FORMATIVE YEARS

RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY YEARS

1925 - 1947

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Dedicated to those of my generation who gave their lives for their country

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PREFACE

This account of events is not, in any conceivable way, intended as a definitive let alone literary record of the period in question. My object was to convey my recollection of those years as I saw them at that particular time, not necessarily with the benefit of hindsight.

Readers may consider some comments to be disparaging, particularly in regard to serving members of the armed forces in non-front line units. May I therefore unreservedly acknowledge those often unsung and courageous men of the Corps of Royal Engineers, Royal Signals, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Royal Army Medical Corps and many others, who regularly worked alongside infantry and tank units in front line areas, and sustained a high casualty rate in so doing.

Suffice to say that the views and opinions quoted in this account are those held by my fellow soldiers at those times when the battlefield was, or appeared to be, the exclusive preserve of infantry, tanks and artillery.

I have no regrets about my time as a soldier. To me, and countless others, war was a necessary evil. If I did not kill the enemy he would kill me - a very simple issue with an equally simple remedy. Whilst I did not see very much action, I experienced sufficient to understand the horror and futility, the fear and suffering. Conversely one witnessed compassion and incredible strength of character under extreme circumstances. Perhaps I was lucky, neither wounded nor scarred mentally but, from conversations with other wartime veterans who concur, by far the majority of us left the Army and quietly adjusted back into civilian life without any great fuss or bother. Today it would appear mandatory to plead posttraumatic stress with a hefty financial settlement to follow.

FORMATIVE YEARS - LAST DAYS OF EMPIRE

Born in May 1925 I was part of that generation spanning the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. It naturally followed that we quickly learned of the appalling casualties suffered by the country during the first war; one of my clearest recollections is that of the annual Armistice Day remembrance parade and service, very sombre and universally observed throughout the country. There was an ill concealed hatred of the German nation, which, not unnaturally, was transmitted to our receptive young minds.

The older generation optimistically described World War I as 'the war to end all wars" and entertained high hopes of the League of Nations to bring about this end. Parents were reluctant to expose children to accounts of war service by members of the family but, inevitably, with a child's curiosity we gradually became aware of the facts.

The years of peace, seemingly endless to us as children, were however passing quickly. The late 'nineteen twenties' bringing economic difficulties prior to graver international problems looming in the 1930's.

Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, and the Spanish Civil War did not however cause a great deal of concern to the average man in the street. The Royal Navy was still the mightiest fleet in the world maintaining the 'balance of power'; our school atlases triumphantly displayed a British Empire over which the Sun never set. In the light of our world standing the above events appeared to be of no great consequence. More ominous events were however taking place in Germany with the acquisition of power by Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party, presaging the occupation of the Saarland and Sudetenland, accompanied by re-arming on a vast scale. Throughout this period the League of Nations proved innocuous.

In Great Britain, despite negotiations between Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler, there was a feeling that war would be the inevitable outcome.

At about this time I was a fee-paying scholar at Morecambe Grammar School, having failed to obtain a scholarship. There was much talk of war and one afternoon playing cricket at school we were treated to the spectacle of four of the then new Wellington bombers circling overhead, firing me with the desire to join the Royal Air Force when I was old enough to do so. Prior to this I was extremely fortunate in seeing the German airship 'Hindenburg' on several occasions as it flew over Heysham en route to New Jersey. It was rumoured at the time, probably correctly, that its route westward over Barrow-in-Furness was deliberately designed to obtain aerial photographs of Vickers Armstrong shipyard.

The summer months of pre-War Morecambe provided holidaymakers with regular concerts at the Harbour Bandstand by regimental bands of the British Army in full dress uniform. I was now torn between my first love the RAF, and the colourful display of the British Army. Later events, beyond my control, would however decide the issue.

With the prospect of war looming closer the Government introduced measures to augment the Army by the formation of militia units; wearing blue blazers and grey flannels they spent periods of training at Morecambe presumably affiliated to various county regiments to which they would be posted at the outbreak of hostilities.

Twenty-one years of peace were coming to an end; as a fourteen-year-old schoolboy I excitedly anticipated future developments.

Several reasons have prompted me to write this account of events covering the period from my childhood to the present day, not least that of the apparent lack of knowledge on the part of recent generations relating to the lives of, and involvements relative to, the older generations. It is not my intention to cite any specific area but it does occur to me that little or no emphasis is given to recent events in modern history. There is nothing new in this, during my grammar school days in the 1930's History as a subject appeared to terminate around the time of Waterloo and Trafalgar.

Recent months have witnessed an upsurge in television documentary programmes about World War II. Whilst these have been of interest to me personally I gave little thought to the fact that others, especially the younger population, would evince a similar interest. I was to be proved wrong.

Over the years in the course of revisiting various locations in Holland and elsewhere where I fought in the war, I was greatly impressed by the determination of the Dutch people to retain and foster recollections of the war years, and forge links, for their children to maintain for the future. In recent months I have discovered similar sentiments applicable to the United Kingdom.

My determination to pursue this endeavour occurred whilst watching one such documentary programme whilst my wife was completely immersed in reading a book. When the programme ended I mentioned one or two incidents from the film to her to which she merely replied "you are ruminating". Despite this classic response the thought persisted that somewhere, somebody might be interested to learn about the life of an average youngster during the second quarter of the twentieth century; if not I could always prescribe it as recommended reading for members of my family.

My only claim to a limited immortality currently resides with an account, requested by the inhabitants of a Dutch village, of an action in which I was involved in 1944.

This along with accounts from other survivors of the action has been sealed and is to be stored for 100 years for future generations to peruse in the year 2100.

The latter half of this century has been relatively free of any major conflicts involving Great Britain and hopefully this will continue; I hope that these notes will in some way help to ensure that the death and destruction attendant upon two world wars within a space of twenty five years will never happen again.

Sunday 3rd September 1939 sitting in the kitchen with my parents listening to the wireless set we were informed, in sombre tone of voice by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, that a state of War now existed between Great Britain and Germany. With recollections of newspaper reports and photographs of German aircraft bombing Guernica in the Spanish Civil War, one half expected swarms of German bombers already en-route across the North Sea to start the first half of the match. We were of course, in our ignorance, supremely confident that the RAF would easily and quickly defeat such a move. In the event nothing happened - not just in Morecambe but throughout the United Kingdom, a complete anti-climax.

Most of the action took place in the purchasing and fitting of 'black-out' material for windows, and the mobilization of Civil Defence personnel such as Air Raid Precaution wardens, and Auxiliary Fire Service members. At Harrison's Cream and Chocolate coach garage next to our flat, all the coaches normally used for tours to the Lake District and Mystery Trips etc., were relocated. The garage assumed a new role as an Auxiliary Fire Service station for the duration of the War, fire appliances replacing the coaches. The sole military activity devolved upon the drill hall at Woodhill Lane where the local Company of the 5th Kings Own Royal Regiment was mustered to join the full battalion.

Frantic and completely inane measures were adopted by the civil authorities in which even I became involved as a member of the Sea Scouts. Events, of which outbreak of war is a typical example tend to propel all manner of unsuitable individuals into positions of little or no authority, but who, anxious to assert their importance, endeavour to create little empires bolstered by screeds of completely unnecessary paper-work on all manner of trifling issues. Caught up in this burgeoning wartime bureaucracy I, with my bicycle and steel helmet, was volunteered to report as a messenger at some requisitioned premises controlled by a typical civil defence nabob. From his office I was despatched hither and thither with countless bits of paper to other similar 'pumped-up' clowns. All this without a shot fired in anger!

Eventually it became apparent that nothing much was happening and normality returned. I was still attending the grammar school but, due to petrol rationing and other difficulties besetting businesses generally, my family were unable to continue paying for my education and I was on the 'job-market' but delighted to put school behind me. At fifteen years of age I commenced work as an office boy with Shell Refining and Marketing Company's refinery, then in course of construction at Middleton near Heysham, at a weekly wage of fifteen shillings (seventy five pence the present day equivalent), and it was during my time there that news of the capitulation of France was announced and the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkerque. These events are clearly etched in my mind to this day; the terrible feeling that the War was lost - it seemed impossible that the country could possibly withstand an invasion by the seemingly invincible German Army. Underlining this fear was the spectacle of thousands of British Army personnel arriving in Morecambe from Dunkerque. They resembled a completely broken and demoralised force. Arriving by train direct from Dover, bereft of equipment and weapons, they were initially sent to the Super Swimming Stadium, temporarily closed to the public, to clean up prior to re-kitting and re-forming into units.

War was beginning to bite. The 'phoney' War known hitherto was over. A unit of the Air Training Corps having been formed I joined, on the assumption that this would facilitate a quick route to enlisting for aircrew selection in the RAF. This entailed spending hard-earned money to purchase books on air navigation and the like. Not content with this I also became a member of the Home Guard unit at the refinery. Weaponry comprised Canadian Ross rifles of unknown vintage and five rounds of ammunition for guard duties. Based in a disused farm on the edge of Middleton Sands we manned a rooftop observation post to detect and, extremely optimistically, repel any attempted airborne invasion. In the event our only sightings centred upon bombing raids on Barrow-in-Furness and Manchester, clearly visible from our vantage point. On occasion we would be required to turn out on Sunday mornings to play the part of the 'enemy' in schemes involving the proper Army. Sunday being the traditional day of relaxation for soldiers there was much displeasure on their part to which they gave vent upon us with fiercely aggressive tactics. This was not a pleasant pastime for we civilians in uniform.

Home Guard duties finally ended when I transferred to shift work in the laboratories of the refinery. The pay was better and the work quite interesting plus the advantage of varied hours of work.

Morecambe was a relatively safe haven untouched by enemy action, apart from a couple of bombs deposited on Heysham Golf Course and another on a house in Douglas Drive. Whether these were intended for the nearby refinery will never be known; personally I can recall but one occasion, during a night shift, when a Junkers Ju88 was caught in searchlights whilst flying low over the plant. It flew on without incident.

Morecambe had been taken over by the armed forces, in particular the Royal Air Force, with station headquarters at the Clarendon Hotel, and hospital occupying the Midland Hotel.

Basic training of airmen with the emphasis on 'square-bashing' on the Promenade was the main activity; there were however other aspects of training for aircraft fitters and riggers operative throughout. The majority, if not all, of the service personnel were billeted in the many pre-war boarding houses in town. At a later date the Women's Auxiliary Air Force recruits replaced the RAF contingent. An interesting coincidence comes to mind from that period in that a Flight Sergeant Drill Instructor at Morecambe, crossed my path once again, many years later when I had taken up residence in Devon. Having a drink in my local 'pub I saw this individual and asked the landlord if he knew his name; he proved to be the same character but now elevated to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and holding down the position of Survival Officer at nearby RAF Chivenor. I was never very enamoured of the man and declined the suggestion of renewing contact with him on this occasion.

Holiday camps at Heysham and Middleton were occupied by an Infantry OCTU, and the 8th (Liverpool Irish) Battalion, The King's Regiment respectively. Weekdays would see platoons of sweaty, tired soldiers marching back to Heysham past the clean and tidy RAF recruits drilling on the Promenade. Needless to say there was little love lost between the two - to the extent that the Liverpool Irish were regularly marched to attention to avoid incidents between them. Sundays presented a different picture as the regiment paraded at full strength complete with pipe band marching to church.

A natural corollary of the OCTU presence was the proliferation of military tailoring establishments in the area, with branches of well-known firms such as Gieves etc.

Nightlife in town was excellent with three ballrooms, the Floral Hall, Winter Gardens and Central Pier; for good measure and for devotees of Old-Tyme Dancing there was also the Tower Ballroom - all fully licensed and within easy walking distance. Eight cinemas and numerous 'pubs combined to furnish a dream posting for the lucky ones.

Underlying this veneer of normality there were many reminders of the reality of war. At frequent intervals lists of casualties were published; friends from schooldays - one lost on HMS Hood, another serving as an apprentice-navigating officer with the Royal Mail line, and another shot down on virtually his first operational flight with Bomber Command.

Now aged seventeen years my thoughts turned to 'joining up' to avoid the possibility of being classified in a reserved occupation at age eighteen. Many contemporaries had already joined the RAF where the minimum age of entry was seventeen and a half for aircrew candidates. Alternatively the Fleet Air Arm accepted entrants at the age of seventeen and a quarter. Opting for the latter I attended an interview at the RN recruiting centre in Preston in the course of which I was found to be colour blind, thus ineligible for flying duties. It was suggested that I re-apply at a later date for service with the Royal Marines.

THE KING'S SHILLING

The only option now available was the British Army. One day I happened to spot a recruiting poster for the Royal Armoured Corps depicting the outline of a lean-jawed tank commander standing in the turret of a tank. Behind him, attached to the radio aerial a troop pennant flying taut in the wind. This was most impressive, and my imagination was fired immediately. The nearest Army recruiting office was situate in Lancaster where I duly made my interest known to an extremely ancient looking sergeant of the King's Own Regiment, an obviously time serving regular soldier with probably the maximum 22 years in India and doubtless wishing he was still ensconced on the sub-continent. Having completed the necessary paperwork I returned home to await developments. Some two weeks elapsed without word prompting another visit to the recruiter who informed me that he had not received a letter of consent from my parents - this was necessary because of my age. My father had destroyed the letter. A further letter, was intercepted by my mother who gave her blessing to the enterprise, and signature of consent.

Looking back and trying to put myself in my parents' position at that time I now realise the reticence on the part of my father to agree to my action. More significantly can I imagine the dilemma facing my mother in that situation? For a young person life is a great adventure - for parents in wartime there is the dreaded and ever-present presentiment of death or disablement of a son.

Events now moved quickly; late December 1942 a travel warrant arrived for me to report for a medical examination and final enlistment on 31st December at Kendal. This was my sister's birthday. Following a successful medical I was ushered in for an interview with a Major who congratulated me upon qualifying for service with the RAC. As a volunteer, opposed to conscript, it was conditional that an Oath of Allegiance to the King was sworn as we took the 'King's Shilling', in reality a massive seven shillings at the time. I was now a soldier signed up for a term prescribed as 'Duration of the War', which later proved not to be the case.

