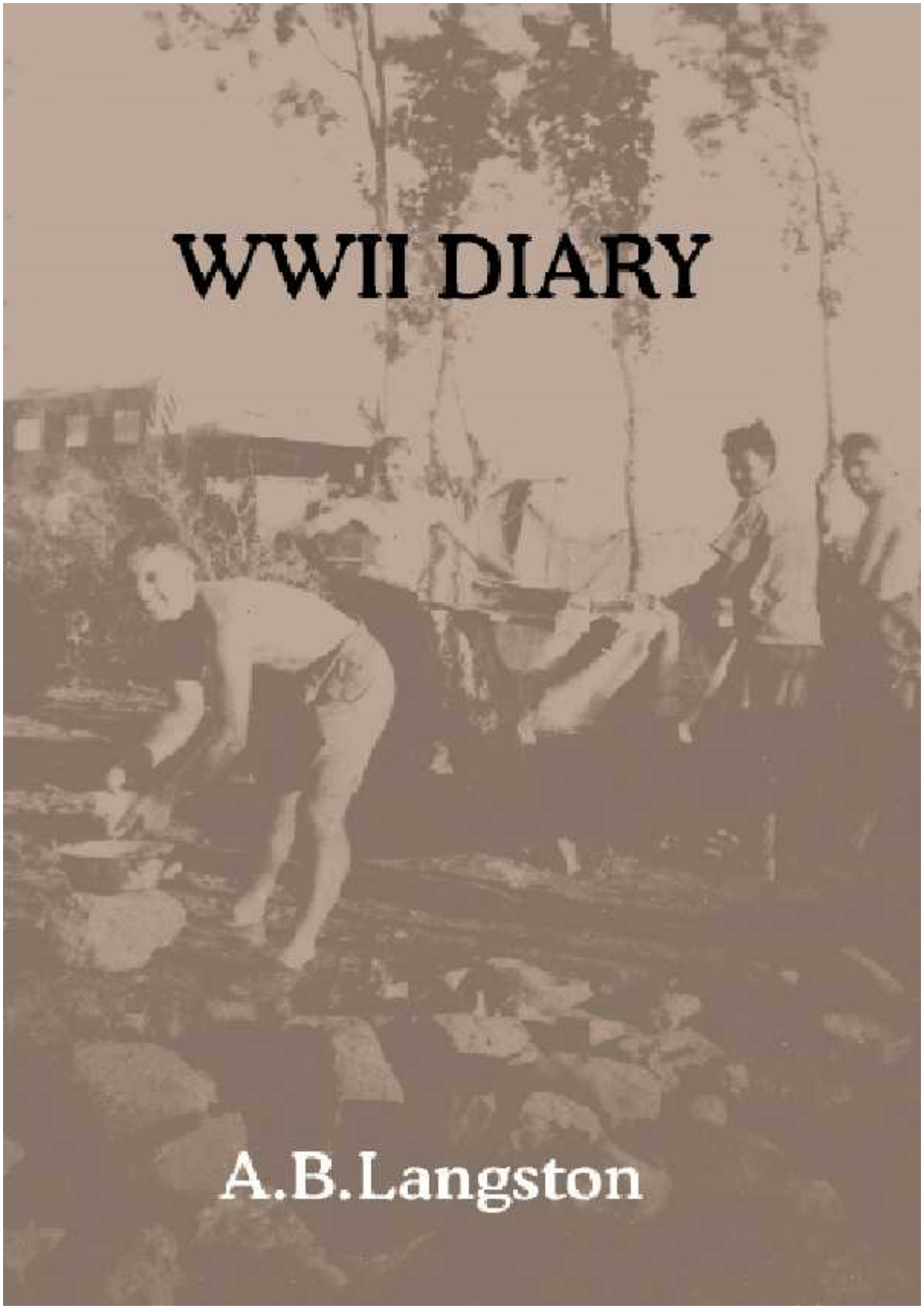


WWII DIARY

A.B.Langston

The following narrative refers to a period that began 60 years ago, and led to the beginning of World War II. This was to last 6 years, and has been written about many, many times. This is my contribution to that time.

As war clouds gathered in 1939, all young men between 20 and 21 years of age in July, were to be conscripted into His Majesty's forces, subject to a medical examination as to fitness. I had to report to the Territorial Army drill hall for my medical in the August. This establishment just happened to be about 200 yards from where I lived with my parents, at 110 York Road, Southend-on-Sea. I therefore failed to qualify for travelling expenses.

Fortunately I passed my medical A1, after which you were questioned as to which department of the service you were best suited to. Having been trained as a plumber since leaving school, I opted for the Royal Engineers, which was by no means certain, as the majority were put into the P.B.I. (Poor Bloody Infantry). Eventually my call up papers arrived, together with travel warrant, with orders to report to the 4th T.B.R.E. at Hyderabad Barracks at Colchester, Essex.

My first sight of the place that was to be my home for the next 6 months training period, was by the back gate to the barracks. I had got lost walking from Colchester station, and was directed across fields as a supposed shortcut. After walking from the back to the front to the guard room, I was questioned as to how I had got in. They couldn't believe I had found a loop hole in the place, and I hadn't even joined! To be fair, the barracks had been vacated by the Oxford and Bucks. Light Infantry, and had only just been taken over by the R.E.s I was in fact, probably the first R.E. recruit to walk in through the back gate. My address then became 1883052 Sapper A Langston, No. 1 Party A Coy 4th T.B. Royal Engineers.

Life became very hectic from reveille to lights out, the day being split up into periods, each of 45 minutes duration. There was a 15 minute gap between each period, spent rushing back to barrack room and probably changing from battle dress into denims, or perhaps into P.T. kit. There was never too much time to spare before "On Parade" was ringing in your ears.

Battalion orders were posted every evening on the notice boards and it was very necessary to read them. Failure to do so could result in being put on a charge, known throughout the Army as a 252. So one soon learned that discipline was of paramount importance.

Training in the camp was very varied, ranging from lectures to square bashing, rifle exercises, and target practice on the rifle ranges. We also did Bailey Bridge building against the clock. At the end of training, a team of about 30 sappers could span a gap of 150 ft (445 metres) in 30 minutes. These bridges were to become a very important part of most theatres of war. From the initial launch, the bridge could be strengthened to take a class 70 load, ie. A 70 ton tank. This was done by attaching additional sections to the sides and on top of the original sections, to the maximum of 3 sections wide and 3 sections high.

We also were trained in wet bridging. This consisted of pontoons joined together by steel road bearers, and pushed to the other side to complete the crossing. Our wet bridging was carried out on 6 inches of ice, at Abberton resevoir.

Also in a sappers training was the use of explosives, mainly gelignite, (which had a pungent smell of pear drops), and gun cotton. This was a cutting explosive about 6x3x1.5 inches, and looked like a slab of polystyrene. It had a conical shaped hole in the centre to take a primer and detonator, and was used for cutting through steel girders etc.

Another part of our training was the handling of anti-tank mines, and delving into the ins and outs of enemy mines, and how to defuse them after location. Locating them was done with a metal detector, fixed to the end of a wooden arm about 4 ft. long. This was swung through 180 degrees at arms length, when, if passed over metal, a high pitched whistle would sound in the ear phones that the operator would be wearing. He would then place the detector at its highest pitch over the mine, which would then be marked by the sapper following in the operator's footsteps. The area would have been laned off with tapes so that the whole area would be thoroughly covered. This was carried out as a daylight operation and then as a night exercise, and always in silence.

Also in our repertoire were lectures on poison gases, also the wearing of gas masks in gas chambers. The building of barbed wire defences was carried out also at night with coils of barbed wire, and iron pickets, which were screwed into the ground at about 10ft. intervals. The wire was then run out and attached to the pickets. Each side of the long pickets, an apron of wire was laid and anchored to the

ground with short pickets. This was called a D.A.F. (double apron fence), always laid against the clock in training.

