretcher and loaded into an ambulance to have one of the most frightening rides of my life. Walking sick sat on the lower stretcher racks, I was put on the top on. The ambulance man seemed to be travelling too fast and when it keeled over at corners I was afraid of rolling off the stretcher and scared of bouncing off it each time it hit a pot hole. That twenty-five mile ride to No. 6 British General Hospital in Isolohn was quite nerve racking.

Pneumonia was diagnosed at the hospital and I ended up in a small six bed ward on the first floor. Why I had pneumonia when I was living in the most comfortable conditions of my service career puzzled me. Apparently there was an upsurge of pneumonia cased at this time

and the Medical people were assuming that it was a delayed action type of illness from the earlier days of unfavourable living conditions. For a few days I was well stuffed with drugs and not even allowed to wash myself. When I stopped feeling sick and was able to eat, all sorts of luxurious dishes came my way such as fresh eggs, chicken and jellies. For elevenses I had egg beaten in milk and sherry, a bottle of Guinness with my dinner and a pint of champagne at night. The champagne stopped when my temperature became normal. By this time I was allowed to get up and dress in the awful ill fitting hospital blues and as my legs got stronger I helped in the ward kitchen where the special light food were prepared. Besides our little annex there were two single bedrooms and a ward extending the whole length of the building. Walking patients helped to serve out the meals and wash up in the kitchen. As a reward for this help there were many extra bits of food to eat.

Except for Nobby Clark, I didn't get to know much about the occupants of the other four beds in my room for they rarely stayed more than a week. Poor old Nobby had some complaint which in the early days of his stay here required injections in his buttocks. One of the sisters must have been a dart player. At the sight of the pan with the hypodermic laying in it Nobby used to groan, roll over onto his stomach and bare his bottom. This dart throwing sister would take the needle end and jab it into Nobby's buttock. Each time I expected to see Nobby fly through the window giving a yelp of pain. He told me that he never felt the needle but was getting quite sore after the frequent jabs.

The R.S.M. of the medical unit in Soest came in for a few days to have some check ups and was put in the single room next to our ward. We knew each other from visits I had made to the unit when

checking material indents and he took me into parts of the hospital grounds that were out of bounds to ranks below W.O. and one of our favourite visits was to the stables where some fine horses belonging to officers of the hospital were stabled.

A few passes were issued to go beyond the hospital gates and having discovered from one of the auxiliaries that there were some nice walks round the lake I applied for one each day it was fine enough for a stroll. The other reason for going out was to buy some lovely doughnuts sold at a canteen outside the hospital. It was against hospital rules to buy food outside and bring it into the hospital but I always brought some to share round the room. We were getting good food and a generous amount of it but these smuggled doughnuts had their own particular appeal. My oversize, badly fitting, hospital blue coat made easy cover for a bag of doughnuts. Rowing boats were available to the hospital staff and one very robust auxiliary nurse on our ward was often seen taking a patient for a trip on the lake. She was most concerned about our welfare in the hospital. When I first began to get around she roped me in to take communion in the chapel on the ground floor and literally carried me up and down the steps.

A ward sister noting my deafness arranged for me to see the E.N.T. specialist, a crusty old colonel. After probing in my ears and asking questions he produced some lengths of rubber tubing and a rubber bulb like those that were fitted to old car horns. The tube with the bulb on one end was plugged into my ear, then a tube with an ugly looking curved thing called, I believe, a catheter needle was inserted up my nose and the loose end inserted in the colonel's ear. He then told me that when he said swallow I was to swallow hard. I heard him say swallow, I did so and at the same time of swallowing he squeezed the bulb hard sending a stream of air through my sinuses. I thought

the top of my head was going off. This was repeated on my other ear, then while my head was reeling he asked if I could hear any better. I wasn't sure that I could hear at all after that onslaught and he got very snappy with me. I then made a mistake by saying 'No sir, my hearing is no better.' and he repeated the blowing out process. I had now had enough and told him my hearing was better when in fact it seemed worse than before. Yards of narrow, oil soaked fine gauze were then poked in each ear, so much of it that I thought my head must be hollow. Going down to the surgery the next morning to have this gauze removed I met two others who had received the same treatment and felt as I did that no benefit had been achieved from this blowing out.

Taking a walk in the hospital grounds again I met Spr King again. Kingy, having had stomach problems had come in to see a specialist and was only expecting to be here for the day. The M.O. thought I was now fit to return to D.C.R.E. and when making out my discharge papers he told me that he had been surprised about my slow recovery and was recommending that I had immediate sick leave.

Once again dressed in khaki I set out to thumb my way to Soest. Two M.P.s in a P.U. pulled up and asked to see my papers. After finding they were in order they brightened up my day by saying 'Jump in, we are going into Soest.'

Sick leave was granted by D.C.R.E. and the day after my discharge from hospital I was on my way to the Hook of Holland. That long tiring overland journey plus the sea voyage to Harwich found me less fit than I thought I was. Towards the end of my leave, not feeling too well I went to see our family doctor who, after an examination gave me a note to take to an Army Office in Leamington and I was given an extension to my leave.

It was almost the middle of June when I arrived back at Soest

to find the members of the unit has changed considerably. Except for the civilian staff, I was in strange company. Jack and many others had either been demobbed or posted and now there were only six of us in the billet. Captain Scott and the office sergeant were among those who had been demobbed and in their place we had a Capt. Howard as C.O. and regular soldier sergeant Brandon who was in charge of the office staff. Sergeant Feaney was under house arrest awaiting court martial for misusing military transport. He had gone out on a joy ride in a truck with a civilian driver and they had been involved in an accident in which the driver had been killed. At the court martial Feaney was demoted to corporal and posted from the unit.