Within days another travel warrant arrived for my initial posting to the headquarters of the Royal Tank Regiment and depot of the Royal Armoured Corps at Bovington Camp, Dorset, to report on 4th February 1943.

At this stage the realisation of my commitment began to surface but, with the resilience of youth, did not unduly perturb me. Days passed quickly until the evening of the 3rd February when, in a gesture completely out of character, my father accompanied me to Lancaster Castle station to catch the 2200 hours Barrow to Euston train for the first leg of the journey. As the train left the station and I waved farewell to my father I felt a vague sense of unease commencing this irrevocable journey into the unknown.

I was not alone. Upon arrival at Waterloo station to catch the train to Bournemouth I found by the platform entrance a group of other pale, insecure looking lads of about my age, all destined for Bovington Camp. Naturally we all sat together in one compartment, also occupied by a burly Army Commando complete with green beret, which induced a suitably hushed conversation on our part in the presence of a real soldier.

The companionship of the others bound for Bovington added to my confidence. - their thoughts must have inevitably echoed those of mine at the time.

The train meandered slowly through the pleasant southern counties until arriving at our destination, Wool station, our picking-up point for Bovington Camp. Tumbling from the train we were confronted by a figure clad in pre-war service dress wearing one stripe and sporting a swagger stick - Lance Corporal Sidebotham, known to us hereafter as Sidi Botam. He approached us with words, never to be forgotten "Are you young gentlemen for Bovington?" Having affirmed this to be our intention his next words, infinitely less polite were " Well climb up on that bloody truck outside". We had arrived.

Bovington is roughly just over one mile from Wool, and during our short journey we saw a number of tanks, which we confidently expected to commence training with in a few days time. The next few days proved to be blur of frenzied activity; issue of uniform, denim overalls, beret, rifle, equipment, palliass and blankets, completed by the issue of identity discs bearing one's army number and religious denomination. Keith Ravensdale no longer existed, from that moment onward he became 14415918 Trooper Ravensdale K.S.T. to be buried, if necessary, as a member of the Church of England. Being C of E was a great drawback, as I later discovered, in that the vast majority of men belonged to this denomination and, as such, were considered fair game for fatigue duties and other tiresome activities on Sundays, whereas Roman Catholics were usually granted time off to attend church. It remains a moot point as to how many actually arrived in church however. The final task was packing and despatching my civilian clothing back home. I was not to wear 'civvies' again for the next five years.

The 58th Young Soldiers Training Battalion, my new home, inducted new entrants every fortnight, these were designated by specific troop numbers, ours being 47 Troop, and comprised approximately 60/70 men. Our first involvement as a troop occurred with inoculations TT and TAB and vaccination for which one was allowed one day's light duties.

Thoughts of any early involvement with tanks were completely dashed as we occupied our 1914 era wooden barrack huts at 30th Primary Training Wing. Our standing as soldiers was such that we were not even allowed to wear the cap badge of the Royal Armoured Corps - instead a disgustingly horrid bakelite General Service badge was our lot. Further humiliation followed in that our sole contact with the outside world was restricted to the PTW area and a YMCA canteen across the drill square.

In no uncertain terms it was made clear that we were considered unfit to defile the good name of the British Army by appearing in public for six weeks, or until we had completed the passing out parade should that take longer. The cinema just outside the gates was therefore out-of-bounds too.

Life was hard - no hot water and very limited washing and latrine facilities. Solid fuel stoves were fitted in the huts but we were loath to light fires, thus avoiding the need to clean out and holystone the surrounds, and black leading before breakfast and first parade each morning. Our day was devoted mainly to drilling with or without rifle; lectures upon the perils of venereal disease and the appropriate Army Act prescribing the particular penalties applicable thereto, God knows how it was thought possible that we could ever be in such a fortunate position to become exposed to such a fate, incarcerated as we were. During this baptism of Army life I first learned the origin of the expression 'to swear like a trooper', and quickly acquired a profundity of additions to my vocabulary. Our guides and mentors, in the form of drill sergeants and their ilk, were endearingly descriptive in their reference to our turnout and general standard. We were frequently informed that we resembled sacks of shit tied round the middle, whilst on more than one occasion I was singled out as 'marching like a f.....duck'.

At home I slept in pyjamas between laundered sheets on a comfortable mattress. My new environment provided double bunk beds with half filled straw palliass resting on wooden slats. Atop this I had three rough blankets, no pillow, and night attire consisting solely of my collarless shirt - the latter worn therefore for 24 hours each day. Two pairs of boots were issued - one pair to be polished to a mirror like intensity, the other smothered in dubbin for preservation of the leather. At regular intervals the process was reversed and the soul-destroying process of burning off the dubbin and imparting a high gloss undertaken.

One day in the YMCA I chanced across Arthur Butterworth from Morecambe, a fellow one-time member of my old Sea Scout troop. Even he, an old time acquaintance, seemed averse to be seen associating with one of the British Army 'untouchables'.

Life hardly seemed to improve. Our drill sergeant was Sgt Bull of the Somerset Light Infantry, quite a fatherly figure who was assisted by an arrogant lance corporal of the Wiltshire Regiment. In the opinion of the establishment it would seem that Sgt Bull was thought to be a little too amenable for the task of breaking down our civilian attitudes. He was posted elsewhere to be replaced by a towering figure from the Border Regiment. One of our number made the mistake of voicing his opinion about the change of NCO, as a result of which the whole troop was marched off for a vicious browbeating by the troop commander, Lieutenant Hicks who regaled us with finite details of the Mutiny Act, and our commitment as volunteers taking the Oath of Allegiance to the King.

Suitably chastened we continued with pounding the Square in preparation for our Passing-Out parade.

By this time I had formed one or two closer friendships with other members of the troop, and also taken the opportunity to assess the composition of the troop members. The Young Soldiers Training Battalions of each Corps (Artillery, Armour, Infantry etc.,) were composed of volunteers only. Enlisting at 17 years of age and undergoing a much harsher discipline than conscripts, they offered a good opportunity for the Army to monitor potential OCTU candidates. 47 Troop was a typical example with a wide spectrum of individuals from various walks of life. From the son of the Baron of Montgomeryshire to a chap from Hackney Wick, between lay a generous complement of boys from public, grammar and elementary schools. Quite a number were eventually commissioned. The system was fair and based entirely upon the leadership potential of the individual.

Currently much arrant nonsense is expounded about a classless society; breaking down barriers, and so forth. To this I can only say that in 1943 no semblance of class division or caste system was ever in evidence, despite the wide-ranging discrepancies in the backgrounds of troop members.

Issued with a razor and shaving brush I had never felt the necessity for using these as I was completely beardless. On First Parade in the half-light of dawn one morning, our liverish troop sergeant descended upon me with instructions to "remove that bum fluff". One more step to manhood.

Further improvements were taking place with our education, the assimilation of Hindi and Arabic at the hands of our bilingual tutors in the form of Regular Army timeserving wallahs in Egypt and India. From henceforth beds would be known as charpoys, rifles as bondooks, tea either char or kai. Maidens no longer described as girls but as bints. To be quick, jildi; couldn't care less, was alakeefic, whilst agreement was signified by the word mahleesh. I cannot guarantee the spelling but phonetically they sounded thus. In very short time these words and phrases took hold to the exclusion of all others. There were many other which have since fled my memory but they certainly constituted a certain colour and tradition engendered through the many years of foreign service throughout the world by the British Army.

The Troop duly made the Passing Out Parade with customary photograph to confirm; presented with our RAC cap badges and, most importantly, allowed to rejoin the outside world once again. Sadly a few did not make the grade and were posted elsewhere - others were retarded for a further six weeks. Our sympathies lay with those transferred outside the Royal Armoured Corps as they had specifically volunteered in order to join this Corps.

Now proudly wearing a silver RAC cap badge we moved a few hundred yards down the road to our new home at Stanley Barracks, the Headquarters and Depot of the Royal Tank Regiment. The accommodation, although slightly improved, was not a lot different from our previous quarters - we had however the freedom to explore Bovington and neighbourhood in whatever free time became available; this virtually non-existent, further circumscribed by lack of money. My weekly pay was 14/-d per week of which I made a voluntary allotment of 7/-d each week to my mother. Instead of possessing two shillings a day with which to indulge myself, I was now restricted to one shilling from which provision had to be made for the purchase of metal polish, bianco, boot polish etc., before any frivolous expenditure on tea and buns in the NAAFI. Fortunately I did not smoke at that time and, as will be apparent, it was impossible to even contemplate alcoholic drink of any description.

Life was hard and extremely demanding with no diminution of the rigorous, harsh in many respects, disciplinary standards. Our day commenced at 0600 hours terminating with 'Lights Out' at 2200 hours, during which time an almost impossible timetable was set for ablutions, barrack room cleaning, breakfast, first parade etc. The remainder of the day entailed lectures and instruction, followed by never ceasing cleaning and pressing of uniform, blancoing and brass polishing during the evening 'leisure' period.

From time to time the Troop would be detailed for guard duties from 1730 hours until 0630 hours the following morning, after which we resumed our full daily routine. Guard Mounting was an occasion dreaded by all concerned, particularly in hot weather. Upon completion of our normal daily programme, often in a filthy condition and covered in oil, we were required to clean up, have Tea then parade in Field Service Marching Order, i.e. greatcoat, valise, gas mask, water bottle, gas cape, rifle, bayonet and steel helmet, for inspection by our troop leader prior to assembling on the Square for a further inspection before taking over our duties. The inspection lasted for over an hour; for the greater part of which we stood to attention sloping arms in our tightly fastened webbing equipment, sweating profusely in warm weather conditions. Every so often one would hear the crash of a rifle and steel helmet hitting the concrete as some poor individual, overcome by the heat, would pitch forward from the ranks. The body was then removed under the supervision of the Orderly Sergeant, and replaced by another trooper held in reserve.

It was my misfortune to suffer a similar fate one day. Failing to get Tea, in the rush to be ready for the parade, I began to feel faint despite shifting my weight in the recommended manner to the balls of my feet. This was to no avail and I pitched forward helplessly. I was hauled off the Square, sent back to the barrack room, and instructed to report Sick the next morning. Reasonable enough on the face of it until the reality of the situation became clear.

Reporting "Sick" involved packing all one's kit and bedding, and handing this in to the Quartermaster by 0730 hours prior to joining the Sick Parade. This usually meant missing breakfast, as one's mug and mess tins had been stored with the QM by that time. The procedure with the Medical Officer required him to confirm that the individual concerned had genuinely fainted - should he decide otherwise, a charge of malingering would be brought against the soldier with the virtual guarantee of punishment. I was lucky, despite having my pride dented by my ignominious collapse on parade.

Training encompassed all aspects of crewing tanks, namely driving and maintenance, gunnery, radio, and tank command. Whilst I was reasonably happy to have a go at driving Matildas, Valentines, Crusaders and Covenanters, I was completely non-plussed when, sitting either in classroom or on the engine deck of a tank an instructor was endeavouring to impart to me the workings of the internal combustion engine, or the sophisticated complexities of the Christie suspension system. Somehow I managed to scrape through but vowing never to get involved, apart from dire emergency, with the inner bowels of armoured fighting vehicles or any other for that matter.

Wireless and Gunnery courses were more to my liking as I was already reasonably proficient in transmitting and receiving Morse Code although, apart from the training regiment, I know of no other occasion thereafter when Morse was ever used.

Being of timorous nature I approached Gunnery with caution even before firing a single shot. Guns, particularly large pieces with solid metal breech blocks, are dangerous contraptions and can injure the user just as much as the person at who it is aimed. My overriding fear was that of losing fingers in the six-pounder breechblock as it crashed into place after ramming a shell up the 'spout'. I quickly learned to tightly clench my fist as I pushed the round in, thus obviating any possibility of exposing any of my paws to needless amputation. Another nasty little propensity of guns was known as a 'misfire' when the firing pin failed to actuate the detonator in the cartridge case of the projectile. The method of dealing with such a situation was to 're-cock' the firing mechanism on two more occasions; should this fail only one option remained - extract the round from the breech, hold one's breath, and heave it out of the turret as quickly as possible whilst praying that it did not decide to explode in the process.

Despite the above cautionary notes I quickly adapted to guns and could quite literally strip and reassemble the co-axial Browning machine gun whilst blindfolded. This may sound somewhat unnecessary but did prove invaluable in the light of later experience on the field of battle.

Tanks were equipped with the 19 Set, a radio comprising three units: the 'A' Set for distance communication, e.g. between squadrons etc., the 'B' Set for use between tanks in a Troop, and the I/C (Intercom) solely restricted to communication between crew members within the tank.

One of my happier recollections of those days relates to wireless (as it was then termed) training. To simulate a more realistic appreciation of communication between units we were sent out with our 19 Sets in small trucks to various locations. The idea was to transmit to, and receive from other crews. We quickly learned that our radios had 'blind spots' such as valleys and other natural obstructions precluding any reception whatsoever. With this in mind we motored down to Lyme Regis, surrounded by hills, and spent a pleasant uninterrupted hour in a local 'pub confident in the knowledge that we were out of radio contact.

Gunnery instruction took place at Lulworth firing at old tanks on Bindon Hill. My gunnery instructor was Corporal Fred Neil, a native of Jersey unable to go home on leave because the German Army was in residence. He taught me, in addition to gunnery, the art of playing shove ha'penny at the Weld Arms, a 'pub in either East or West Lulworth.

Our final course, known as Collective Training, brought together all the aspects of tank training including navigating by sun and stars for use in desert warfare, followed by visiting Canford School on a recruiting drive, and half a day at Swanage for a swim in the sea.

The nett result of six months at Bovington was my new found status as a gunner/operator class III with, I think, an extra 6d per day pay. Success at last.

It was now Goodbye to Bovington. The parting of the ways for most of us - some were destined for OCTU, the rest of us to service regiments of our choosing (so we were told). I was approached to apply for OCTU but lacked the confidence to do so; instead, in common with others, applied to join the 17/21st Lancers simply because they sported the 'Death or Glory' skull and crossbones cap badge. Impetuous stupid youth!