During the foregoing, we were gradually getting kitted out. Our battle dress usually fitted where it touched, and we had to parade in front of the tailor for alterations. I still hadn't got mine back one month after enlistment, and almost ran out of cotton from sewing the sleeves back on to my jacket, due to doing rifle exercises every day. I think I was the last one to become a uniformed soldier, having grown tired of answering the question as to the whereabouts of my battle dress.

Thankfully, I was properly dressed before our completion of training passing out parade. During the training period, weekend leave was almost impossible to get, I think I made it about once from after duty on a Saturday until 23.59 hours on the Sunday. Anybody checking into the guard room after that time, was deemed to be A.W.O.L. worth about 7 days confined to barracks, which also meant reporting to the guard room every half hour from retreat (18.00 hrs.) until lights out 22.15 hrs. So much for training, now for the real thing!

6 MAR 1940. I was destined to join along with about six other sappers, the 290th Army Troops Coy. R.E. I was put in charge of this party, and armed with travel warrants, we travelled from Colchester station to Farnham in Hampshire. This unit was a Birmingham based T.A. unit, being made up to strength with fully trained conscripts. Initial question from the C.S.M. was, had we had our embarkation leave? And the answer was in the negative. A look of surprise appeared on the face of C.S.M. Joyce (little "Nap"). He went missing for about 10 minutes whilst he phoned Colchester to find out if we were pulling a fast one. As if we would.

What followed was a series of inoculations, and the promise of 5 days of leave the next day, with the understanding that we would return immediately on receipt of a telegram, the company being on 24 hours standby to embark to France. About 3 weeks later we received our marching orders, having spent the last 2 weeks route marching all over Hampshire. Our departure from our billet at Goldhill Manor was a rather sad occasion, as there were hordes of relatives at the station at Farnham to see their men-folk off. Little did we realise how quick we would be returning.

Recollection is rather dimmed as to how we crossed the Channel, at least we didn't have to swim over, and I can't remember the name of the ship, or also the point of disembarkation. What I do vividly remember was the sight of the cattle trucks lined up in the sidings, I know they were cattle trucks because written on the side of said trucks were the words "8 Chevaux/40 Hommes".

When we started trundling along in this undignified way towards Bapbaume, it was hard to realise we had joined the British Expeditionary Forces (B.E.F.). We eventually stopped about 2 miles outside Bapbaume, alongside what looked like a high walled enclosure with nothing inside it. It transpired that this was an ordnance stores dump, with small hut accommodation for our platoon to live in. My first job was to recce the possibility of getting a water supply into the "dump". This resulted in the running of a 2 inch galvanised iron water pipe along the road towards Bapbaume and connecting to the end of the town water main. At this time it was noticeable that quite a lot of locals were pushing their belongings away from the German invaders. I was just about to make a connection to the water main, when a

message arrived ordering me back to camp immediately. We were pulling out, having barely enough time to get my kit together. (I was to pass this very spot again in 1960. We were on route for a holiday at Wassen in Switzerland. We were travelling in an old Ford Anglia, and yes, the hole I had left in the road had been back filled. Well, they had had 20 years in which to do it. I had another surprise that day, after we stopped for the night at a small hotel at Vitry Le Francoir. It was the sound of traffic going over the wooden chesses of a Bailey bridge. I just had to go and have a look at it, still going strong some 20 years after it was built. Well done the sappers! – Back to the fray of 1940…)

17 MAY 1940. We rejoined our H.Q. section and the rest of the company, now with our own transport, and set off for we knew not where. After quite a few stops and starts and various false alarms from dispatch riders as to the whereabouts of the Germans, we stopped for the night in a village outside Amiens. As darkness fell about 50 motor cycle combinations passed through the village, with machine gunners in he side cars. They waved at us as they passed, and drove into Amiens and captured the town. They weren't too bothered about us, thank God, else this would have been a different story.

The next night was spent in an empty warehouse at Boulogne docks. During the night, there was quite a bit of shelling in the distance. When the warehouse doors were rolled back at first light a ship lay alongside, offloading 2 pounder anti tank guns, manned by Welsh guardsmen. We thought that we would embark on this ship when empty, sail off westwards, and land again further down the coast. Imagine the surprise when the White Cliffs of Dover hove into sight, a very welcome sight to say the least. Our thoughts went out to those left over there, as were all of our electricians, who were laying dummy landing lights at Orly airdrome near Paris. They eventually rejoined us about 1 month later, all safe and in one piece I'm pleased to say. Thus ended our short sojourn in France, which was of about 4 months duration.

Our first night back in "Blighty" was spent asleep on a train travelling from Dover. It wasn't until we were awakened at around midnight, to find that we were at Tidworth. We got on to a fleet of 3 ton lorries to off load at the barracks and to a very welcome slap up supper of 2 eggs and chips and bread and butter, with as much tea as you wanted. Before bedding down in barrack rooms, we were told there would be no revellie, but that breakfast would be served until 9.30. I forget the name of this holiday camp! Also, anyone could go off barracks provided they had some form of head gear, steel helmet included. It seemed funny to see so many men walking around with helmets on, berets being stuffed into the corner of one's kit.

My intention was to get on the phone to my brother, Ern, but every public phone in town had an almighty queue, so I gave up on that one. It was three days before opportunity presented itself to phone. By this time our unit had been transported to Aldershot. Whilst 300 troops were milling about in the middle of the square, I spied, about 400 yards away, a long building with the words 'Stanhope Lines Post Office', with a telephone box at each end of it.

Here was the ideal opportunity I had been waiting for, which I seized with both feet. With a quick march I was soon occupying the nearest booth, and after reversing the call charge, I had not been missed when I returned to the milling mob on the square at Gibralter barracks.

Although it was now June 1940, they were dark days indeed. The evacuation at Dunkirk had started when boats of every shape and size sailed across the Channel to get the troops off. Before Dunkirk fell to the Germans 331,000 troops were evacuated from the beaches.

We were now employed in ways to keep the Germans out, should they follow us. We were under canvas at Rushmoor, and the majority of the unit were employed on what was known as the "big dig". This was an anti tank ditch, which when completed, encircled the Aldershot garrison. It was dug manually, being about 7 feet across at the base, and then sloped at 45 degrees to ground level. The vertical side was reinforced with brushwood wired together to stop collapsing of the earth. It was encouraging to see the number of civilians that took part in digging the trench, all volunteers of course.

At this time, guard duties were very tense. As soon as darkness fell it was even money that a yellow air raid alert was on. This meant that the duty section were called out to patrol the camp, in addition to the usual 6 men patrolling. The scare was if the Luftwaffe dropping paratroops, so all eyes were skywards during the yellow air raid alert, which usually meant all night. Just as a reminder as to the seriousness with which things were viewed, the sentry pounding his beat outside the guard room was forced to read a notice board at the end of his beat, which read as follows:

SENTRY! THE ENEMY MAY STRIKE AT ANY MOMENT.
YOU MAY BE TIRED, HUNGRY COLD, AND WET.
BETWEEN THE ENEMY AND YOUR PALS, THERE IS YOU.
THEY TRUST TO YOUR EYES, EARS, NOSE AND BRAIN.
IF YOU FAIL THEM, THEIR LIVES ARE IN DANGER, IT'S UP TO YOU,
PLAY THE MAN.

I don't know who composed that, but everybody knew it off by heart, after having read it every time they pounded the beat every five minutes.

Since the fear of invasion had diminished thoughts were given to arranging accommodation over the winter months, now fast approaching. This turned out to be a major building operation, as we had to convert a whole block of unused stables into living quarters. Walls were demolished, windows built in, walls plastered, and floors cemented.

GIBRALTER BARRACKS, ALDERSHOT 1940.