The C.O. sent for me the day after my return home from leave to tell me that I was demoted. This demotion usually happened to lance corporals and lance sergeants when they were away from their units for long spells. The evening was spent cutting off my stripes and the bits of cotton from my sleeves and the next day I had difficulty in explaining to the civilians that my reversion to sapper was not for misconduct. It was even more bewildering to them and I suppose to me when I read on orders a day later that I had been promoted to lance corporal again and had to sew my stripes back on my sleeves.

The D.P. centre was now empty and deserted and I was to spend the rest of my long lonely days while waiting for demob wondering through these buildings making what appeared to me an estimate of repairs and redecorating that would never be used. I had no other jobs to break the monotony. Fritz was engaged on other projects, his project of the kitchen at the centre had been shelved and his previous eagerness to be friendly which had been an embarrassment was now welcomed to liven my days. I missed Jack quite a lot and was unable to accept others in the billets as mates to go into town. Jack

corresponded regularly and invited me to visit him in Hastings when I returned to England. Bruer, the interpreter, was cultivating part of the garden behind the billets and I spent many hours talking with him getting to know something about life under the Nazis. Seeds were hard to get and he was experimenting with such things as dried peas in an attempt to grow food. Potatoes were peeled a little thicker by the eyes and grown in containers in the house before planting outside.

Hundreds of fire flies attracted by the sweet sticky substance of the lime trees fascinated me in the twilight as they swarmed around the trees in luminous clouds.

At the centre I found that if I stood still in the attic mice would emerge from their hiding places and play over my boots. Without gaiters I'm sure I would not have done this because without a doubt they would have climbed inside my trouser leg and I watched the adventurous ones climbing on the outside of my trousers keeping them below knee level. It only needed a small movement to send them scuttling to safety.

The date for the release of group 37c was announced, I made a calendar from a piece of card and like a prisoner ticking off the days of his sentence I crossed off each day and what long days they were. Most of my gear was handed into stores, leaving me with little more than I had when I reported to Maryhill Barracks to begin training four years ago.

The journey to The Hook of Holland was a happier one this time. Each mile was one more mile to civilian life again. On the boat taking us to Hawich I once more met Kingy. How odd that we should have bumped into each other so often and in differing circumstances. Kingy was going on leave this time and during the crossing we had many chats together, our R.E. training at Fulwood being the main

topic. How many of that group we wondered had been as lucky to survive as we had.

From Harwich, men of the group 37c, travelled by train to Dover. At the demobilisation centre there we were formed into alphabetical groups and, after a hot meal, began to queue up the last rites of demob. Passing in single file from one point to another we turned our various remaining items of kit into segregated piles. Knives in one pile, forks into another, mess tins on another heap and so on until all we had were the clothes we were wearing, a kit bag, personal cleaning item such as tooth brush, razor, towel and a change of underwear. The pieces of kit were thrown onto the piles with much emphasis and loving! We came to a gigantic menswear department to choose our civvy clothes. The colour choice was small. I chose a pin striped gray suit, a gray mac, a trilby and black shoes. The fit of the suit was reasonably good so I poked all the khaki gear into my kit bag. Papers signed, pay given with travel warrant and ration cards collected. I walked out of the centre not Lawrence 14340452, but Mr F. H. Lawrence ready to meet the challenge of settling into civilian life again which didn't come easy.

Appendix A

Abbreviations

A.C.C. Army Catering Corps

A.P. Anti-Personel

A.T.S. Auxiliary Territorial Services

A.W.L. Absent Without Leave

B.D. Battle Dress

C.B. Confined to Barracks

C.O. Commanding Officer

C.R.E Commander Royal Engineers

C.S.M. Company Sergeant Major

C. & J. Carpenter and Joiner

D.C.R.E. District Command Royal Engineers

D.P. Displaced Person

D.R. Dispatch Rider

DUWKS A general term for amphibious vehicle (D - Factory serial no. U. body type K. W. lorry chassis)

ENSA Entertainments National Service Association.

E.N.T. Ear Nose and Throat

F.B.E. Folding Boat Equipment

F.F.I. Free From Infection

H.E. High Explosive

H.Q. Head Quarters

L/Cpl Lance Corporal (one stripe)

L/Sgt Lance Sergeant (without crown)

Lt Col. Lieutenant Colonel.

M.O. Medical Officer.

M.P. Military police.

M & V meat and veg.

NAAFI Navy Army and Air Force Institutes

N.C.O. Non-commision Officer

O.R. Other Ranks

PLUTO Pipe Laid Under the Ocean

P.O.W. Prisoner of War

P.T. Physical Training

P.U. Pick Up

Q.M. or Q.M.S. Quartermaster Sergeant

R.A. Royal Artillery

R.A.M.C. Royal Army Medical Corps

R.A.P. Regimental Aid Post

R.A.S.C. Royal Army Service Corps

R.E. Royal Engineers

R.E.M.E. Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers

R.S.M. Regimental Sergeant Major (W.O. I)

S.M. Sergeant Major (W.O. II)

U.K. United Kingdom

V.D. Venereal Disease

W.O. I Warrant Officer (First class)

W.O. II Warrant Officer (Second class)

W.V.S. Womens Voluntary Service