Six months had brought about many friendships, albeit fleeting. The years ahead would, from time to time, bring some of us once again into contact, whilst others remained just a distant memory - almost an extension of one's schooldays. Some recollections are still retained; Watkin Williams-Wynn, son of the Baron of Montgomeryshire fighting John Challoner in the barrack hut one evening, both seventeen year old public schoolboys battling away to exhaustion, and close to tears, over some petty argument. At some later date I heard that Willie Wynn had been found dead in bed from a lighted cigarette igniting his bedding. If this was the case it would perfectly befit his life style - a typical latter-day Victorian county family type not completely in accord with the demands of the British Army in regard to the lower orders. One of his prized possessions was his beagling horn, which he carried with him during a night march of some 36 miles through Devon and Dorset. As our section of eight men marched through villages and hamlets en-route, Willie Wynn would delight in blasting away on his horn to awaken inhabitants for miles around. He was extremely popular with every man in the troop.

John Challoner was commissioned and later posted to the Westminster Dragoons where I met him once again in Belgium, this time as my superior and acknowledged with a salute and whispered personal greeting. Another troop member, Eric Smallwood, was commissioned into 1st Royal Tank Regiment and had the signal honour of leading the first tanks into Hamburg when the city was taken in 1945. He appeared in the national newspapers a few years ago, accompanying the Duke of Edinburgh, to a civic reception commemorating the event in Hamburg. Another person I became friendly with at Bovington was Eric Pennington; unfortunately he did not survive an encounter in Normandy when his tank engaged a Panther at short range and five crew members were killed.

An interesting feature of service in the British Army was that the demobilization process ensured that those of us enlisting on the same day in 1942 were all discharged at the same time in 1947 when I had the very great pleasure of meeting once again a few of my training regiment contemporaries at a transit camp in Germany. Eric Smallwood was one of these, he a full lieutenant fondly embracing me, a buckshee lance corporal, like a long lost brother.

The majority of our Intake would undoubtedly be posted to units destined for the forthcoming invasion of France where, in the event, tank losses proved to be heavy. It is inevitable therefore that a number must have become casualties.

By and large Bovington achieved its aim - the inculcation of discipline and responsibility in any situation, which might eventually confront an individual. Inevitably there was a price to pay along the line, as witnessed by two (perhaps three) suicides during the six months of my stay. Similarly I remember one young, very keen lad who was somewhat underweight; he was despatched to an Army Physical Training Unit with a view to improving his physical condition, which regrettably produced adverse results leading to him being invalided from the Army. These were the negative aspects which, when set against the general picture, represent a very small percentage as a whole. The fact that we were young, fit and malleable were the key factors. I doubt whether similar results could have been replicated with an older group - most certainly not in the year 2000.

Of particular recollection are route marches when, ordered to sing, we remained defiantly silent.. To counter this 'bolshie' attitude the troop sergeant would order "fit gas masks" immediately followed by the command to march at the double - the ultimate in sadism.
Burdened down with equipment and wearing gas masks was, as he knew, absolute purgatory, several minutes of this and we were quite prepared to sing the Hallelujah Chorus if necessary. Without doubt good character building stuff for the dear boys. Even going on leave we were required to march at the double from Bovington to Wool station.

In Memory of

ERIC BRYANT ALLEN PENNINGTON

Trooper
14413736
' C ' Sqn., 2nd County of London Yeo. CWestminster Dragoons), R.A.C.
who died on
Monday, 12th June 1944. Age 19.

Additional Information: Son of Cyril R. and Enid Pennington, of Bristol,

Commemorative Information

Cemetery: HOTTOT-LES-BAGUES WAR CEMETERY, Calvados, France
Grave Reference/ Panel Number: III. J. 8.
Location: This cemetery can be reached from Bayeux by taking the D6 southeastwards. After about 13 kilometres and after passing through Tilly-sur-Seulles, turn right (westwards) at Juvigny onto the main road (the D9) that runs from Caen towards Caumont PEvente. The cemetery will be found after a few hundred metres on the right hand side on rising ground.

Historical Information: Most of the burials were brought into this cemetery from the surrounding district, where there was much heavy fighting through June and July 1944, as the British forces tried to press south from Bayeux and swing round to the south of Caen. There are now 1015, 1939-45 Commonwealth war casualties commemorated In this site. Of these 56 are unidentified. Also commemorated here are 132 Foreign Nationals and 1 non-world war casualty.

CfisjslayHfepc^fd «tf *@mre morion.*

My days at Bovington were coming to an end and I now awaited details of my posting to a service regiment. My posting duly arrived and I stood once again on the platform at Wool station en route to Warminster to join the Westminster Dragoons a regiment of which I had little knowledge but definitely not in the same league as 17/21 Lancers, or 5 Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, which I particularly fancied. Even my third choice of 7th Royal Tank Regiment had been ignored.

Before proceeding further it would be appropriate to give some details of my allotted regiment. This was, still is, a yeomanry regiment known as 2nd County of London Yeomanry (Westminster Dragoons), and formed part of the Imperial Yeomanry raised for the South African Campaign in 1901 from mainly professional and mercantile classes in the City of London. The regimental colours of red, yellow and purple (more commonly referred to by we other ranks as red, egg and purple) adorned everything regimental. During World War One two lines of the regiment were raised - one serving in the Middle East participated in the capture of Jerusalem from the Turks; the other, as far as I can establish, provided reinforcements for units serving on the Western Front. After WW1 as early as 1922 the regiment was mechanized, equipped with armoured cars and gained a further identity as the 22nd Armoured Car Company of the Royal Tank Corps, and the right, continued to this day, of wearing the symbolic tank badge on the right sleeve of the uniform.

With the abolition of the Imperial Yeomanry it became a unit of the Territorial Yeomanry, with headquarters in Westminster until after WW11. Recent rebuilding at the site of the old headquarters at Elverton Street has revealed the remains of several horses buried there years ago.

Further changes took place with the outbreak of war in 1939 when it was converted into an officer training unit in which role it continued until 1941 - re-equipped with tanks as an armoured regiment it formed part of 42nd (West Lancashire) Armoured Division at Helmsley, Yorkshire, from where it moved to Warminster.

Joining the regiment, then equipped with Crusader tanks, and posted as a gunner/operator to RHQ Tank Troop was my first encounter with long-serving "hairy arsed" tank men. With my surname and, to them, somewhat 'poncey' speech I was quickly dubbed 'the Baron'. Nevertheless they proved to be a friendly and helpful bunch and I quickly adapted. Elles Barracks at Warminster were modern with facilities not generally available elsewhere, and it was with some regret that we heard that we were to vacate in favour of the US Army. We were also ordered to prepare fresh palliasses and straw for our American allies beds; this was not well received with the result that numerous stones and other foreign bodies eventually found their way into the palliasses

Our next move was to the pleasant market town of Banbury, Oxon, a shade closer to home when my next leave came due.

Banbury was idyllic with approximately 69 public houses and a very friendly populace. My troop was billeted in Wincott's Cafe opposite Banbury Cross, our tanks lining the main road through town. It was here that I suffered extreme embarrassment as we marched back to our billets one day when a local housewife remarked " I bet your mother cried when you left home". This was most distressing for a callow youth serving King and Country, and endeavouring to look suitably cool and warlike.

A local factory employing a large female workforce was situated close to where our prowler guards patrolled during the night, and it was not uncommon for some of these ladies, during their 'smoke break', to provide sexual favours in adjacent shop doorways for members of the guard. Suddenly guard duty assumed a different, much sought after, diversion. This terminated with the news that our brief stay in Banbury was coming to an end. Once again we made way for units of the American Army, and travelled down to our new location at Burford.

Burford is a beautiful little town in the Cotswolds where some of us occupied Nissen huts close to he local graveyard, reputedly haunted. One of our number, probably drunk at the time, went off his head claiming to have met up with some apparition, and was hauled off for remedial treatment. Another popular local legend was that of the 'Headless Horseman' who, it was alleged, made an appearance in the main street on misty nights when the level of the river Windrush was low. On such a night, on solitary prowler guard duty by the bridge and extremely conscious of my isolation and the ripple of water from the river, I glanced up the road horror stricken as a luminescence approached me. My fevered imagination convinced me that the 'Horseman' had arrived as I stood rooted to the spot with fear. Seconds later, with great relief, I heard the unmistakable sound of an internal combustion engine - from the mist emerged a truck bearing the Orderly Officer on his rounds. Sanity restored I had a quick furtive 'fag' immediately he disappeared. We spent Christmas in the village and were the grateful recipients of a gift of several casks of beer from a local brewery.

Burford proved to be another extremely short stay preceding a move to our final destination in the UK, this time East Anglia on the chilly east coast to the village of Thorpeness in Suffolk. Thorpeness was, and presumably remains, a model pre-war holiday village with a remarkable Folly, the 'House in the Clouds' that concealed the water supply tank for the village. The beach was mined and covered with barbed wire entanglements and other anti-invasion devices. There were few, if any, civilians apart from the 'pub landlord at The Dolphin', and Mrs Jones who ran the post office. Mrs Jones was incidentally the fount of all knowledge, classified or otherwise. When the regiment was preparing to move to the south coast to embark for 'D'Day we had the news from Mrs Jones long before being notified officially by the powers that be. The only resident females in the area were some WAAF girls manning a Radiolocation Tower nearby - they too were surrounded by barbed wire entanglements.

A complete change of role was now in process, 42 Armoured Division was disbanded and we lost our identity as an armoured fighting regiment, and became an assault armoured regiment as part of 79th Armoured Division, along with our sister regiments, the 22nd Dragoons, and the Lothian and Border Horse Yeomanry. We now wore the divisional 'Bull's Head' sign on our vehicles and battledress. Re-equipped with minesweeping flail tanks, known as 'Crabs', we began training to lead the beach landings in Normandy whenever the date for this was decided upon.

We were decidedly unhappy with this role change - we had trained as fighting tanks and this seemed a retrograde and humiliating step as we contemplated plodding along sweeping minefields at approximately one mile per hour. Dougie Tyler and I, from the same crew, requested a transfer to Airborne but were sent packing with a 'flea' in our ear, with the comment that we were too valuable and that we would have plenty of action soon enough. We were still unhappy but unable to change the course of events.

One pleasant interlude arose from the re-equipping of tanks, when a number of us were detailed to pick up some new Shermans from Liverpool docks and drive them back to Suffolk. A few of us were from Lancashire and, with the collusion of the troop leader, managed to travel home for a few hours when we parked the tanks overnight on a staging post at Preston - none other than Deepdale Football Ground home of Preston North End F.C. This seems quite reasonable in retrospect as I believe that Tom Finney was, at that time, serving somewhere as a trooper in the Royal Tank Regiment.

Desperately short of cash and covered in oil and dirt, I managed to raise sufficient money to pay for a single 'bus ticket to Lancaster where I ambushed my father where he was working in the Canadian Treasury. I must have cut a remarkably odd figure as I made my presence known to the immaculately turned out members of the Canadian Army Pay Corps who did allow me access to my father and the wherewithal to continue home for the night. Another trooper took a Sherman and parked it outside his parents' house for the night - to the intense joy and delight of the neighbourhood children.

I had now been posted from HQ to 'A' Squadron where I was to stay for the remainder of my time with the regiment. The squadron comprised five troops of five tanks each. 1 to 4 Troop were equipped with flail tanks; 5 Troop, in which I was troop leader's gunner, had roller tanks, tanks fitted with heavy rollers at the front. The 'modus operandi' was that we would precede the flail tanks until such time as mines were encountered and our rollers blown up when we would then withdraw to allow the flails to clear the mines ahead. We spent many hours on Orford Ranges practising and perfecting techniques until the whole exercise became second nature to us.

Crewing a Sherman differed considerably from the Crusader insofar as a gunner was concerned.

Having been trained on the British 2 pounder, 6 pounder and BESA co-axial machine gun, it was now deemed necessary for us to master the American 75mm and Browning .300 machine gun, in addition to turret firing controls etc. To assimilate such knowledge, in company with gunners from the other regiments, I spent a very pleasant fortnight at the Lulworth Gunnery Schools. No longer trainee recruits we were left very much to our own devices during our free time, which was a very pleasant change.

Greater differences arose in regard to the tactical use of our new mounts. No longer were we to indulge in standard armoured warfare operations - our main objective would now be to clear lanes through minefields for other tanks to safely negotiate. We were horrified to learn that the tank turrets would be traversed to the rear when 'flogging' (flailing). This meant that the operator and I would sit with our backs to the enemy whilst we proceeded at a spanking pace of approximately one and a quarter miles per hour towards him and his devilish 88mm's. Absolutely bloody brilliant! In the meantime the commander, having set a compass bearing to be followed by the driver, would by means of his periscope and radio guide the following tank. The commander of the following tank would likewise guide the one behind, and so on. Ingenious if it worked - part of an equation we did not dwell upon too deeply. Despite all this we would also be available for use as straightforward gun tanks should opportunity permit when the flail was not required.

Mrs Jones shortly advised that we would be moving off very soon; at the same time it was decided that roller tanks were not to be used, and 5 Troop became redundant. Our flail troops left us for a destination on the south coast prior to embarkation for landings on 'D'Day. Our troop moved to Seaford in Sussex, billeted in a requisitioned girls school, awaiting further orders as to our disposal. Whilst the rest of the lads were up to their necks in muck and bullets on the Landings in Normandy we spent a very pleasant time, with little to do in this very comfortable niche in Sussex. It was fairly close to Brighton where we spent many evenings at the Dome ballroom dancing to the music of Sid Dean and his Orchestra until 2200 hours when all the civilians had to be off the streets. Missing the liberty truck one evening I had to walk the twenty miles or so back to Seaford - fortunately it was a lovely warm evening and I made the trip with odd rests on the grass verges here and there. Another free pastime was that of watching V1 Doodle Bugs puttering overhead all day and night, hotly pursued by RAF Typhoons, anxiously hoping that the engine continued running until some distance away from us - for anybody unfamiliar with the V1 rocket it should be explained that once the engine stopped the rocket would immediately plunge to earth and explode.