After the installation of double bunks, we had a smashing barrack room. It was from this room that I started what I shall call my Cook's circular tour, but more of that later, like four years and 7 months. We were gearing ourselves up for another embarkation, this time the destination was mostly conjecture on our part, and of course alldetails were top secret anyway.

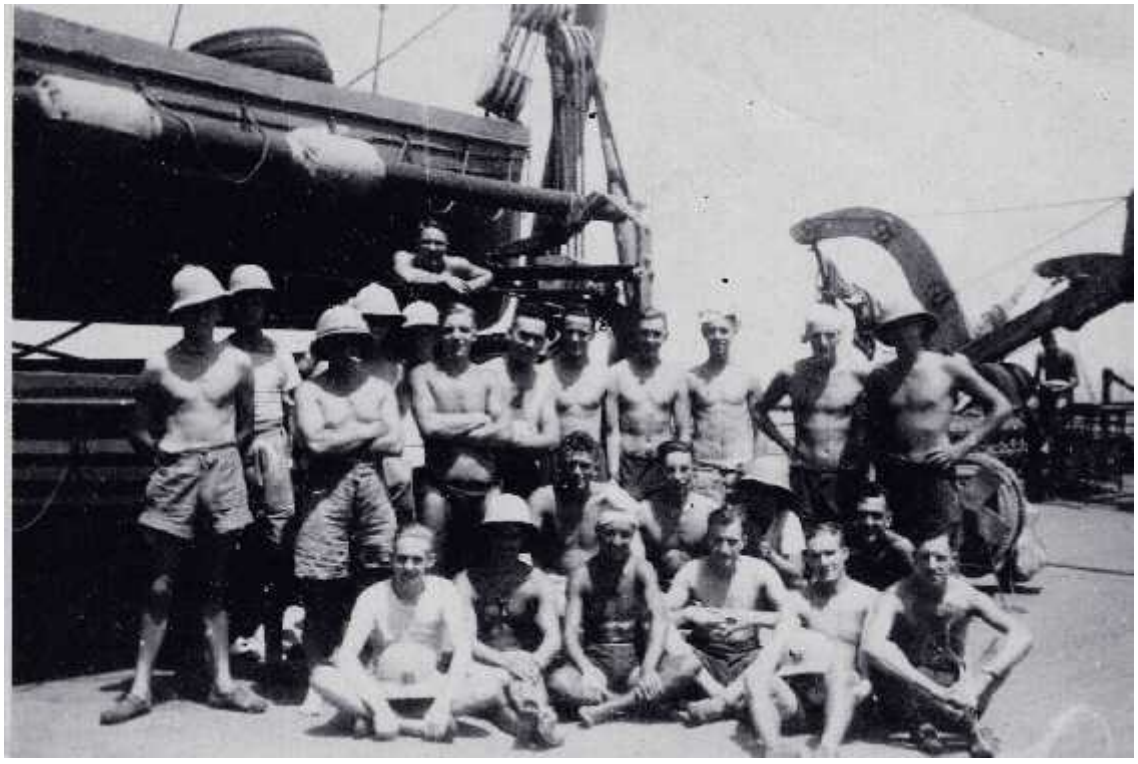
Christmas 1940 was upon us, and I have, surprisingly, unearthed our Xmas menu, duly signed by all of our platoon, together with half a dozen A.T.S. girls, who I promise you, I have no knowledge of. They could only have been Catering Corps staff, but have been the butt of much banter amongst people who see it.


Royal Engineers
S.A. Tunnelling Coy.
Christmas, 1940
MENU
Mulligatawny Soup
Roast Pork Roast Beef
Apple Sauce Sage & Onion Stuffing
Roast Potatoes
Brussel Sprouts
Rich Fruit Pudding
Sweet Flavoured Sauce
Fruit Nuts
Mince Pies
Minerals Beer Cigarettes
GIBRALTAR BARRACKS
166. Downing St

My mum and dad paid a surprise visit to me in January. How they found me was always beyond me. That was on Sunday the 19th Jan 1941. They must have got B&B, because they didn't go home until the Monday.

SUNDAY 26 JAN 1941. I hitch hiked to London having left Aldershot at 10.30, and arrived 12.30. Then caught the 1.50 p.m. from Liverpool St. to Southend. This was a fairly risky business, as I hadn't got a pass. Anyway, I left Southend at 7.10 and arrived safely back at barracks without any problems.

TUESDAY 4 FEB 1941. Left Aldershot for port of embarkation. The world and its wife were at Aldershot station to see us off, despite all the secrecy. The train stopped at Carlisle,
where tea was served on the train – very welcome. We resumed our journey, arriving at Glasgow, where we embarked on the Llangibby Castle. We were destined to spend the next 3 weeks on this vessel, before we touched land again.



LLANGIBBY CASTLE
("LITTLE NAP" CSM JOYCE, 3RD FROM LEFT STANDING)

Our first port of call was at Freetown, Sierra Leone, British West Africa. To reach there we spent the first night down the Clyde, and finally setting sail at 10p.m. on the 8th Feb. We then sailed in convoy due westward for 3 days, and actually sighted icebergs. Thoughts were beginning to turn as to what Greenland was like, but we eventually turned southwards, having out flanked any fear of torpedoes from U-boats. Life jackets were one's constant companions, if only to sit on. I was sea sick on the second day out, also 1 member of crew was buried at sea. Weather was very windy, and the sea very rough.

H.M.S. Birmingham joined the convoy in the afternoon of the 13th, the weather being very cold with hail stones. The battleship 'Rodney' joined us on the 14th and the weather was warmer and improving. This was the day I lost my wrist watch. Whilst sitting on toilet, which was a long shaped channel continuously flushed with sea water, the strap on my watch broke, and my watch was committed to the deep. After initial anger, I thought that if that's all I lose in this lot, I won't do so badly.

Sunday the 16th Jan. 1941 brought the best day so far at sea, but was disappointed that H.M.S. Rodney left the convoy. It was the most beautiful sunrise I'd ever seen. Monday the 17th Jan. saw H.M.S. Renown and the aircraft carrier, Ark Royal join the convoy, the sea being like a mill pond. The days were being spent more like a holiday cruise, with six laps of the ship every morning, with lectures on basic Arabic words, reading books, and listening to the A.T.R.E. band. In between I was forever writing letters home.

The weather was now very hot indeed, and some of us had taken to sleeping on deck at night, due to the heat below decks. The Ark Royal and The Renown left the convoy on the 21st, replaced by H.M.S. Malaya. The convoy was well protected with about 8 warships. The temperature was so high now, that we were ordered to wear P.T. kit in the morning and tropical kit in the afternoon.

There was much of interest to see on most days, such as the comings and goings of the naval vessels, and the constant zig-zagging of the convoy. The weather was still very hot, getting quite a tan almost all over, but we were not allowed not to wear our topees.

2 MARCH 1941. The convoy at long last arrived in Freetown, where fuel and water tenders filled up every ship. The local natives milled around the ships in very crude canoes, probably home made. They would barter bananas for anything you wished to part with. I had a 'fair-isle' sleeveless pullover which was too tight for me, so that went down to the boys in the canoes, in exchange for bananas. The popular game was to throw a penny down into the water, and in they went after it, coming up with the penny between their teeth. When all the ships had been fed and watered, we left the harbour on Saturday the 8th of March, at midday. At 5p.m. (17.00 hrs.) one of the twin engines decided it had had enough. We carried on with the one engine, but I was very queer all night. Case of banana-itis I reckon. It was Monday before I felt better. Saw a school of porpoises, at the same time as a tropical storm.

At 9.45 a.m. on Tuesday the other engine decided to stop in sympathy with its partner. Within 30 minutes of stopping, the convoy had disappeared from sight, and a destroyer came back and circled around us. They lowered a lifeboat carrying a team of marine engineers, who took parts from one engine to service the other one. We were under way again at 16.30 hrs., but heading very slowly back to Freetown, accompanied by our friends in the destroyer.

We arrived back to an empty harbour at Freetown on the 15th. On the way back, our escort twice shot off at full speed to identify smoke on the horizon. We were thankful for their presence, which was rewarded with a sack of potatoes from the ships store. They had asked our ship,

via a loud hailer, for the potatoes, and cheers broke out as the transfer was made. We were to stay in Freetown until the next convoy arrived, when we would be allocated so many troops to each ship.

The day after our 2nd arrival in Freetown, 16th March 1941, a battleship and an aircraft carrier sailed into the harbour, a very reassuring sight. Since we had to vacate ship, everybody was employed cleaning the ship, including all paint work in the cabins. We were now going ashore in tenders for route marches, complete with brass band. It was like a carnival to the locals, especially the young nude kids of which there seemed to be thousands. At least I've never seen so many at one time in one place. After the one hour march, we were free for one hour to do as we wished. It was not funny to be greeted at the dockside by the sergeant major. About 40 of us were 10 minutes late back to catch the departed tender, which resulted in the loss of 2 days pay when we paraded in front of our c.o. the next day, with the threat of no shore leave at our next port of call.

The awaited convoy duly arrived from "Blighty", a lot bigger than the one we were with originally, the ships were also of greater tonnage, such as the Empress of Canada, P&O ships : Orcades, Otranto, Orion, Louis Pasteur, and sorry, I can no longer understand my shorthand.

Suffice to say, we (my platoon) went on to the Orion. Our H.Q. went on to the battleship Nelson, but were kept mostly below decks. The rest of the company went on to the Empress of Canada, and once again we were on our way, albeit 30 days after out original departure. This delay, with hindsight, was in my opinion the salvation of our unit – more of which later.

Having had a 05.00 hrs. revellie on the day of our transfer to the Orion, we were ready to hit the deck. Most of us were sorrowful to leave the Llangibly Castle, having got to know the boat and its crew. The bosun especially comes to mind. He was nicknamed 'Rubberneck', who, due to an accident at sea, had a neck which had a twist to port. During our voyage with him, he rigged up a weighing machine for all and sundry to be weighed. I was 9 stone 9 lbs. On enlistment, but was now 11 stone 3 lbs. This life must have agreed with me.

9 APR 1941. We were now having lifeboat drill every day, as there was a reported armed merchantman in the area. The clocks have now been advanced 1 hour twice in 3 days, must be sailing eastwards.

11 APR 1941. The weather has turned very cold, the sea has got rougher, like I'm feeling today. Our escorting naval boats have been busy identifying ships on the horizon. Luckily, no fireworks. We are wearing battledress again, as weather has turned cold. We were having quite a run-in with the military police on the ship. They kept booking our chaps for not wearing their topees, and we had to enlist the help of our officer to get the order lifted. The o.c. troops on the ship deemed that we had been at sea 30 days longer than most troops, we could be excused wearing topees. Needless to say, it didn't go down too well with the original passengers, especially as they had to squeeze up a bit to accommodate us. 16 APR 1941.We arrived off Cape Town at dawn, but could not dock until 16.30 hrs. The next day, 17th April, we had shore leave from 13.30 hrs. to midnight. It was a wonderful place, but our big disappointment was not being able to go to the top of Table

Mountain. We walked up as far as the aerial cableway, but operations were suspended due to too high a wind. Another disappointment was that we never met "The Lady in White". She apparently met every convoy that came in and sung "Land of Hope And Glory" to the troops as they came ashore.

18 APR 1941. Went ashore again, window shopping.

19 APR 1941. I forget who I was with, but we were met by a local lady and her daughter. They asked us if we had anything special to do, and would we like to go to the cinema, which needless to say, was gratefully accepted. Having seen the picture, we went out to be met at the roadside by the lady's chauffeur driven car. We were then whisked away to her house, which was quite something, and sat down to a slap up tea. She wrote my address on a silver leaf, and said she would contact my parents, and she was good to her word. Don't ask me what became of the silver leaf. It was certainly a very eventful day, and not unusual for hundreds of troops.

CAPE TOWN. APRIL 1941.

20 APR 1941. We left Table Bay in convoy at 15.00 hrs., enjoying a last look at Table Mountain from the sea. Life reverted to the usual routine. The weather was very changeable, battle dress one day, K.D. (khaki drill) the next. Spent a lot of the time in the swimming pool. Had a lesson on morse code. The news on the radio was very grim.

27 APR 1941. Crossed the line (equator), and had a ducking in the swimming pool, something to do with a ritual when crossing the equator. They had quite a "to do" on the Nelson, because it was the

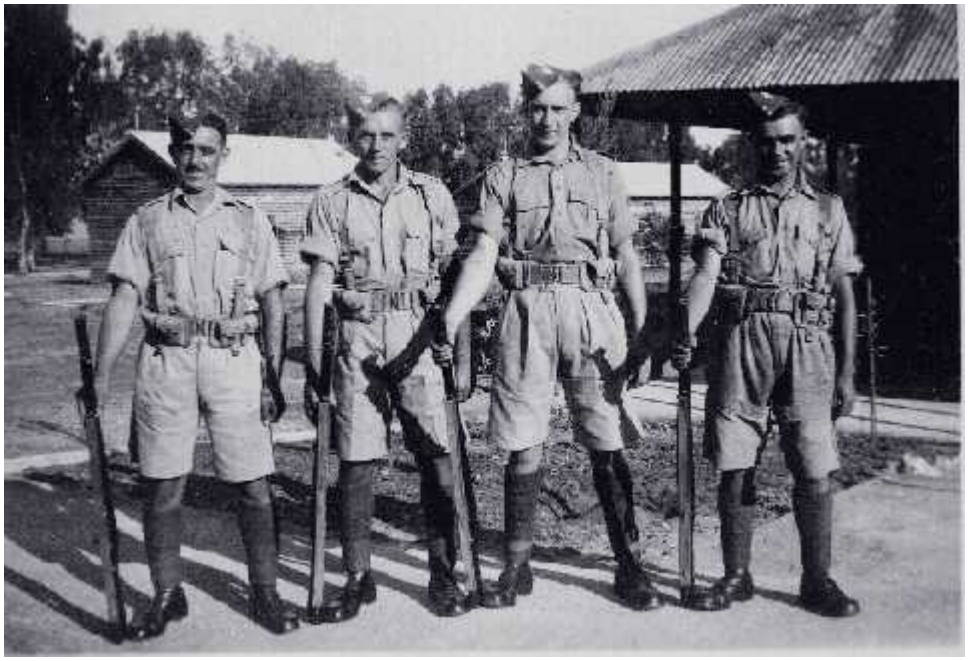
first time it had crossed the line.

29 APR 1941. All A.A. guns on the troopships are now constantly mounted, and there is much activity amongst the naval vessels identifying distant ships. Four troop ships and their escort left the convoy bound for Bombay we are told. Lots of conjecture as to our destination. Methinks it will be the Suez Canal.

6 MAY 1941. At long last we sailed into port Tewfik, greeted by the wonderful sight of the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth riding proudly at anchor. They had sailed across from America, unescorted by any naval escort, due to the speed they travelled. The next couple of days were spent cleaning our quarters and getting ready for disembarkation from the Orion. I still liked the Llangibby Castle the best, as the Orion rolled too much for my belly.

We eventually parted company with the Orion on 9th May, after a 04.30 hrs. revellie. At 07.00 hrs. we boarded landing barges to take us to an old tub called the Ethiopia, to sail us majestically up the Suez Canal at 17.00 hrs. After the luxury of an ocean going liner, this really was a joke. It was just indescribable, and one wonders what the owners were claiming off the British government for the service. I was detailed to the off landing party at the landing stage, at least making it possible to be first off the boat. Preparations were now taking place to entrain us to our next destination, this involving a train journey which finished up breaking down.