Our last night in Seaford was spent as guests at a dance organised by the ATS girls from an anti-aircraft battery on the golf course. I met a very nice girl and have thought about her from time to time over the years as she was an extremely attractive and sensible person. I always remember that she seemed to be more concerned than I was about our imminent departure for Normandy. I remain to this day very appreciative of her kindness and company that evening.

Mention of Seaford would be incomplete without reference to a typical example of British Army irrelevance concerning our pay. At the weekly pay parade, instead of English money, we were presented with the equivalent in French Francs presumably on the basis that shortly we would be destined to embark for France. We were therefore virtually destitute, unable to buy any commodities in shops or - worse still - 'pubs. Our only salvation lay with donations from home in the form of postal orders urgently requested from families. These were somewhat tardy in delivery; in the meantime anybody in receipt of a fortuitous half-crown postal order gained immediate popularity until the last dregs had disappeared over the bar counter.

THE SHARP END - FIRST HALF

Leaving Seaford we arrived at Portsmouth in a great convoy of vehicles of every description, all halted in the approach roads to the City and Docks. The good people of Portsmouth nightly opened their homes to this mass of soldiery, usually providing an empty bedroom sufficient to house five or six men at a time with their blankets. The City had suffered badly with air raids, and I remain greatly impressed and grateful of the kindness of the civilians of Portsmouth.

The following day we embarked at Gosport Hard on an LST (Landing Ship Tank) belonging to the Royal Navy. The crew had been involved in several landing operations in North Africa, Sicily and Italy, and were very matter of fact about their activities generally. A Chief Petty Officer engine room wallah, from Barrow-in-Furness, gave us a guided tour of the engine room prior to sailing at Midnight on a very calm, dark and moonless night. The date seemed a little ominous - Friday 13th July 1944.

Forebodings concerning the date proved groundless and we beached at Le Hamel on the Normandy coast at slack water at 2100 hours. Our waterproofing so meticulously and painstakingly applied in England proved to be unnecessary as we drove off the LST on to a dry sandy beach where we dismantled all the waterproofing around the air and exhaust ducts prior to moving off. It was still daylight and a solitary German Me109 fighter flew overhead precipitating an outburst of machine gun fire from some quarters, to which I overhead the remark "Leave the bugger alone - if we don't bother him, he won't bother us". This I thought to be excellent advice and resolved to abide with that tenet in any future dealings with the 'master race'. Making our way off the beach we eventually reached our squadron area at Juaye Mondaye on 16 July spending the next few days hanging about awaiting a decision as to our future deployment. This was not long in coming, there were no plans to use roller tanks in future and our troop was to be disbanded and the crews sent to a reinforcement holding squadron to serve as replacements for casualties in other regiments as required.

Overnight we had lost our regimental status and were now available for posting to any other armoured regiment in need of crewmembers. This was an extremely unhappy period, the break-up of a team, which had trained and established a comradeship and expertise for one specific purpose.

I was in luck. Two crewmembers of 4 Troop Leader's tank had been wounded, and replacements were required for a gunner, also a driver. My mate Dougie was selected as driver and I accompanied him to take over from the gunner who was evacuated to England but unfortunately succumbed to his wounds shortly afterwards. Dougie and I were happy in the knowledge that we were rejoining our own regiment rather than some other unknown quantity. With this we climbed aboard a 3-ton truck on our way to rejoin 'A' Squadron. The beachhead, even as late as July was still not very deep and it was quite an easy matter to take a wrong turning to find oneself in enemy territory; eventually after one or two alarms we arrived at the squadron location.

4 Troop was laagered in an orchard, which had long since ceased to bear the slightest resemblance to the popular conception of such. The day was hot, the ground dry and dusty with shell splintered apple trees, and littered with the swollen carcasses of dead cows. Pervading the whole area was the abominable stench of dead bodies, human and animal, all in varying states of putrefaction. Doug and I made our way over to the troop leader's tank to meet our new tank commander, Lieutenant Sam Hall, henceforth known to us, but not to his face, as Chopper. A small, stocky build of man with a large and bushy black moustache, and a native of Wales. We made ourselves known to the other crewmembers consisting of a Plymothian named Dan Piatt who was the loader/operator, and Simon Howells the driver who hailed from the Rhonda Valley. The ages of the crew were, tank commander 20, co-driver 20, wireless operator/loader 27, driver 23, and me the gunner 19, Insofar as rank was concerned we comprised of one lieutenant, a full corporal, a lance-corporal, and two troopers. Despite the disparity in rank we all lived, cooked, ate, cleaned, slept and fought the tank together - extremely democratic and probably unique amongst units of the British Army.

At the outset Doug and I were understandably apprehensive upon joining an established crew under these circumstances. We were very much aware of the bonds engendered as a crew fighting together since landing on the morning of 'D'Day, but our fears were dispelled as we quickly became absorbed into the team.

So much for our companions; let me now dwell upon the splendid amenities provided by our American style windowless mobile home, tank crews for the use of. The General Sherman M4 medium tank was a derivation of the General Grant tank, the latter a cumbersome beast with restricted traverse for its main gun, and used by the Eighth Army in the Western Desert. Shermans were, I think, manufactured by the Chrysler Corporation and others, and supplied in vast numbers to the British and US Armies. Initially superior to the standard German tank, the advantage was lost with the advent of the German Panther with its thicker armour plating and, more particularly, its highly effective high velocity 75mm gun. The Sherman was however fast and extremely reliable unlike its British counterparts which were mechanically troublesome.

The Sherman had several disadvantages by virtue of its high profile, thin armour plating, and low muzzle velocity 75mm gun. Due to the high profile the tank was an easy target for the enemy and had a terrifying propensity to catch fire and become a raging inferno within seconds of being hit. They were nicknamed 'Ronsons' by our infantry, 'Flaming Coffins' by the Polish Armoured Corps and, most macabre of all, Tommy Cookers' by the Germans.

Driver and co-driver were seated low in the front of the vehicle with access to their respective compartments by hatch covers, which also provided their means of escape when necessary. Additionally, to the rear of the co-driver, an escape hatch was situated in the bottom of the tank to be used if the other hatches became blocked. Their claustrophobic quarters replicated to some extent those of a submarine.

In the turret above lived the commander, usually standing below the cupola (main hatchway from the turret) with a periscope to observe, safely protected, the goings-on outside, normally however he stood with head exposed which was a dangerous pursuit through which many commanders lost their lives from snipers bullets. Immediately in front of the commander was located the home of the gunner, with 75mm gun to his left, and traversing gear, gun sights and firing controls immediately in front and below. The gunner's sights had good magnification being the most powerful sights on the tank. Opposite on the left hand side of the 75mm gun sat the operator/loader occupying a very perilous position in the event of the tank 'brewing-up'. Bearing in mind that often, mere seconds were available to 'bale-out' before the tank erupted into a veritable blowtorch, he would usually have greater difficulty than the commander and gunner in gaining exit, having to scramble over or under the breechblock of the gun. This could be further exacerbated should the gun be either elevated or depressed at the time of impact and his chances of survival, in such circumstances, were minimal. Fortunately on both occasions when we were hit the tank did not 'brew-up' immediately.

Two points come to mind from the aforegoing. When Shermans arrived from the States they were fitted with an extremely comfortable armchair type padded seat for the gunner - absolute Paradise for gunners reared on the backless bar stool fitments in British tanks. Safety was however paramount, and our first task was the removal of both backrest and armrests, to facilitate the sharpest possible exit in the event of being hit. Similarly a long metal breechblock deflector at the rear of the gun was sawn off to provide a better chance of escape for the loader/operator. A metal mesh partition enclosed the lower half of the turret where rounds for the 75mm were stacked. This was also sawn off thus giving a further alternative escape route to the driver and co-driver by exit through the turret, It was obvious that the Americans had very little idea of the problems encountered in operational conditions by tank crews. They no doubt learned the hard way.

Motive power was supplied by five Chrysler, sometimes Wright Cyclone, 30 horsepower engines cooled by a massive fan at the rear of the turret and sucking in air from the open turret, down the gunners's back with a bone-chilling intensity in the winter months. Despite all these problems one gradually came to look upon one's tank with almost a similar affection for a favourite dog or cat.

Armament consisted of the 75mm cannon with a co-axially mounted .300 Browning machine gun in the turret. For anti-aircraft protection we had a .500 Browning mounted on the top of the turret, used very rarely, which was just as well as I could never manage to get off more than two or three rounds before it jammed. This gun was fitted to all the Flying Fortresses operated by the US Air Force so I assume they had more success with the thing than I did. Also on the turret was a smoke grenade ejector - a very useful weapon when used in conjunction with reverse gear. When confronted with a lethal Tiger or Panther this procedure could mean salvation, I.e., engage reverse, fire smoke and get the Hell out of it.

Despite the disparity of rank within the crew ranging from lieutenant to trooper, each member took part in the essential chores of cooking, gun cleaning, re-arming, and fuelling-up. For obvious reasons the commander was less involved - he was responsible for another four tanks in the troop etc. Whenever we stopped the first task was to conceal the tank by means of a scrim net and whatever greenery was available, after which refuelling, restocking of ammunition and rations and water. Interspersed with this was gun cleaning, sight calibration etc., and finally cooking a meal. In Normandy during the dry weather our bivouac was located in a deep hole over which we drove the tank to provide shelter from shrapnel and other bits of hardware flying about. Into this hole went our blankets and other essentials for the night's sojourn. Notwithstanding the protection afforded against flying metal I always retained an uneasy feeling, lying there conscious of 38 tons of solid steel above my head and listening to the ominous creaking as the tank settled into the ground and always fearing the worst. Additionally we were subjected to the revolting stench of decaying flesh from the trackplates where we had run over corpses and carcasses. Sometimes, having dug one of these beautiful holes in the ground, we would receive the order that we were to move off again so the whole process would then have to be repeated at a new location sometime later.

Food came in the ubiquitous Compo Pack, a box containing rations for five men for three days. These ranged from the 'A' Pack containing delicacies such as tinned fruit, rice pudding, steak and kidney, to the lowly 'F' Pack with greasy Irish stew, tinned sardines and similar none too exotic items. All however contained Players or Senior Service cigarettes, hard biscuits, cheese, and Compo Tea - a blend of powdered tea and milk to which one added hot water for a brew. Eventually it was possible to become addicted to Comp Tea to the exclusion of a normal brew with genuine leaf tea. Bread was a rare sight.

Meals were supplemented wherever possible by local produce such as eggs for which we bartered cigarettes, Calvados was another prized commodity.. A primitive but very efficient method of cooking was that of the Benghazi Cooker an innovation created by tank crews in the Western Desert, this was simply an old biscuit tin filled with sand or earth, covered in petrol and ignited. Water was strictly rationed with the result that mugs and mess tins, usually covered by a film of dust, quickly developed a vintage discoloured appearance. Personal hygiene suffered similarly with shaving water sometimes dependent upon the remnants of a mug of tea. At odd intervals we would be transported to a Mobile Laundry Unit where facilities were provided for a shower and change of shirt and drawers cellular, followed by the return trip to the squadron, often over dusty tracks thereby acquiring a fresh coating of dust and grime - all in all it often seemed to be a complete wasted effort.

Our crew were delighted one day to come across a tin bath which was immediately requisitioned, slung at the rear of the tank and carried off to our tank harbour. On arrival we unshipped the bath and heated water from an adjacent pond in preparation for our forthcoming luxury. Watched by other troop members we cavorted gleefully around our prize and proceeded to fill the bath. To our intense disappointment we saw the water draining from the bath as quickly as it was being filled and found it had been damaged in course of transit, presumably by the track plate ends. The demise of our enterprise was received with rapturous applause from the other crews looking on.

The squadron was continually on the move as the battle for Normandy continued and we were 'put in the picture' daily by regular briefings on the general situation in the beachhead. I remember a vague sense of unease on these occasions looking at the disposition of allied and enemy forces in the area noting that an overwhelming preponderance of enemy units were concentrated in front of the British and Canadian sectors.

4 Troop was involved in support of other units on a number of occasions at this time of which my recollections are somewhat hazy. This is quite understandable - as anybody who has been involved on a battlefield will readily appreciate. Whilst there is, one hopes, undeniably a grand strategy devised by those on high it is very rarely discernible to those most closely involved at the 'sharp end'. Tank crews have very restricted vision when 'closed down', what little that can be seen through peritelescopes is invariably shrouded to a large extent by dust and smoke in the immediate foreground. The crewmember concentrates purely and solely upon the task in hand as it affects him.

Contrary to popular opinion and no doubt engendered by countless 'gung ho' war films, especially American, the life of a frontline soldier is incredibly dull and boring for the most part, repetitively cleaning guns, calibrating sights, checking ammunition, guard duties et al. All this enlivened by a ceaseless round of brewing up and smoking, with an occasional foray with spade to attend to the needs of nature. A splendid outdoor life for young gentlemen.

These periods of inaction were frequently interrupted by orders to stand by to move in one hour, or whatever, immediately giving rise to a nervous anticipation and attendant fears as to what lay ahead. The feeling persisted but was immediately obliterated when action commenced to be replaced with total concentration on the job in hand. Speaking as a gunner I was fortunate in that my mind was totally committed to seeking and engaging enemy targets, with no time to dwell upon the possibility of our own destruction. In direct contrast the unfortunate co-driver, not even provided with a periscope, could only sit in complete isolation other than recourse to his radio headset, awaiting the possibility of a direct hit, or injury to the driver which would require him to extricate and replace him, if possible. Without doubt the most nerve-racking station in the crew. Retiring from action brought an intense feeling of relief and we would revert once again to masterly inactivity until the next 'flap'.

As mentioned previously the established bridgehead in Normandy was quite small with the detritus of war lying everywhere. Tanks were unable to fight at night and we would pull back to form a defensive laager, tanks on the outside with any soft vehicles inside; something akin to the Western movie where the wagons formed a perimeter. Each crewmember undertook a two-hour stint on guard duty - one trooper in the tank manning a Browning machine gun whilst the other patrolled outside the perimeter as a prowler guard. This latter duty was, to me and doubtless to others, particularly unnerving in the densely covered undergrowth of the Normandy bocage country listening to the rapid firing of the Spandau and Schmeisser guns of the German infantry, and to the slower more methodical firing of the British Bren gun. Nerves were stretched taut by various sounds emanating from within the undergrowth firing the imagination with visions of a German fighting patrol emerging therefrom - a sensation heightened by occasionally stumbling against corpses lying about. By the time I changed places with the turret guard I was almost reduced to a gibbering wreck.