11 MAY 1941. It was about this time that we realised how lucky we had been by breaking down and being delayed by about one month. On our arrival up the Suez, hospital ships were returning from Crete and Greece with troops that were in our original convoy, having been overrun by Germans. It transpired that half the convoy sailed straight to Crete and Greece, and the other half went to Singapore, where they were captured by the Japanese. Dark days indeed.



READY FOR GUARD DUTY AT SARAFAND.

After our train journey we found ourselves at a place called Sarafand, which is a Palestinian equivalent of our own garrison town of Aldershot.

The only problem with garrison towns is that the "bull" takes over. We enjoyed lovely barrack rooms, where we had to endure a 2 hour siesta every afternoon, on account of the heat. When the sun had gone down we were allowed out into the town. The nearest place of note was Tel Aviv, where we enjoyed the swimming. There was of course the garrison cinema which was also well patronised.

It was on the 21st May 1941, that I caught the eye of the powers that be. On company orders that night, under promotions and appointments, was the news that the U/m sapper (yours truly) had been promoted to lance corporal, w.e.f. that day. This of course meant that instead of being shouted at on the barrack square, I was qualified to do the shouting, which I must confess I didn't like very much. One amusing story springs to mind regarding the square bashing. Surrounding the square was a concrete drainage channel, measuring about 3 ft. across by 2 ft. deep. As the squad were distancing themselves from me and the sergeant, I said I'd better turn 'em round, to which the sergeant said "Let 'em go!" Within seconds they were crossing the drainage channel, some stepping down into it, and others jumping across it. If you have heard of Fred Karno's army, this was it. I just yelled, "Halt", but don't think my voice was carrying. You can imagine the chaos, and how I ever got them into some sort of order, I'll never know. So much for Sarafand! We were at this time getting our own transport, which had caught up with us from Blighty.

This transport was to be our life line for the next 3 or 4 years, the first port of call being Tiberius, which overlooks the Sea of Gallilee. This move took place on the 5th June 1941, but we were only there long enough to get a couple of swims in the lake. Whilst there I was kept busy doing plumbing jobs in the billets occupied by our unit.

OUTSIDE THE BILLET PALESTINE, JUNE 1941

During the couple of weeks we were in Tiberius there was a general state of awareness, and all units were standing by to cross the border into Syria. This country was being controlled by Vichy French troops, coupled with German technicians. One wondered what opposition they would put up, but short of one or two demolitions of roads and bridges, there was very little.

One such bridge was at a small town called Damour and spanned the river of the same name. Our company had the task of rebuilding it, which proved quite difficult, on account of its height, about 70 ft., and the fact it was spanning a river. The old bridge was of timber construction with trestles resting on the river bed. This necessitated the partial damming of the river, which fortunately was not fast flowing at this time of the year. As this was on the main road to Beirut, it was imperative that it was carried out as quickly as possible. Meanwhile the Vichy French forces capitulated, and the German technicians disappeared. Whilst the bridge building was going on, I was employed on repairing the roads, just a matter of collecting hardcore from the surrounding hills and filling in the potholes. This was a very necessary job, to ensure the smoother running of the Army transport, especially as some of the holes could be 2 ft. deep.

My next port of call was to be Beirut, with an advance party to form a 24 hour guard over the vacant barracks. When we arrived, the place was overrun with Bedouin Arabs looting the contents of the barracks. They had to be threatened with rifle fire before some sort of order was restored. Eventually, these Bedouins who were employed there by the Vichy French, were now working for us. It wasn’t long before a mountain of rubbish was piled up in the centre of the parade square.

The rubbish included hundreds of bed mattresses which were alive with bed bugs. A drop of petrol and a match, soon put paid to that lot. At the end of each day, the Bedouins, mostly women, were going out looking like the Michelin tyre advert, due to the amount of clothing they had wrapped around their bodies. In their position, who could blame them? Incidentally, this victory in Syria and the Lebanon, was Britain's first land victory of the war.

Guarding the barracks went on for about 3 weeks, the only consolation being that there was no bull, just a matter of posting a sentry on the main gate every 2 hours. Eventually the company moved into the barracks, and we were relieved of guard duties. We were now allowed out into Beirut, and I purchased a watch from a local w.o.g. (worthy oriental gentleman). I was with a very good buddy of mine named George Bennett, and we had a photograph takes of us both overlooking Beirut harbour. I'm afraid neither of us looked very happy, and I captioned the snap, "Fed Up and Far From Home". I can put a date on that as 27 July 1941. The day before (26/7/41), we had visited the American University, but I can't recall anything about it, I think it was closed.

Fed Up and Far From Home

The country above Beirut was very picturesque. One of the villages we visited at our leisure was a place called Aley, a favourite watering hole. That was one village higher than Broummana, where we were fortunate enough to be billeted.

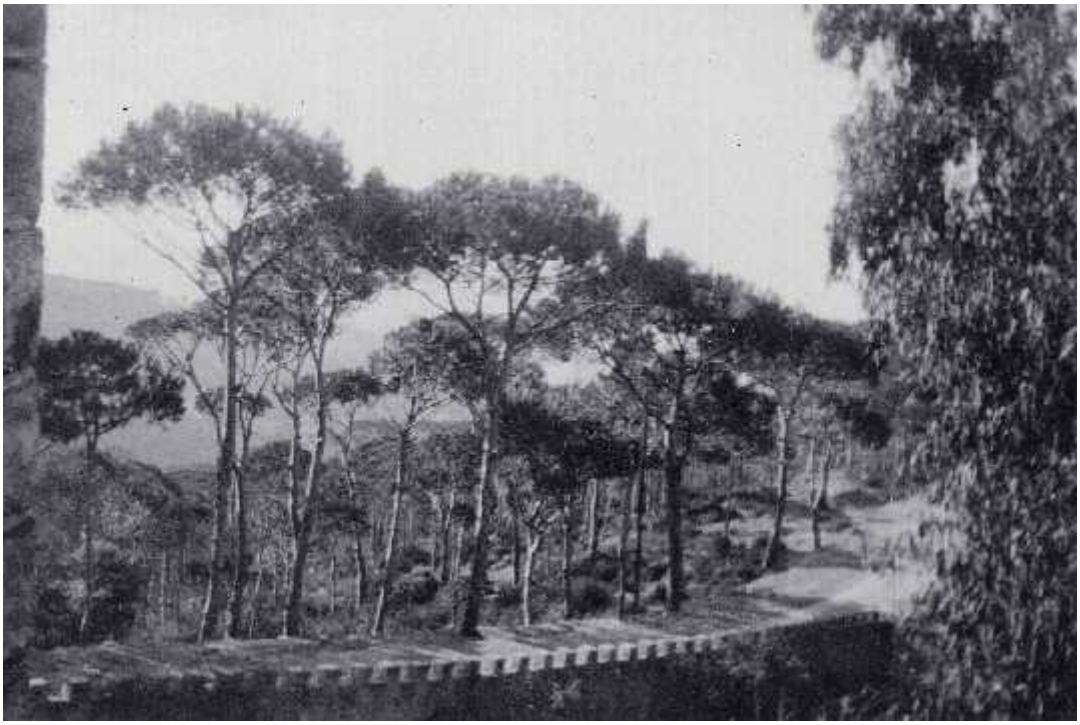
The billet was. surrounded by cedar trees.

GOOD
SCENERY,
SPOILT.

LEBANON,
NOV. 1941.

Whilst stationed in the barracks in Beirut, I had the bad luck to break my bottom dentures, which meant a trip to the Army Dental unit. Must have been a bit of tough meat I was chewing. Joe Kirk, our cook, would have to go – I don't mean that, he fed us well.

During this time, I was usually employed carrying out plumbing jobs of one sort or another. I notice from my notes that I visited Aley (where our watering hole was) to look at a plumbing job, accompanied by Percy Jennings (a Cockney boy from Dagenham), and Driver Tom Fields. The next day, 2nd August 1941, we were attached to the 1st Australian Corps, but despite being with them for 4 or 5 days, have no recollection of what they were doing there.