The hours of darkness play strange tricks with one's imagination, none more so than patrolling woodlands where trees and bushes metamorphose into moving human figures when subjected to lengthy scrutiny. This illusion most certainly prompted a compulsive urge to open fire. Overcoming the problem was simply a matter of not focussing on any particular object for any length of time, instead if it was transferred to the corner of the eye the status quo was resumed and the bogey man disappeared. Very simple and effective with greatly reduced wear and tear on the nervous system.

Standard military practice opines that the most critical times of day are Dawn and Dusk, in particular Dawn when units are most unprepared and vulnerable. In consequence all crews would man vehicles before first light for 'Stand To' for any possible attack. With crews mounted, radios 'netted' on frequency, engines running, and muzzle covers removed we would remain in position until daybreak and the order to 'Stand Down', followed immediately by a rash of petrol fires for the first brew of the day and breakfast.

Swarms of horrible green backed flies were constant attendants, particularly at meal times. One morning, assailed by a larger than usual contingent of these pests, the co-driver and I wandered off to take a look at a wrecked Bren Carrier a few yards away and discovered the immediate source of these flies. The body of the driver still in the driving seat had been struck by some large projectile, which had removed the upper part of the torso, which was now a crawling mass of maggots. From his battledress we removed his Army Book 64 for identification purposes - he was a member of 3 Reconnaissance Regiment whose name I still remember.

I do not believe that many of us were unduly traumatised by proximity to violent death and to our encounters with the dead on the battlefield, which had an appearance of wax effigies, no longer a part of our existence. This does not imply callous disregard, merely a coming to terms with the circumstances in which we found ourselves. I recollect finding two dead German soldiers lying almost side by side, both young and blonde, and thinking to myself at the time that somewhere in Germany were parents probably unaware of the death of their sons. For me there was no satisfaction at their deaths just a very human feeling of sadness for their families. War is anything but pleasant and subconsciously I suppose one's mind quickly adapted to the everyday carnage enacted around us.

The British Army was, and remains, a comprehensive formation embracing many arms of service of which only about ten percent of the total are actual fighting troops, in the main, Infantry, Artillery and Armour. Correspondingly the highest number of casualties were suffered by these branches. Our closest companions throughout were the PBI (Poor Bloody Infantry) with, in my opinion, the worst of all jobs in the fighting services. Often overlooked and most certainly unappreciated by the general public their living and service conditions were appalling, exposed to all weather without shelter, and remorselessly exposed to death or injury from mortar, machine gun fire, mines and everything else flung at them. Surprisingly enough they would often remark that they would never wish to trade places with tank crews contending that they preferred to hug Mother Earth for protection rather than be exposed for target practice in a high-sided tank to be burnt to death or blown to blazes. We on the other hand, somewhat naively perhaps, took comfort in the knowledge that we were protected by a few inches of armour plate.

The Infantry were always glad to have us around provided we did not outstay our welcome as our presence would sooner or later bring down enemy artillery fire. A lasting memory is that of infantrymen from old county regiments filing past us, laden down with entrenching tools and other impedimenta, making their way forward. Many young eighteen year old reinforcements heading into their first action - often their last such was the attrition rate for infantry. I always had the dreadful feeling that I was watching men marching to seeming oblivion.

Reading this may understandably give rise to unease on the subject of death. I make no apology for this as war begets death and other associated horrors, and I merely wish to record events and feelings experienced at the time, also to pay tribute to those other branches of the British Army with which we were closely allied.

Previously I mentioned that tanks were absolutely useless at night due to our lack of night vision; accordingly and similar to a cricket team we retired from the field as daylight faded. As we departed to prepare a secure laager for the night our place was taken by anti-tank units of the Royal Artillery to support our infantry friends throughout the night. Setting up a laager away from the scene of action did not guarantee respite from the enemy as we found to our dismay one evening. We had found a very pleasant green meadow one warm summer evening and, having finished refuelling with petrol and ammunition etc., settled down for a few brews and cigarettes before retiring to our foxholes, Our peace and tranquillity was rudely shattered by the arrival of the Royal Artillery with a few heavy bits of ordnance which they sited , after blowing a few holes in the ground to accommodate them. Having done this they brewed some tea, had a few fags and then turned their attention once again to the guns. Each gun fired three rounds apiece following which they speedily reassembled the guns with the limbers and drove off at a rate of knots giving us a cheery wave as they departed. We were informed that they had been shelling a German position some miles away. The significance of this was not appreciated until we were subjected to a heavy 'stonk' in retaliation from the German artillery; this we learned was known as counter battery activity and we then appreciated the reason for the indecent haste with which the artillery unit made its exit. Sticking two fingers up would have seemed more appropriate to their departure than a cheery wave of the arm.

This same evening, having survived the attention of the Wehrmacht, we were attacked by creatures of Nature in the form of mosquitoes. Climbing into my foxhole I spent the night cowering under my blanket seeking to evade the attention of these pests but without success. A more amenable intruder one night was a mole quietly going about his business some six inches below ground when he suddenly plunged a further few inches upon drilling into Trooper Ravensdale's burrow. It would be difficult to imagine who was the most surprised. Our interference in Nature produced some amusing incidents, one such whilst preparing a bivouac in which we laid a groundsheet; everything seemed satisfactory until sundown when we were invaded by a swarm of wild bees returning home after a day's work, unfortunately their home lay directly beneath our groundsheet with our only option that of hasty retreat and relocation.

Our days in Normandy were coming to an end. We had been involved in a number of incidents at this time, one immediately preceding the break-out through the Falaise Gap. The Americans had broken out from the Cherbourg peninsula and we were ordered to link up with them at some point. This involved, of all things, a night march with tanks, our objective a village shown on the map as Vire. Throughout the night sitting in the turret absolutely 'knackered, head resting on the gun controls I listened through my headset to some beautiful Strauss melodies filtering through, presumably from a German radio station. The whole experience was intensely eerie - a feeling that we were travelling through a dark unending tunnel lured on by the siren sound of music from far away. The dark hours can play havoc with one's imagination.

Normandy during the months of June to August 1944 will always be remembered by those who were there; the inescapable, unremitting stench of decaying flesh, the desolation of the ruined villages, and the bitter fighting throughout. The unique bocage country with its high hedges and concealed lanes provided natural defensive capabilities admirably adapted by the Wehrmacht to resist the attacking forces, with every field and hedgerow a virtual fortress. British and Canadian casualties were high and without the massive air superiority we enjoyed there is little doubt that losses would have been far greater. Nevertheless air support had its shortcomings; on more than one occasion we were targeted by aircraft of the RAF and USAAF - what is quaintly referred to these days as 'friendly fire'. To offset such misunderstandings all allied vehicles bore a large white painted star on top and side, additionally luminous yellow silk squares were issued to all personnel as a further means of identification. In retrospect however it is very difficult to envisage some character blasting along in his fighter-bomber, at a fair old rate of knots having much chance to differentiate between friend and foe. German and British troop dispositions were relatively close to one another - inextricably often, a battle zone is also usually enveloped in smoke, and the warring participants doing their utmost to remain concealed as far as practicable. Little wonder that mistakes arose.

Our pretty yellow silk squares were quickly adapted for use as neckerchiefs as a means of restricting the ever present dust gaining access through our shirts. I also possessed a piece of purple coloured chiffon given to me by my sister, which she cannot now recall, and would wear this from time to time for the same purpose. Our dress did not always accord with military regulations and was adapted to suit the situation. Tank crew were, for example, issued with steel helmets (round pudding bowl shape) but these were never worn being completely unsuitable, useless impedimenta in fact, under active service conditions. The only exception applied insofar as tank commanders were concerned, who frequently were obliged to stick their heads above the cupola presenting welcome targets for enemy snipers. The protection was minimal - a spent piece of shrapnel might be deflected, but a rifle round would easily penetrate. For those of us sitting snugly in the tank the standard issue black beret was highly suited to conditions.

By and large I was not enamoured of the local people who, I assumed, would appreciate liberation from la salle Boche - on the contrary those I met were surly almost hostile. A recorded incident on D Day + 1 took place just behind the landing beach when one of our crews gathered a few potatoes from a field, and were accosted by the farmer complaining bitterly of their intrusion. His classic remark at the time was to the effect that the Germans would have paid him for any potatoes they took.

Perhaps I was guilty of unfairly criticising the French at the time; later in my travels I found many very appreciative of their liberation. Undoubtedly it certainly appeared that more than a few had happily co-operated with the German during the occupation of France.

In the course of our travels in France a number of events come to mind concerning crew members. Our driver, Simon Howells a native of the Rhonda Valley, had been a coal miner at some time in his life but eventually left the pits and, as far as we could gather, spent the remainder of pre-War life as a poacher. He was a man of immense strength and I christened him The Troglodyte' which, when I explained the meaning, he was quite happy to accept thereafter. One day he shot a pigeon or something similar and proudly announced that he would bake it in a clay oven he was constructing. We were assured of a delicacy we would forever treasure in our memories. The cooking completed we gazed upon this gem of culinary perfection, the erstwhile plump and healthy looking bird now resembled a half-cremated corpse, giving rise to ribald comment and ridicule. With this Simon seized the wretched bird and flung it with great force against the side of the tank and stalked off in high dudgeon not to reappear until some four hours later The squadron was then on standby to move at one hour's notice but fortunately this did not happen obviating certain court-martial proceedings for desertion. He duly returned, inbred Celtic temper assuaged and the matter consigned to history and never to be spoken of again.

Raping, looting and pillaging extremely popular with Vikings, Goths and other unsavoury characters, are pastimes frowned upon and subject to severe punishment in the British Army, additionally there is usually an element of danger inherent thereby, such as booby traps etc., applied with great skill by the Wehrmacht who frequently attached these to their own dead. The favourite was the Luger pistol, highly coveted by our people. Our regimental padre was no exception and very nearly blew himself up to Head Office when I happily chanced to find him in process of removing a pistol from a dead German officer. The pistol was wired to an anti-personnel mine beneath the body. I had an opportunity to remind him of this at a regimental reunion some 50 years later.

Nevertheless and despite the inherent dangers, the temptation was ever great, and Doug and I took the opportunity to look over an almost undamaged and fully furnished country house to seek out any worthwhile spoils of war. Whilst Doug poked about downstairs I rummaged around in the bedrooms on the lookout for perfume, silk, jewellery, anything at all of value. Completely engrossed in my criminal activities I happened to glance in a mirror, behind me I saw a figure in the uniform of a gendarme. Wheeling round, gun in hand, I was about to fire when I realised that it was Doug who, as a joke, had donned the uniform. I had very nearly killed him and would have had a very difficult task to explain the circumstances of his departure. Sometimes one was at greater risk from one's comrades than from the enemy we were supposed to be killing.

The most bizarre experience followed the capture of some farm buildings recently occupied the enemy. The buildings were relatively undamaged and quickly earmarked for use as a temporary Squadron HQ for which a number of we lower ranks were 'volunteered' to make the place reasonably habitable. Upon entering the farmhouse we came across a body, in field grey uniform, lying on the kitchen table; the body was in an advanced state of decomposition and needed to be buried without delay. The interesting, and to this day, unexplained feature was that no identification papers were found which was quite unusual, even more so was the discovery of a Cross of Lorraine medallion around his neck. This was of course the symbol of the Free French Forces of General de Gaulle. Somewhere, somebody would no doubt in years to come, ponder the fate of this man buried in an unmarked grave in Normandy.

The squadron leader and his minions were champing at the bit to take up residence, whilst the Padre was every bit as anxious to press ahead with the burial. Accordingly our fatigue party, in a matter of minutes, was reconvened as a burial party with instructions to find a suitable place of interment. This was quickly resolved by the discovery of a trench previously used by the Germans for their waste disposal. The weather was poor with heavy rain and the ground extremely muddy. The corpse, giving off a malodorous stench of putrefaction to the extent that we received permission from the Padre to smoke, was placed on a blanket for removal to the burial site. So there we were, six pall bearers puffing heartily at our fags with the Padre following behind intoning passages from the funeral service. Worse was to follow as we lowered the body into the grave; missing my footing on the slippery edge I fell full length on to the body. A funeral to remember! A soldier's life embraces many activities, e.g. trench digging to grave digging - simple pleasures denied to those unlucky enough to follow vocations other than the profession of arms or as sometimes described as hired assassins. Still holding down the lowly rank of trooper there was as yet no sign of a Field Marshall's baton in my small pack. Where was I going wrong?

A feeling of unreality pervaded my thoughts as day succeeded day without any clear perception of dates or days of the week. Apart from the incessant stench and Herculean efforts of digging holes for shelter, everyday activity assumed a fairly basic routine. The crew of the troop sergeant's tank hosted schools of brag, poker and other pursuits favoured by those of a gambling nature. This was supposedly a very secretive affair but clearly evident from the constant emission of cigarette smoke from the gaps in the bivouac cover. All stakes were payable in French Francs in which small fortunes were amassed and lost daily but this was of little consequence as we had nowhere to spend money. One of the disadvantages of life at the 'sharp end' was the inaccessibility to the 'fleshpots' enjoyed by base troops - not even a NAAFI. Bartering was the usual form of trading for the main essentials to add to our creature comforts. Circumstances permitting and stocked with soap, cigarettes, and other negotiable commodities we would visit farms in search of eggs and eau de vie. Thus engaged one day I espied an absolutely beautiful young Frenchwoman with whom I fell in love immediately, wasting no time in knocking on her door with the customary "Avez vous des oeuf, s'il vous plait?". As she replied I was assailed by an overwhelming breath of garlic immediately destroying my hitherto lustful designs upon her body, nevertheless she did produce the eggs and Calvados. During our interchange of fractured Franglais I noticed a ginger haired fellow nearby and assumed he was a local farm worker until he came over and spoke to me in perfect English. He was in fact a Spitfire pilot shot down some weeks before and concealed by the French family during the German occupation. Quite obviously he had now established his feet well under the table with the garlic eating maiden mentioned earlier. He was not in any hurry to return to driving aeroplanes - understandably - and asked me not to report his presence to our people; although decidedly envious of his situation it was agreed. I often wonder whatever happened to him.

Letter writing was an activity enjoyed by some, loathed by others who probably never sent a letter home throughout the whole campaign. In addition to the fact that there was little to write home about, there was also a question of censorship, which meant that, with the exception of one letter each month, all our correspondence was vetted by our troop leader, my tank commander. This somewhat restricted our choice of topics bearing in mind the close proximity of crew members throughout, letters therefore devolved into the usual enquiries as to family health coupled with requests for cigarettes and other vital supplies. Giving vent one day to some specific moan about conditions in general my tank commander, upon reading these comments, remarked "your comments about your superiors are a little on the strong side Ravensdale" whereupon he probably deleted the whole sentence with his blue pencil.

Against this could be set the lighter moments of criticism evidenced on occasions when we were being briefed for some forthcoming operation when some clown would inevitably interject with comments such as "but we're much too young to die Sir". Allowing for this type of comment it should be made clear that there was little, if any, discussion of, or reference to death or premonitions thereof, neither was there any morbid speculation as to what tomorrow may bring. There was after all abundant evidence of the carnage all around but this is not to say that one looked ahead with equanimity; fear was a common ingredient and varied according to individual circumstances, and usually subsumed when action commenced. Incessant shelling and mortaring over lengthy periods could, and did, induce complete mental and physical breakdown.

Our opponents the Wehrmacht and SS units were undoubtedly the most proficient battle trained troops ever known and we had a healthy respect for them. Many had fought in the bitter Russian campaign bringing with them tactics that they put to good use in Normandy.
The Sherman tank was the mainstay of the American and British Armies ranged against the German Pzkw MklV and Panther and Tiger. The superior armour and guns of the German tanks was a decisive factor at all times. With a muzzle velocity of approximately 3000 feet per second, opposed to that of 1800 feet per second of the Sherman 75mm gun, we were significantly outclassed. The nett result translated into the ability of the Panther to destroy a Sherman at a range of 1000 yards, conversely it was necessary for us to close to 150 yards to have any chance of inflicting any mortal damage to the Panther. Some redress was obtained later by fitting some Shermans with the British 17 pounder gun with a greater killing range. Much belated and in far too few numbers.

We were completely outgunned and consequently highly vulnerable at all times. Additionally the German infantry were equipped with a very efficient lethal, hand held anti-tank weapon, the Panzerfaust, which could be used to great effect in close encounters and usually bringing about the destruction of a tank. The previously mentioned propensity of the Sherman to become a blazing inferno was never far from our minds; reminders of this were all too readily visible in the number of abandoned tanks, with the shrivelled and charred bodies of the crew still occupying the positions of the moment of impact, the gunner for example, one hand still grasping the traverse switch with his other hand on the elevating control. These were extremely sobering images retained in the mind for ever. So much for Normandy but these disparities remained with us for the future.

The Falaise Gap marked the German withdrawal from Normandy with catastrophic losses of men and material in their retreat. Advancing through abandoned German transport - much of it horse drawn - the countryside was littered by corpses and the carcasses of horses, and everywhere long lines of dejected German prisoners of war trekking to the POW cages in the rear. It was as one imagines Dantes Inferno.

Pushing on to the river Seine we crossed by pontoon bridge at Vernon, en route to Beauvais. From the stalemate of the previous weeks the advance was now 'hotting-up' with advanced armoured units pressing on, with little resistance, to the Belgian border. With these changed conditions there was no role for us to play at the time and, to conserve fuel and wear and tear on our tracks, we were loaded up onto tank transporters for a leisurely drive to our next destination and to await further orders. We had two brief stops at Amiens and Arras where I encountered a French brothel for the first time, although I hasten to add that this was not in any personal capacity. I was merely interested to see the lengthy queue of British soldiery, wondering to myself just how many young ladies were available to service all this crowd. I have always had an enquiring mind.

Looking back over some fifty six years to 'D'Day and subsequent events, it is sometimes difficult to believe that it all happened and that I was actually part of the proceedings. What was undoubtedly a truly momentous event in the liberation of Western Europe nowadays appears to be of little significance - just another quickly fading historical fact.

Despite this air of unreality the memory remains undimmed and constantly refreshed when I attend regimental reunions. One example arose a couple of years ago in course of comparing photographs by war correspondents taken in 1944. Despite the fact that the Westminster Dragoons and 22nd Dragoons were the first tanks ashore on 'D'Day there are no photographs of flail tanks; this we now understand to have been deliberate policy to conceal these 'secret weapons' from the German High Command.

79th Armoured Division, of which we were part, was the largest division in the British Army, equipped entirely with a variety of specially adapted tanks specifically for an assault role. In addition to our flail tanks, other regiments were equipped with flame throwing tanks (Crocodiles), tanks carrying fascines and bridge laying items, and many other strange innovative items to achieve the landing and breakthrough of fortified coastal defences. The Divisional Commander was Major General Percy Hobart, an extremely able, forward thinking regular officer of the Royal Tank Regiment. A number of his highly evolutionary ideas on armoured warfare, whilst considered unsatisfactory by the British War Office, were studied by General Guderian of the Wehrmacht, and adapted to good use by him in the 'Blitzkrieg' of Poland and France in 1939/40. In the meantime Hobart served in the Western Desert, was recalled to England and resigned from the Army, spending a short time as a corporal in the Home Guard until Churchill recalled him to active service and eventual command of 79th Armoured.

The Division was used extensively in all the beach landings by the British and Canadian Armies and were, without doubt, instrumental in the success of the operations. Offers of support to the US Army were declined; had they been accepted it is reasonable to conjecture that the 'bloodbath' suffered by the Americans on Omaha Beach might possibly have been averted or, to some extent alleviated.

We never fought as a regiment, rarely even at squadron strength; the usual deployment was that of a troop formation, sometimes just a detachment of three tanks loaned out to whoever needed our services, British, Canadian and American. Possibly due to this we rarely gained any recognition or publicity of our activities. Only recently have I learned that the invasion planners originally envisaged flail tank losses would be in the region of 80% due to their vulnerability as leading assault units. In the event our casualties were very light which I can only attribute to pure luck.

THE SHARP END - SECOND HALF

However, to resume the narrative from our stop alongside a brothel in Arras; our onward travels took us to Douai and an interesting meeting with a young Frenchman, the son of a WWI English soldier married to a local woman. Two of us were invited to his home and were surprised to find a meal prepared for us which we thoroughly enjoyed, but were discomfited later to learn that the meat was le chien (dog). Whilst savouring these gourmet delights in Douai the rest of the Army was making progress north into Belgium, and we in turn followed sedately aboard tank transporters enjoying the scenery on the way. This was an idyllic period and, with the Wehrmacht in seeming chaotic disorder and retreating at speed, one could be forgiven for assuming that the worst was over - one more mistaken assumption, this was really only 'half-time'. We had had our little respite and picnics in the countryside and now Jerry had settled in once again determined to make life decidedly unpleasant for all concerned.

Operation 'Market Garden' now commenced with the capture of Nijmegen and Arnhem its main objective. Troops of British 1st , and American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were dropped in the area, and our task was to follow by road to establish a bridgehead over the river Waal in their support. The bridges at Grave and Nijmegen were successfully taken by the American forces but the British attack at Arnhem was repulsed by a strong German armoured unit stationed nearby, the presence of which we were reputedly unaware. This was a fiasco exacerbated by the problems we, the intended relieving force, experienced in our efforts to reach the area along the only road available. This was surrounded on both sides by marshy ground unfit for tanks and other vehicles, and subjected to attack by enemy forces along the whole length. It became known as 'the corridor' with a bottleneck caused by the massive concentration of vehicles, nose to tail the entire length. With the evacuation of those fortunate enough to evade capture at Arnhem the operation was aborted, and the area remained in German occupation for a further six months during which time the Dutch inhabitants suffered great privation and hardship.

The approach of winter found us at the village of Westerhoven near Eindhoven billeted in a loft above a farmhouse at such times as we were not required in action. Farmer Kuylass and his wife had a family of eight very delightful children, mainly little girls one of whom was particularly endearing named Treisje (possibly Theresje). Many years later I prevailed upon my daughter Helen to include the name for her daughter - my granddaughter Naomi. An interesting feature of the farm was an intercommunicating door leading from the living quarters directly into the shippon giving rise to a very pronounced manure-rich pong throughout the building. One advantage I suppose was the warmth emanating from the body heat of the cattle. Upstairs in our loft we had a few resident rats for company.

Klompschoen (clogs) were universally worn to the extent that our host would regularly sit in the kitchen with the oven door open and his feet, encased in clogs, stuck therein for warmth. The winter of 1944 in Holland was the coldest on record for over fifty years; the tank turret ring would regularly freeze solid with ice and snow. To ensure operational capability it was necessary to traverse the turret every two hours to break up any build up of ice.

These freezing conditions were particularly troublesome to me as the owner of a fairly luxuriant bushy moustache in those days. My breath freezing as I exhaled coated the whiskers forming a stiff covering of ice and produced painful twinges as I spoke or laughed.

Clothing in the summer months was minimal, serge trousers and denim overalls, giving way as the weather got colder to battledress jacket and trousers surmounted by denim overalls and a leather jerkin, adequate for autumn but certainly insufficient for the bitter winter conditions of Holland. To our great relief we were issued with the newly devised tank suit, a lined and waterproofed, one piece garment complete with hood - very fetching and resembling Snow white's little men. We were promised tank boots to match but these never arrived. The tank suit was highly adaptable and could be transformed into a sleeping bag although I never tried this. There is good reason to believe that some of our number climbed into their suits upon issue and remained inside for the duration - their only concession that of removing the hood sufficient to allow access for shaving in the morning.

Our Dutch hosts were very solicitous of our welfare and whenever the tanks returned from an operation they would, more or less, count them in to check upon casualties.

Creature comforts were few and far between in Holland whereas Belgium, a few miles down the road, boasted all manner of things, particularly drink. With this firmly in mind I readily accepted an offer from one of the scout car drivers to join him and a few others for an evening excursion to Shangri La, perched precariously on top of the Daimler Dingo. We enjoyed a wild night drinking to excess after our months of abstinence. My only lasting memory is one of downing a glass of schnapps or similar snake venom and, as a final gesture, heaving the glass with some force into a crowd of individuals in the middle of the dance floor. We than made a headlong retreat to the door, piled onto our scout car and made a very hasty exit from the scene.

The weather alternated between bitterly cold and freezing to incessant heavy rain. During one particularly wet spell we received orders to proceed to the Peel Marshes in the vicinity of the river Maas where the Germans had established strong defensive positions at Overloon and Venraij. Our brief was that of supporting 3rd British Infantry Division and 6th Guards Tank Brigade, by clearing minefields impeding their advance. Some few weeks prior to the British involvement at Overloon, an attempt had been made by the American 7th Armored Division, which had been repulsed with heavy losses. No longer sharing Farmer Kuylass's quarters with our new pointy-eared rat friends, we had been thrust out into the cold inhospitable world to earn our living once again. Unlike Normandy there was no question of digging foxholes for shelter in view of the waterlogged condition of the ground and the continual rain, which penetrated everywhere, soaking our blankets as we slept - or tried to. Seeking a solution to the problem I experimented with spending the night aboard the tank in my gunner's seat which was fine whilst the heat from the engine continued to seep through into the turret, approximately one hour, following which I became colder and colder as the tank transformed into a mobile refrigerator. I quickly abandoned this idea.

We were in action most days in this area, both flailing lanes where requested or acting as straightforward gun tanks in support of the infantry. The latter involved close support in clearing buildings and other defensive positions occupied by Jerry. This was the type of action we preferred and for which we had originally trained before our involvement with flails, and my tank commander responded to the challenge with great enthusiasm. I was also glad of an opportunity to use my guns in an offensive capacity for a change.

The infantry, as usual, had a bad time here as the whole area was overlooked by a German observation post in the tower of Venraij church, which dominated the flat landscape for miles around. From this position the German OP officer was able to bring down accurate and devastating fire on all our positions. Concentrated efforts both by our artillery and RAF rocket firing Typhoons failed to dislodge the OP who was undoubtedly an extremely brave man and typical of the German soldier of the period.

Several examples of what is now termed as 'friendly fire' took place here. Occupying a 'hull down' position behind a platoon of infantry we became aware of heavy firing taking place across our front, and assumed this to be an exchange of fire between our infantry and that of the Germans. It became apparent however that this was not the case, and we learned that two of our own units were shooting at each other due to a misunderstanding over their respective positions at the time. Whilst unfortunate it was one of the inevitable consequences, which did arise, in the confused conditions of close proximity to the enemy - a simple misunderstanding quickly leading to a disastrous conclusion.

Another example of 'friendly fire', a little closer to home this time, happened to us as we were quietly going about our business one morning. We heard and felt a thud and the tank came to an abrupt halt with complete failure of all systems. Leaping out we discovered an armour piercing shell lodged in the rear of the vehicle having penetrated the engine doors. As we were at that time moving forward towards the enemy it could only have been possible that the shot came from our lines. Possibly somebody had taken a dislike to us but, fortunately the tank did not 'brew'.

There were of course much lighter moments when, for example, one of the troop trotted off with a spade to commune with nature; squatting happily he looked around to find some 30/40 Germans had risen from the undergrowth, hands on heads, wishing to surrender. His comments were simply "what shall I do with these buggers"

The weather became progressively worse, overcast with almost continual rain; the ground from the concentrated usage by tanks deteriorated into a sea of mud. The conditions combined with incessant enemy activity produced a miserable and uncomfortable existence for all concerned. Despite the weather the attack continued and we were, whenever conditions permitted, constantly deployed clearing lanes through the minefields upon completion of which we would hang about giving covering fire for the infantry, and having a crack at any opportunity targets presented.