THE CEDARS OF LEBANON

Still, we never got detailed guard duties during our absence from our own camp, but you can bet your bottom dollar, that they will detail you as soon as you get back. The problem with guard duties was that I, as guard commander, was awake all night, but the sentries did 2 hours on and 4 off. I think we earned the extra few bob the stripe brought.

9 AUG 1941. We were now standing by to go to Deir-Ez-Zor, which is a fairly large town on the river Euphrates. But first of all, and most importantly, I had forgotten that my "choppers" were at the dentists in Beirut. Thus with a jeep and driver, I was transported into Beirut to retrieve my possessions. The journey to Deir-ez-Zor was via Homs, Hama and Alleppo. It entailed quite a long ride over some very rough rods, during which I took snaps of anything that was of interest. These were taken whilst sitting on the back of a 3 ton. Dodge lorry, and they came out fairly well considering the shaking up we were getting.

The river, which was spanned by a suspension bridge, flowed through E. Turkey and Iraq to join the river Tigris and thence to the Persian Gulf. I was now picking up quite a few words of Arabic, enough to get by with when trying to organise the local labour that the army employed.

My final notes from my diary for 1941 were :-
25 DEC. "Excellent Xmas dinner, thanks Joe".

XMAS 1941.

31 DEC. "Saw the old year out, my thoughts are with you at home."

1942. We were now mainly employed on building an ordnance depot, which consisted of four electricity sub-stations, linked together with power lines. There was about half a mile between each station, built as a square, so that meant quite a lot of wooden poles, similar to our telegraph poles, to be put up about 100 yards apart. With the poles erected and the cables run between them and into the sub-stations, I then had the job of connecting them to the main cable. This was done by means of a wiped soldered joint. The only snag was that the Army never carried plumbers solder or moleskin wiping cloths on its inventory. I was expected to "fall over" some lead and tin, and manufacture my own solder. I shall not bore you with too many details, suffice to say that I eventually got the joints on with cardboard wiping "cloths".

My next project was the pipe work appertaining to a petrol supply depot. This was mainly in 4 inch galvanised iron pipe, which had to be bent to 135 degree angles. These bends were made in the workshop and then transported on to the site which had not then got any identity. This depot on completion had 20x2 inch filling points and 10x1 inch filling points. Our platoon were at this time on detachment at Kuneitra, which is about 30 kilometres from Damascus. We were encamped next door to a pig farm, and the sight of hundreds of young piglets running around got too much for our Joe, the cook. He was thinking of our Xmas dinner, so he decided he would acquire one of said piglets and fatten it up for Xmas 1942. Everything was working nicely until the farmer had a count up and found one missing. The next thing was that the Military Police ("redcaps") were searching our tents for the missing piglet. No, they didn't find it. I seem to recall that it left camp rather suddenly in a 15 c.w.t truck and returned after the all clear.

About this time, I awoke one morning, and felt very much under the weather, and decided to stay in bed and report sick. The medical orderly L/Cpl. decided I was fit for light duties and I was ordered to clean all the 60 rifles in the armoury. I could hardly stand up, let alone clean rifles, and reported back to Sgt. that it was my intention to stay in bed. He had a medical officer examine me, who had me sent to the C.C.S. at Damascus. Diagnosis :- Malaria. This is a very common disease in the M.E. caused by receiving the affection of a mosquito which had bitten an infected person. We were receiving a daily dose of quinine in tablet form, which was supposed to combat the effects of malaria. I can't remember how long I was a guest at the C.C.S., but long enough to learn hownotto play brag. I gambled my week's pay on the "certainty" of having three kings. I was gutted to find that I was against a chap with 3 threes. I don't think I have played cards since.

JUN 1942. Being recovered from the bout of malaria, I and my fellow "pipe stranglers" were running a 3 inch water main, which necessitated crossing the main road to Egypt. We had diverted the traffic off the road whilst a trench was dug to take the pipe. We were about to start putting the pipe into position when the Military Police ordered me to fill the trench in immediately. Reason was that the 9th Army was moving to reinforce the 8th Army who were, being pushed back to Alamein. I had half an hour to get the trench back filled, and as luck would have it, I was able to lay my hands on a couple of lengths of 4 inch pipe, which when screwed together, and laid in the trench, formed a perfect duct to push a 3 inch pipe through later. We timed our back fill to the minute as the first of hundreds of vehicles came

thundering through.

So life went on in Syria and the Lebanon.

Meanwhile a little guy called Montgomery arrived to take command of the 8th Army, and hopefully reverse some of the disasters of this war. When there were slack periods everybody in our platoon would be employed making dummy tanks and aeroplanes – no don't laugh – this was serious. The framework of this "armour" was fabricated out of 3/8 inch mild steel rod, and when covered in fabric and camouflaged, they looked quite realistic, especially when viewed by enemy spotter planes.

Meanwhile, General Montgomery was rapidly building up his supplies and equipment for the big push out of Alamein. This momentous event took place at 22.30 hours on 23rd October, when Rommel – the desert fox – must have wondered what had hit him. It was only a few days before Monty had recaptured all the lost territory previously lost.

Our own unit were then on "stand by" to move up to the Egyptian front thus losing our 9th Army status, and becoming part of the 8th Army. We were eventually staged up outside Alexandria which was to be our next port of embarkation for we knew not where. It was whilst

sunning ourselves that the next bit of excitement occurred. A 15 c.w.t. jeep was coming through the rows of tents, stopping every 100 yards, being greeted by the voice of General Montgomery telling us to break ranks and gather round his jeep. He discreetly told us that big things were about to happen and that he had every confidence in success. During the next day it was evident that a move was imminent and at the fall of darkness we were on our way into Alex and boarding an L.C.I (Landing Craft Infantry). After setting sail all troops were ordered to stand by for a message from o.c. troops, who informed us that the invasion of Sicily was in progress, and that was our destination. Big cheers all round.

Next day bought fine weather, and dropping anchor about half mile off the island. There was plenty of activity at sea, with ships disembarking troops and supplies at convenient landing spots.

There didn't appear to be much opposition ashore, only the sound of small arms fire and Bofors ack ack guns firing at German spotter planes. Our platoon eventually went ashore and were instantly put to work making additional landing places.

Our accommodation was two man bivouacs, which we dug into the ground about 1 foot. Incidentally, our address had now changed from M.E.F. (Middle East Forces) to C.M.F. (Central Mediterranean Forces) which told folks at home that we were in a different theatre of war. After about three weeks on Sicily it was evident that things were moving again. I can't remember the place of embarkation, but it was about half way up the island towards Messina. The invasion of mainland Italy was now on, and we landed at Syraceuse. On day one I can clearly remember our first job. To demolish the concrete sea wall which was about ten feet high and slope it back to a manageable gradient, so that vehicles could roll straight off ships on to the land. The front line at this time was at Augusta, about five miles away along the coast – a bit too close for comfort. If we got pushed back from there, there was nowhere to go – only into the sea. Perish the thought!

Supply ships were now queuing up to get into the docks which could take three ships. There were hundreds of troops off loading these vessels and stacking the supplies wherever they could. I was employed in adapting an oil pipe terminal from metric to imperial size to enable our oil tankers to dock, connect up to the terminal and pump straight up to the oil reservoirs. This terminal was let into the wall of the dock just above the water level. We were at this time being subjected to dive bombing attacks by Junkers 87 dive bombers, which appeared out of the very bright midday sun. They had sunk a ship half a mile off shore, then another ship about a quarter mile out the next day. It crossed my mind as I and numerous other bodies, poked our heads into the recess in the sea wall where the oil pipe was, that the next air raid would see a bomb in the middle of the mountain of stores. In the next instant we were all soaking wet, the bomb hitting the water about six feet away, between the ends of the two ships. Casualties : about a hundred dead fish. What you call a near miss. If it had landed ten feet nearer the land it would have killed hundreds of men, me included.

About this time, I remember a German plane being shot down by the Bofor AA guns, of which we had many. They were a rapid firing gun and every fifth shell was a tracer, like watching a firework display, only this was for real. I was at this time writing to my cousin Bill King,

he being a sergeant in the 11th AA Brigade H.Q., and I gathered from his letters that we were in the same country, and to keep eyes and ears open for any signs of each others units. About this time I was on detachment with three other men on a water point. We were filtering water from a stream at a point where a road bridge straddled the stream. We had our tent, latrines etc. all set up conveniently near our filler plant. It was a pleasant Sunday morning when a face appeared out of a 15 cwt. truck. I was greeted with
"I have been looking all over bloody Italy for you". Needless to say we had plenty of talking to do, followed by plenty of drinking in his sergeants mess. I was to see him four or five times, before we were drifted apart by the fortunes of war, I have met Bill King just the once since those war time meetings.

After returning from any detachment to our own unit, it was a racing certainty that your name would appear on orders the following day for guard duty. So it was fortunate that I was called upon to go on detachment, thus disappearing from the company duty roster. Such was the case one morning when I had to report to the company office with a detail of eight men. It transpired that I was to take the detachment to Florence, which was to prove quite momentous.

Setting off with a three ton lorry and 15 cwt. water purification unit, kapok self supporting canvas tanks and necessary stores, we were to report to the D.C.R.E. who would issue us with orders and billets since we would be about fifty miles from H.Q. We were not carrying any arms, (not even bayonets) since Florence had been declared an "open" city by the powers that be of both sides. This was designed to protect the buildings of historical interest from damage, but this did not prevent both sides from shelling each other over the top of the city, and we got quite used to the whistling of the shells as they passed over.

RIVER ARNO AND BRIDGE S.TRINITA

Our billet was a classroom in a school on the south side of the river Arno, and our first task was to set up a water point in the palace gardens. This was fairly clean water, since it was in the lake, but the civilians had to take it, despite long faces. We then had to set up a second water point on the south bank of the river, which was a different kettle of "dirty" water, and was hard work pumping it through our filters, and then being injected with 2 parts per million of chlorine. We then had to set up a third water point on the north side of the river, which meant that there was only 3 men per water point, when 8 men was the recognised number. So we were a bit stretched to say the least. We had now been in Florence for about 10 days and were very apprehensive about what we thought were German troops wandering around, and there was nothing we could do about it. Every morning 3 of us traipsed across the Ponte Vecchio, to be greeted one morning by the sight of our water and plant strewn all over the place. Someone's shell had dropped short during the night, hitting the adjacent tall building, and leaving a lot of clearing up to do, before we could even think about pumping water out of the river. The queue of civilians was coerced into lending a hand, and we started producing drinking water after about an hour.

We had another setback a couple of days later. There had been incessant rain during the night, resulting in the river level rising about 4 feet and submerging our pumping set which was on the towpath about 10 feet down. We hoisted the pump out by the attached hose and got it on to dry land. My mate, Joe Lovell soon had the engine stripped down and dried out, and to my surprise it started pretty quickly. After we had started pumping water into the canvas tanks it was evident that it was so muddy that it would not pass through the filters. This meant that we had to dose the tanks up with handfulls of alum, which was stirred in and then left to settle. This made a lot of the mud in suspension to settle to the bottom. We were in business again. The civilians looked in amazement at the difference in the water in the tanks and that at the supply tap. We had to demonstrate the quality by drinking it ourselves, and it wasn't long before they were bringing cakes and goodies for us, which I'm sure they could ill afford or spare. And so three tired men traipsed back across the Ponte Vechio to our billet, which was certainly better than being under canvas.

In the foregoing pages, I have completely forgotten the details of my promotion to full Corporal (two stripes). I was called into the company office, and after the usual salute was asked by our platoon officer whether I was keen on promotion. I thought what a silly question. Having replied in the affirmative, I was then told that it would mean my being transferred to No. 3 Platoon, which I immediately refused. After explaining my reasons of refusal, which was that I was employed more or less at my trade and that I had been in 2 section (E & M) since joining the unit from the T.B. I was dismissed from the office, and reading company orders about three hours later, I was delighted that CPL "Snakey" Thornhill had been transferred to 3 Section and that I had been made up to full corporal. And so I had quite innocently been the cause of getting rid of a most hated man in the platoon, who had put me on a 252 for the only charge I ever had in my army career, but that is another story.

Continuing the saga of Florence, we had a surprise visit from our C.O. Major Beaumont M.B.E. He was very interested in our activities,

especially one Spr. Jack Rees who was sitting on an upturned filter powder container enjoying 40 winks. I quickly explained that we were getting very little sleep, and that I had given my authority for him to break off a while. At that moment, and right on cue, the sound of a shell came whistling over.
"What's That?" He asked. He then asked whether we would like a relief party to be sent out to take over, but I said we were coping satisfactorily, gave him a salute, and he was gone.

The following day however, a whole 3 platoon arrived (60 men, including 4 NCO's and an officer), to take over and do the job that nine of us had been doing for three weeks. After picking up our bits and pieces from our "hotel" room in the local school, we were on our way back to the luxury of a tent and the inevitable bull of being at H.Q.

After reporting to the C.S.M. he graciously gave me permission to miss parade the next morning. Enjoying a lay-in was not to be, as the orderly runner was waking me up saying that the C.O. wanted to see me right away. I gave a message to the runner that I would be there as soon as possible as I had been excused duty, and was not yet dressed. When I did eventually present myself, he said he wanted a full account of the day to day events in Florence, the names of the men and their duties. I told him that they all did a wonderful job. He also wanted facts and figures of how much water we were pumping etc. And so ended the saga of Florence, or so I thought.

Many months later, having moved from the C.M.F. to the B.L.A. (British Liberation Army), there was quite a bit of activity around the notice board, and someone came to tell me that I was the cause of the excitement. When things had quietened down, I dragged myself to read company orders myself. It read : "The under mentioned (u/m) NCO has been awarded the British Empire Medal (Military Division) in recognition of gallant and distinguished service in Italy. Authority :- London Gazette dated 19 APR 42)".

I was absolutely amazed at the award, but disappointed that there were not one or two oak leaves (mention in despatches) for some of the lads in the party. At least they enjoyed the booze up in Ostend that evening. On parade next morning I was checked for being improperly dressed – I was not wearing the
medal ribbon, and was ordered to get down to the Q.M.s and draw the ribbon right away. That just goes to show how "bullish" our unit was.

In contrast to messing about with water in Florence, I now had the job of unblocking a chimney, except this was no ordinary chimney. It was a factory chimney that the R.A.F. had managed to knock 45 ft. from the top of. The resultant rubble was well and truly jammed up inside the chimney. I can say that this is the dirtiest job I've ever had in my life. After about 3 days of sweat and soot, we eventually got the stack clear and the steam boilers could become operational.

At this time the 8th army were making big advances up the country and the rumour went round that Mussolini was dead. Spirits in the platoon were quite buoyant and we were being asked to consider different aspects of leave in the U.K. which I shall now bore you with. The following notes are taken from a letter to my mum and dad, dated 5 May 1945, written on a day off and vile weather conditions, very

similar to today infact.