Such an opportunity arose one afternoon. In our usual 'hull down' position alongside the infantry we were sitting smoking and keeping observation and listening for radio messages. Very little seemed to be happening although we were aware of activity elsewhere from the stream of messages on the radio to which we listened almost disinterestedly. There was a report of an enemy 'hornet' (i.e. tank) at some map reference, and a minute or two elapsed before the operator, with a sudden start, rumbled that the map reference quoted was virtually in the position we occupied. The customary blind panic evolved as we all peered through our sights to try to locate the target, which we eventually spotted some 600/800 yards to our front, and I locked on to it through my sights and discovered this, to my horror, to be a Panther. It was impossible at this range to knock it out, my only chance of disabling the beast was to hit its tracks. I fired several rounds of armour piercing to which it seemed impervious - it merely ignored us, for which we were eternally grateful, and wandered off to destroy a Sherman Firefly equipped with a 17 pounder gun, and a lethal adversary on many occasions. This episode merely underlined the sheer futility of joining action against the superior armour and firepower of Panthers or Tigers. It did not inspire confidence giving rise to the opinion that the most sensible course of action in such circumstances was that of firing smoke, engaging reverse gear and getting to Hell out of it. There were many instances when the only option available was to engage the enemy tank and, regrettably too many of our tank crews were sacrificed as a result of this disparity. Only one man named Stokes, MP for, I believe, Ipswich regularly drew attention to the woeful inadequacy of the tanks with which we were equipped. The Sherman was, in the opinion of many tankmen, a deathtrap.

Ranging and hitting a target with the 75mm gun was reasonably easy once the distance to the object had been established, but the co-axial Browning machine gun posed problems over a distance due to the spread of shot. Seeing a German having a shave in the open I loosed off a burst of Browning in his general direction, missing him entirely but incurring the wrath of the commander of some infantry ahead of us who pointed out that his chaps did not take kindly to us firing machine guns over their heads. Point taken, but better luck lay ahead when one infantry unit was taking heavy casualties from a German mortar crew. They were unable to locate the position of the mortar and we were ordered to keep a lookout for any telltale flash and assist if possible. Our driver spotted this and put me on to the target at which I fired a couple of High Explosive rounds and was rewarded by an almighty explosion and a cessation of further mortar fire. It would seem that, in addition to the mortar and crew, my shots had detonated their stock of ammunition. We received an immediate vote of thanks from the Brigade Commander. I had done something useful at last.

Earlier I mentioned that we had been put out of action by a shell from an unknown source and, as this was the troop leader's tank and he, the troop leader, exceeding keen to continue the action, commandeered the tank and crew of the troop corporal and drove off into the sunset. Dougie (co-driver) and I were deputed to remain with our lame mount until the recovery unit arrived to transport it to Brigade Workshops for re-fettling. Dougie and I were well pleased at the turn of events and set about constructing a 'bivvy', brewing tea and settling down for a bit of peace and quiet as soon as I had cleaned my guns and fitted the muzzle covers. Dreams of peace and quiet were rudely shattered by a heavy 'stonking' by a mortar . The German mortar was probably the most loathed item of all weaponry - it was indiscriminate and made the most fearful sound in flight. Our luck held but there was no sign of any recovery unit and we prepared to spend the night in that God forsaken spot. Shortly before Dusk, lumbering great Churchills belonging to the Coldstream Guards of 6th Guards Tank Brigade, hove into view with the lead tank coming to a halt close by. The commander leaned from the turret enquiring as to our business, which I explained. He then asked why muzzle covers had been fitted to our guns, and I pointed out that we had no power for the traverse or indeed for anything else. I was then 'torn off a strip', ordered to remove the muzzle covers and be prepared to man the tank as a defensive position in the event of an enemy counter-attack. I duly saluted the stupid oaf, reported the conversation to Dougie, and unanimously agreed that at the first sight of a field grey uniform we would scarper rearward at the speed of light. In the meantime the muzzle covers remained in position.

The Wehrmacht fought brilliantly - a dogged resistance aimed at preventing us reaching the river Maas and its close proximity to the Fatherland. The German soldier was not only tenacious and resilient in defence, he was also good at improvisation. No matter how heavily we attacked their positions they would invariably dig in amongst the rubble, to reappear after the barrage to inflict heavy casualties upon our advancing infantry and armour.

Our working day commenced before Dawn as we prepared to assemble on the Start Line to join the infantry and relieve the anti-tank units after their nightlong vigil. This procedure was reversed at the end of the day, of which I have the lasting memory of dark grey days of fading light as we pulled back to harbour-up for the night, past the eerie skeletons of burning houses and other grim indications of the ongoing war of attrition taking place.

Arriving at the laager we would be joined by the soft vehicles from 'A'Echelon bringing supplies of water, petrol, ammunition and food, all of which had to be loaded manually by the crew members, petrol (60 gallons) in 4 gallon jerricans, plus restocking with rounds of 75mm rounds passed from man to man, from the ammo truck to the turret and down into the ammunition racks lining the turret. Backbreaking work at any time.

Having restocked the next task was cleaning and oiling the guns, 'netting-in' the radio to any change in frequency required, and essential maintenance of the tank generally. Upon completion the crew would then, and only then, make preparation for erecting a 'bivvy' and organising something to eat - it was very much in the cavalry tradition of the care of the mount taking precedence over the requirements of the rider. Finally crews would be detailed for guard duties of two hours duration throughout the night. With early morning 'Stand To' before dawn there was little likelihood of much rest. At the time I vowed that, upon regaining civilian life, I would never ever complain about anything again. Alas memories are short!

Our suffering though was as nothing compared with our infantry compatriots. Entering a small village early one morning I dismounted and wandered across to a large shell crater in the road ahead of us in which lay some eight or nine khaki clad bodies. I mentioned this to the crew and we began brewing a pot of tea, with which we were surprised to see the 'dead' bodies clambering from the shell crater and making their way over to join us for a drink. They were in fact members of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment who had taken part in the attack on the village earlier and retired to rest after they had been relieved by another unit. They were cold, hungry and completely exhausted and extremely glad of our decision to halt at that particular spot and provide a lifesaving cup of char.

Similarly, again in the early morning, approaching some fairly dense woodland, we came across a private in the Suffolk Regiment looking after items of equipment left behind by his platoon when they went forward to clear the wood some hours previously. His only sustenance over the previous 24 hours had been haversack rations of a couple of sandwiches and the contents of his water bottle. He had not received any word from his platoon, was extremely cold and hungry, and also in a poor state mentally. Before moving on we plied him with hot tea, biscuits, butter and marmalade, and of course a good supply of fags hoping that he would in short course be relieved by his regiment.

With the capture of Overloon and Venraij we were pulled back into reserve along with the rest of the squadron, Chopper rejoining us after his fun and games with the troop corporal's tank and crew. In the meantime we had been issued with a brand new replacement tank, which, I was delighted to find, was equipped with a hydraulic oil traverse as opposed to the previous electrical traverse. This oil traverse was much smoother in operation - much less jerky.

Within a matter of days three of our tanks, ours included, were detailed for another job, this time in support of 15th Scottish Division to liberate Tilburg, a fairly large town in the west of Holland. This entailed a long march from our present location with a providential overnight stop for accommodation at a girls' school (unoccupied). We seemed fated to occupying girls' schools in our travels. The next morning we resumed our march on Tilburg.

Tilburg was the complete antithesis to our recent area of operations mainly due to the fact that the Germans more or less pulled out without offering any resistance, and we were ordered to mark time outside the town to allow the Dutch troops, Prinses Irene's Nederlands Brigaat, the honour of being the first troops to enter the town. This was greeted with some ribald comments from the British soldiery, the majority of whom immediately pressed on to capture Breda, another town in the vicinity. Our three tanks joined the procession into Tilburg receiving a rapturous greeting from the thousands of civilians lining the route. This was the sort of war we enjoyed - a hero's welcome with all that goes with it, and it was well nigh impossible to drive the tanks through the streets due to the massive crowds of people. Whenever we halted women and girls climbed onto the tanks, even inside the turret immodestly displaying undergarments and body parts hitherto but a figment of our imagination. It was undeniably most disconcerting for we young celibate gentlemen.

Eventually we managed to make the town square but still the subject of never ceasing acclamation of the populace; also the attentions of one or two light fingered individuals making off with any rations we inadvertently left on display. We could live with that but not with one jarring aspect of the proceedings when we became aware of increased shouting from the crowds. Coming along the street a procession, headed by what appeared to be boy scouts of vintage years and others, was pushing a woman and two small children along. The woman was practically stripped of clothing and the two children crying loudly. We were informed that she had been the lover of a German. Our chaps were visibly annoyed and inclined to intervene but were ordered not to get involved under any circumstances. It was a disgusting scene which left an indelible memory but one had to try to understand the feelings of the average Dutchman who had endured the years of occupation with his own pride, and his understandable revulsion concerning collaborators. The incident passed, soon forgotten when a pretty girl approached offering accommodation at her parents' home for two of the crew. Chopper had no objection to this and I and another chap were happy to take up the offer of a decent bed for the night. The next morning after thanking our hosts for their hospitality I said goodbye to the girl, eighteen years old named Riet, who gave me her photograph together with full name and address. I carried this with me throughout my service, fully intending to keep in touch but never did so. That morning, as we were no longer required, we returned to the Maas area to rejoin the squadron.

For over forty years I have, from time to time, looked at the photograph and thought about the day at Tilburg, thinking that like most wartime meetings there was little chance of ever meeting her again. However a friend of my daughter Elizabeth lives in Amsterdam and hearing the story volunteered to try and locate Riet. She eventually tracked her down to her present home in Rotterdam where we arranged to meet after a number of telephone conversations. My wife and I took a train from Amsterdam, where we were staying, and arrived at Rotterdam station nervously examining all the older females in the main hall. One white haired old lady approached who I thought might possibly be Riet but passed by. We began to doubt whether she would materialise at all.

In course of peering at the passing travellers somebody prodded me in the back and I turned round to face a most attractive woman who said "Keith" - it was Riet, and we spent a very enjoyable day with her and her daughter. I was delighted to have an opportunity to renew this fleeting acquaintanceship of so many years past.

Our two day respite was over as we traced our way back to the muddy, shell torn river Maas. Several changes were taking place insofar as the crew was concerned; Chopper and I remained as commander and gunner respectively whilst the operator was also unchanged but there were replacements of driver and co-driver, and very shortly we saw action again with events of almost farcical quality. The first incident happened as we drove along a forest ride. The commander had just ordered the removal of muzzle covers in preparation for possible firing as we exited the wood. Sitting there with clammy hands and an increased pulse rate we suddenly heard the co-driver over the intercom reporting that he had lost his escape hatch from the floor of the tank. This in itself was a most exceptional and unlikely thing to occur being secured by two strong catches, which required considerable effort to release. The only likely explanation was deliberate release by the co-driver who was, by reputation, a nervous type. There was no alternative but that of retracing our path to retrieve and refit the hatch, without this the tank and crew would have risked complete destruction from exploding mines. The co-driver did not remain with us for very long.

We continued with worse to follow. Emerging from the forested area Chopper put me on to a target for the 75mm gun and having aligned this in my sights I pressed the electric firing pedal. Nothing happened whereupon, assuming a detonator fault, I went through the standard drill prescribed for such and bellowed out to the operator "Misfire - Recock"; all this to no avail even after two more attempts. Throughout my commander was kneeing me in the back with his orders to "Fire", he then spotted one of my mess tins lying beneath the manual firing pedal. The air was blue with his comments as to my parentage - or lack of, and to "your bloody mess tins". In the event neither the circumstances of my birth nor the 'bloody mess tins' were in any way involved. Under the 75mm breech block was fitted a small safety catch for the firing mechanism, and in the course of reaching forward to extract a round from the ammunition rack my awkward cumbersome Plymothian operator/loader had inadvertently nudged this with his shoulder into the 'safe' position. My honour was intact but my back bruised and aching from Chopper's none too gentle ministrations during this crisis.

During periods in action with both guns working, a tank turret was bedlam. The explosion as the cartridge case was detonated followed by the clatter of the spent cartridge case as it ejected from the breech, accompanied by the repetitive firing of the co-axial machine gun over and above the bawling and shouting through one's headphones, all contributed to a general numbing effect after a time. Overall hung an acrid cloud of cordite fumes and a fusillade of red hot cartridge cases from the machine gun flying about generally.

My tank commander, also troop leader, was excellent and cool headed but, on rare occasions, gave vent to his feelings in no uncertain manner. A notable example of this happened as we ran up against a number of our infantry making their way back to the casualty clearing station, a great proportion of whom had suffered disabling wounds to feet and legs from German Schu mines. I was ordered to train the guns on a line of German POW's also making their way rearwards when, to my horror, the commander ordered me to fire with the co-axial Browning machine gun which I refused to do. In a matter of seconds he simmered down and sanity was restored. This sort of thing can, and undoubtedly did happen in the heat of the moment.

By now I was beginning to believe that fighting angry Germans was not really an ideal pensionable form of employment. No longer the naive innocent 'greenhorn' keenly anticipating the excitement of action; instead there was an increasing awareness of the precarious tenure of existence, resulting in a noticeable lack of enthusiasm when venturing forth into gladiatorial combat with the opposition.

There were, insofar as I could see, little or no 'perks' with the job - the very opposite in fact. The first blow was the recall of my AB64 (Army Book of Service) when the term of my engagement was summarily amended from that of Duration of the War, to that of Duration of the Present Emergency, a clear breach of contract which in effect added a further two years to my length of service. The reason behind this lay with the decreasing reserves of manpower, and the anticipated troop requirements for the immediate post-war period. Personally I was not particularly concerned about these problems besetting the planners but extremely concerned about Trooper Ravensdale's future outlook, particularly as my pay book now also bore an additional entry clearly inscribed in red ink 'Far East 1'. By the simple stroke of a pen I had now been classified for transhipment to the Far East, as and when required, after cessation of hostilities in Europe.