"Although the fact is not uppermost in my mind, I shall be on my way home on 7 days leave in another 18 days. This is on a L.I.A.P. scheme whereby 10% of the company can go on leave each week. This morning, we have had to make up our minds whether to stay on Python or go on a new scheme known as LILOP. I will try to explain what the War Office codes mean. "Python" means that if you have served more than 4 years overseas, you become eligible for repatriation. That doesn't mean that you only have to serve 4 years, as in this theatre of war the "sentence" is 5 years. After that time, a man can get 28 days leave in the U.K. and then serve a minimum of 2 months in another unit, after which he can be sent on ashortsea voyage. If that sounds mind boggling, the LILOP (Leave in Lieu of Python) is just as bad. Roughly, this is what it boils down to. You can have 3 days leave in the U.K. but then lose all Python rights, which means they could send you on a long sea voyage.
"Anyway, we have all played safe and signed nothing, as on Python we should be in this until next FEB 1946, that is if we are not demobbed in our release group before then. Meanwhile we are looking forward to our 7 days on LIAP (Leave in Advance of Python). "

I think all the different leave schemes were designed just to hoodwink the public, -not dissimilar to today. In this same letter home, it was nice to read that the 8th Army Radio had reported German troops in Northern Germany, Holland and Denmark had unconditionally surrendered at 08.00 hrs. today. It was also nice to hear Winston Churchill's glowing tribute to the 8th Army.

Before leaving Italy, our platoon managed to get 48 hours at a rest camp, a sort of glorified Butlins. I also managed to get to the top of a certain leaning tower – Pisa, now it can be told.

Our unit eventually sailed on a T.L.C from Leghorn (Livorna) with all our own transport, bound for Marseilles. We then proceeed northwards on a route coded G.F. (Gold Flake) bound for Ostend. The journey was spread over 7 days. It was here that my 7 days LIAP leave came through. It was a bit disappointing that the unit was not being repatriated to the U.K., but we were told that we had another 6 months to serve abroad.

My leave date eventually arrived 23 MAY 45, when I received an unexpected welcome by all and sundry. What I least expected was such a crowd turning up at Southend station, but I had tears in my eyes when I saw my Dad. He was in no fit state to have walked up to the station, and needless to say he had my helping hand on the way home. It was decided that it would be a good idea if we got a doctor's letter regarding dad's health, which I could present to the Garrison Adjutant at Shoebury barracks with an application for a leave extension on compassionate grounds. I was granted a 14 day extension with pay and ration allowance, and was given the assurance that my unit would be informed. Otherwise, I'm sure I would have been posted as AWOL on my return to camp. It was certainly nice to have the extra time with the family. There were questioning faces in the company office when I returned, but at least they didn't show me the guard room.

Events were certainly moving very rapidly. The current news was that our beloved. company was to be disbanded – in today's. language,

made redundant, -and that all the. N.C.O.s were to be posted to the 6 T.B.R.E. at Preston as potential instructors. We were posted in "lots" of 6 or 7 a week. At the same time, some of the older men were coming out for good on their age group, which at this time was about group 24. My group was 26, due out in Feb. 1946.

On my posting to Preston, the first thing to happen was a promotion to acting unpaid Lance Sergeant, so that we could avail ourselves of the sergeants mess and consequentially pay mess fees. On my interview regarding becoming an instructor, I pointed out that I was due out of the Army in about 6 months, and it was hardly worth wasting time swatting up on an instructor's course. To which came the reply that maybe I would then like to sign on as a regular soldier. You can guess what my answer to that was. During the time I was waiting for a further posting, I looked up Duke's sister and brother in law who happened to live in the area.

And so another posting came along, this time a bit nearer home. I left Preston en route for Stratford upon Avon Racecourse, being assured that transport was arranged to pick me up at Stratford station. Of course, said transport was non existent, so after waiting about half an hour, I started walking to the camp carrying all my worldly possessions. About 1 hour later and 100 yards from the entrance to the camp, a 15 cwt. truck pulled
out from the entrance and stopped when he saw me. Enquiring my name, I almost refused the invitation to complete the journey in style. On reporting to the company office, I got the distinct feeling that I was not wanted when I was told that they were in an advanced state of disbandment.

I cannot remember much about the camp, least of all the name of the unit, only that it was an Artisan Works (A.W.) outfit. The work I was allocated was being in charge of a load of sappers, picking up spent match sticks!

"Your Country Needs You!" was the slogan on billboards plastered all over Great Britain. Another interesting job was white-washing mountains of coal, to detect unauthorised people nicking it, no don't laugh, it's true.

After about 1 month of utter boredom I was once again hitting the road, this time to some obscure address in Aldershot. This camp turned out to be where we had converted the stables into billets in 1940-41. Amazingly, I was told to occupy the self same bunk bed that I had vacated some four years plus earlier. It was the same place that my mum and dad had visited me before embarkation to the M.E. Could have been the completion of a Cook's tour, but there was another posting yet to come.

The possibility of a final posting nearer home was not to be, as it turned out to be Liverpool. This posting turned out to be much more interesting than the last 2, since it was here that I got my 28 days Python leave. Before my leave became due, I was working on the Aintree racecourse – home of the Grand National steeplechase. During the war the hundreds of stables had been heated to accommodate American troops, and it fell to me to dismantle the heating system, ready for the horses again. Back to my leave, when I arrived home, Mum was entertaining Babs Middleditch, Edie Refoy, and Ida Langston, who had been widowed in the

war. The war was by then virtually all over, bar the shouting, and one could begin to enjoy oneself if possible.

I was attracted to Ida at our first meeting. My cousin Arthur, Ida's first husband, had been shot down at Charleroi in Belgium in a Wellington bomber on 16th April 1942. John and Joan, Ida's two children, then aged about 5 and 3 years old had been perfectly brought up in most difficult times by their mother. I'm sure that their presence made my attraction to Ida all the greater.

After going back to Liverpool to finish my "time", which turned out to be another 6 months, I was corresponding with my new found family. My letters seemed to be very welcome, and I was then applying for 48 hours leave passes so I could visit them. It was on one of these excursions that I made my proposal of marriage.

As soon as I knew the date of my "demob", 4th Feb. 1946, we were able to fix the date of our wedding, which was to be 16th Feb 1946, at St. Erkenwald's Church in Southend. I don't think anyone could accuse me of time wasting after I knew I would be out. I had been a long time in the service of my country – as with many millions of others – but these last few weeks were going agonisingly slowly.

A chat with the Cook Sgt. During one of the spud bashing sessions, certainly paid dividends. After telling him that I was tying the knot, I enquired about the possibility of collecting any surplus dried fruit, prunes, raisons, currants etc., to which he replied, "No problem". That was the ingredients for the wedding cake solved. The "loot" would be in a sandbag, to be picked up on my next weekend leave. Bearing in mind that all this stuff was rationed, it certainly was a blessing in disguise.

I can't remember who made the cake, a three tier, square shaped creation, which opened all eyes. The other thing I do remember during that very exciting day, was that we had our reception for 40 odd guests at Offords in Southend High Street at a cost of 4/6d per head, that's 22 ½ pence in crazy money. Our wedding day went off according to plan. In case you were wondering, John and Joan had been claimed by Edie and Cliff, who lived at 38 Canada Grove at Bognor Regis.

We spent our honeymoon not very happily, because we missed the children. We did go to the Palladium, and saw Tommy Trinder. But by the Wednesday, we went to Bognor to retrieve the children, much to the disappointment of Edie, who absolutely adored them.

And so it was back to civvy street for one ex-soldier, having collected a civvy suit and one or two bits and pieces from a depot at Northampton. (They never did send 2 pairs of long-johns when they restocked). I went back to my old job, which was mandatory to all returning troops. The only problem was that the job was with my brother Ern, who lived at Thorpe Bay, which meant leaving home at 5.40 a.m. and getting home at 7.40 p.m. except Saturdays, when I had an early day at 4 p.m. I suffered this for 4 years, until I got a license to build 11 Ulster Avenue, Shoeburyness, which is still our abode after 50 years come 13 March 2000. The house took nearly 12 months to build, due to the building material shortages after the war, and it was like being on holiday when we did move in, not being able to get used to an extra two hours in bed. Unfortunately, Ida was not too happy for a few weeks

after we moved in, due to missing her friends and relations at Chingford. It was just the reverse with me, being back to the town I was born in.

ALF & IDA -16th February 1946.