I then got a touch of religion. The Padre announced that he would be holding confirmation classes for those interested and, fearing for my soul, and knowing that this would please my mother, I volunteered. Our classes were a little unconventional, held when and wherever operationally practicable; four or five of us sitting on the ground endeavouring to assume a suitable devout God fearing countenance much beloved by the Puritans of old. This was rudely shattered on one occasion when the Satanic hordes comprised of the unbelievers of the squadron found some discarded German shells. Detaching the projectile from the round they laid a trail of cordite to the brass cartridge cases, which they then ignited with the most spectacular results. These large brass cartridge cases took off in divers directions, some dropping perilously close to our holy gathering. The Padre wisely decided that having survived this ordeal of fire we were obviously favoured by the Lord and eminently suitable for confirmation, and we all dispersed at great speed to await details of the date and venue of our confirmation.

The Confirmation ceremony took place at Eindhoven Cathedral conducted by the Bishop of Dover, and was quite a colourful affair by virtue of all the troops wearing best battledress bearing the various divisional, or brigade, and regimental flashes, together with a miscellany of regimental badges. It was a very moving occasion.

UK Leave came into operation at about this time for which names were selected by ballot - something akin to the present-day National Lottery. The number of places was very restricted by lack of transport and shipping with the obvious realisation that many months would elapse before everybody would have an opportunity to qualify; in the main we relegated the probability to the back of our minds. One commonly held grievance on the part of troops at the 'sharp end' was that of allocation sharing with lines of communication troops - a deeply felt resentment of equal status with many who had never heard a shot fired in anger.

The subject of leave, or furlough as more rightly termed, involved what might be classified as a 'caste' system operated on troopships. Invariably, and to my mind quite correctly, precedence on embarkation and disembarkation was accorded to members of the Royal Navy. However as the British Army stood around awaiting our turn we would be greeted by the sight of the RAF going aboard. We Pongos would, after much 'faffing-about', be herded aboard like a consignment of cattle and usually despatched to the very bowels of the ship well below the water line. The other ranks of the British Army were not very highly regarded - the only people who seemed to love us were the old ladies manning charitable tea and bun counters in the southern counties, who would endearingly refer to us as 'our dear boys'.

The war went on, at the same time my religious fervour wore off with surprising speed. This I attribute to the antics of a holy man as we drove off into action one day when he approached our tank making a sign of the cross. Doubtless this was intended as a blessing but to my morbid imagination it equated more to the administering of the Last Rites.

Our next little 'party' was in support of 3rd Battalion Monmouthshire Regiment to dislodge and clear one of the last remaining German strongholds on the west bank of the river Maas, where they were securely dug in at a Kasteel (Castle) and the adjoining village of Broekhuizen. Intelligence reports suggested that the opposition consisted of a small number of Hitler Jugend and unlikely to pose any great problem. In our Forming Up Area at Horst on 29th November 1944 we were briefed with maps and diagrams of the enemy positions, and of the order of battle for the following day. We were to lead the attack with three tanks of 2 Troop at 1000 hours with their objective the Kasteel. Our troop, 4 Troop, would follow at 1100 hours to assault the village of Broekhuizen. Both troops were to 'flog' lanes though the extensive minefields to allow the infantry and supporting armour to follow-up behind. Prior to our attack the artillery would lay down a barrage of shelling together with a smokescreen to assist.

The planned operation bore all the hallmarks of the 'set piece' battle advocated by Montgomery but, within minutes, it became apparent that the Germans were well entrenched and fiercely resisting. We learned later that the defending troops were not members of the Hitler Jugend but battle hardened veterans of 21 Para Regiment with orders to defend the position to the last man - surrender was not an option. 2 Troop commenced their attack flailing a lane towards the Kasteel with a company of 3 Mons in support, and rapidly encountered problems due to the marshy ground when one tank 'bogged down' at such an angle that it was unable to bring its 75mm gun to bear against the enemy positions. Additionally heavy fire, under the direction of a German observation post on the enemy held side of the river Maas, inflicted heavy losses to the infantry who were unable to continue their advance.

It was then time for our troop to begin the attack on Broekhuizen village. With our tank in the lead and two others in echelon behind we commenced clearing three lanes through the minefield closely followed by another company of 3 Mons. The minefield at this point was 700 yards long, over which we crawled at our 'flogging' speed of just over 1 mph - extremely nerve-racking listening to the mines detonating, and gloomily anticipating that at any moment a well aimed 88mm shell would blast us into eternity. The commander, mindful of the situation, would from time to time, and to our great relief, halt the tank and order me to traverse the turret to the front to give me targets for my 75mm gun. A wonderful respite from lumbering along as a sitting duck for German target practice. By some grace of God we managed to clear our lane unscathed but observed that our infantry support unit was being decimated by the enemy. My commander ordered our two other tanks back to the Startline whilst we stayed in position to give harassing fire to the nearby German positions, and afford some protection and support to 3 Mons. Our good fortune did not last for long.

Some 50 yards from a German defensive position we were struck by a Panzerfaust anti-tank missile, which hit us somewhere in the vicinity of the gun mantlet and the co-axial machine gun housing. In this we were extremely lucky - had the shot struck the hull a little lower there is every probability that it would have penetrated the thinner skin of armour plating and detonated the rack of shells lining the turret.

Suddenly there was a 'deafening silence', I was slightly concussed and then noticed blood dripping on to my leather jerkin and assumed this to be mine. Looking around I saw that it was from the commander who had been hit, also the operator was bleeding from stomach wounds. The tank had died but did not 'brew up'. The commander and operator baled out leaving me in the turret reasoning that it would only be a matter of time before we would receive another hit with every possibility that it would 'brew up' on that occasion. Whilst agonising about this I became aware of the driver and co-driver calling out from below to the effect that they were unable to escape as the 75mm gun barrel was traversed over their hatches.

Instinctively I reached for the traverse switch, which failed to operate as all the power systems were out of action - the turret remained immobile. The only remaining option was to try using the manual traversing mechanism; if this failed both driver and co-driver would be burned to death when Jerry hit us again. Thankfully there was no apparent damage to the turret ring and slowly the turret and gun traversed to the front enabling both occupants to scramble out of their hatches. It was time for me to evacuate but I was acutely aware that in exiting the tank through the cupola, I would present a beautiful target for someone to take a potshot at me. In parallel with this I also realised that the longer I remained with the tank the more likely became the possibility of receiving another hit. The latter being the more positive of the two I decided to chance my arm and I sprang, in one movement, from my gunner's seat through the cupola on to the engine deck and took a flying leap onto the ground behind the tank. Although clear of the tank I was not particularly happy with the situation realising that I was much closer to the enemy than I was to our chaps, furthermore Jerry was doing his utmost to ensure that I did not reach my destination. With 700 yards to go my chances of survival lay with crawling on my stomach along the tracks we had cleared in the minefield on the way out. At one point I had to negotiate an Italian box mine which had not been detonated by our flail - there was no way around it and I gingerly slid over hoping to God that it would remain dormant. It did. I was petrified.

Some yards further on I met the leading files of 3 Mons, a moment I recollect very clearly, being concerned that they might mistake me for a German and finish the job the German had been endeavouring to arrange. The leading infantryman of the Monmouthshires was wounded and bleeding from his shoulder; looking at me his immortal words, in time honoured British Army vernacular were "F..k this for a game of soldiers". With this I heartily concurred.

Ignominiously creeping back to the Startline I joined two others of the crew, scrounged some cigarettes from somebody, and lay behind a bank to watch further proceedings. Our two wounded crew members had been evacuated to a casualty clearing station. My driver suddenly suggested that he would like to retrieve some presents from the tank which he had brought with him from Brussels the day before, but I was not particularly enthusiastic about this idea and, a matter of minutes later, we saw the tank hit once again followed by a violent explosion and sheet of flame. We were now completely redundant and left to our own devices with the departure of the remaining troop tanks back to the squadron. A matter of hours elapsed before anyone seemed to notice our absence until a truck rolled up to transport us to our 'B' Echelon some miles to the rear.

Arriving at 'B'Echelon we presented ourselves at the cookhouse for a meal, this was refused on the grounds that we had already been issued with rations for our tank, now burning quietly away on the banks of the Maas. Adding insult to injury we were then detailed for guard duty that night, despite the fact that our only possessions were the clothes we were then wearing.

We were, with good reason, none too pleased at the turn of events whereby having spent the day in action with the loss of our tank, and two crew members, we were now to take turns in providing guards for the non-fighting elements of 'B'Echelon. Fortunately for us our plight did not go unnoticed by one of our officers recovering from wounds who happened to be present. The order was rescinded and he arranged for us to attend an ENSA show in Helmond that evening.

Worse was to come the following morning when I was marched in to see the Squadron Leader for a de-briefing and authorisation for replacement of kit and equipment lost in the action. Observing that I had left my personal weapon in the tank as I 'baled-out', he informed me that this was a court martial offence, a fact I was not really worrying about the day previous - in any event I doubted very much whether it would be of any great use to anyone after the 'brew-up'. I heard nothing more of my heinous offence. Regarding my other lost equipment I was quickly issued with a new set of those vital ingredients of soldiering, i.e. razor, toothbrush, comb, mess tins, mug, knife, fork and spoon - once again fully equipped to challenge the might of the Wehrmacht.

I have dealt in detail with regard to the Broekhuizen incident as I feel that it illustrates very clearly the conditions endured, and the treatment usually to be expected irrespective of the circumstances befalling the individual. It gives added weight to the oft repeated maxim levelled at us through every stage of our training, namely "You are not paid to think - you are paid to do as you are told". Somehow it was quite apt and proved highly successful in many ways. In other words, stick the brain in neutral, look to the front and ignore 90% of the proceedings.

Now temporarily unemployed I was awaiting another new tank, a new troop leader, and a new operator/loader. All these items and other were soon to arrive.

Before moving on it is perhaps of interest to note that the Broekhuizen action ultimately succeeded in clearing the German defences on the west bank of the river Maas. This action took place over a period of 24/30 hours at a cost of some 140 casualties. The irony of the situation unfolded later when we learned that no further action took place in this sector until March 1945. In the meantime the 'powers that be' were content to merely patrol the area to prevent any counter attack from the German held sector across the river. One wonders, in retrospect, was the loss of life justified? This and countless thousands of other minor engagements of the British Army over the years warrant little recognition, apart from short entries in war diaries and histories of particular regiments involved on the day. The terse, brief descriptions of such events provide little or no understanding, to the reader, of the horrific and violent intensity of these 'minor' actions.

In the course of writing these notes I find various incidents coming to mind, which have been buried in the recesses of my memory over the years. Not in any strict chronological order they are, nevertheless, relevant to any appreciation of the everyday existence of an average trooper at the time, One such incident took place in France as the squadron was moving forward. Sitting cross-legged on the turret top, enjoying the sunshine and looking at a map of the area, I happened to notice a church tower, which did not identify with the church marked on the map. From this I deduced that we were heading the wrong way - a fact I duly remarked to my commander. He somewhat sarcastically suggested that I might wish to point out this error to the squadron leader, whereupon I shut up and awaited events; a few minutes later the whole squadron was ordered to retrace its order of march - I remained discreetly silent.

Maps of France were updated daily and flown in from England for distribution to units as they progressed from one location to another and were extremely detailed despite the fact that four years had elapsed since up-to-date maps had been available in 1940.

When opportunity afforded, crew members other than the driver and commander would emerge to sit on the turret, or the engine deck, as we drove to fresh locations. This was not particularly comfortable insofar as one's rear quarters were concerned; the metal surface was hard and either hot or icy cold. This was offset by sitting on the tank tarpaulin cover and scrim net on the engine deck, providing relief from the hard surface and insulation from the engine heat. In winter one alternately froze on one side and roasted underneath.

Soldiers are inveterate scroungers and collectors and tank crews were no exception - possibly worse by virtue of the means to carry their booty with them. My proud possessions comprised a German steel helmet and rifle; others had similar bits and pieces. One crew adopted a small dog in France, which they carried with them for some time. The situation did however tend to get out of hand with ducks, geese and other assorted game festooned inside the tank ready for cooking whenever possible. Some crews had accumulated 'liberated' property to an extent whereby the turret was no longer capable of a full 360 degree traverse. Inevitably orders were given to discard all unnecessary baggage and to resume our official role as armoured fighting vehicles.

Attending to the needs of nature occasionally posed problems. Under normal circumstances one would merely urinate against the side of the tank or wander off with a spade to dig a little hole somewhere. Closed down in action was another matter entirely; in these instances spent 75mm shell cases were adapted for use, the contents then poured out through the pistol port in the turret. A tank could be quite insanitary at times.

Guard duty was an essential, if unwelcome, chore particularly in cold wet weather such as we regularly experienced in the winter of 1944 in Holland. On one such night occupying a Dutch village crews had bedded down having posted a prowler guard to patrol the area. The night passed uneventfully until early the following morning when the local inhabitants informed us that they had been disturbed by a strong German fighting patrol enquiring as to the whereabouts of the British. Our prowler guards had heard nothing - the general assumption was that they had probably been asleep, sheltering from the weather in a truck - and the German patrol discontinued their search before reaching our position at the far end of the village.

Earlier I mentioned that I was awaiting a new tank and replacement crew. Whilst this was being organised Doug and I together with a member of 2 Troop were surprised to hear that we had been granted local leave to Brussels for forty eight hours. This was wonderful news and we joyfully piled into the back of a truck for this momentous event. In Brussels we were billeted with the owners of a cafe/bar who received us with great kindness. It was December 6th., St Nicholas Eve, something akin to the English Christmas Eve for children. My companions and I also felt a bit like children at Christmas as we gazed around at the sights and sounds of Brussels, unable to decide where we should commence our bacchanalian revels. Somebody suggested a shave in a barber's shop where we partook of a traditional lather and cut throat razor operation. This was extremely hair-raising, leaving me with the feeling that half the flesh on my face had been removed; following this it seemed an eminently good idea would be to have our photographs taken to send home; the remainder of the day was spent wandering around looking at the sights of the city such as the Manekin Pis and other objets d'art.

That evening, predictably, was spent wandering around bars and cafes, eventually coming across one with a large sign outside bearing the words "Off Limits", the US equivalent of the British Army "Out of Bounds". Ignoring this as being none of our business we entered the premises and were soon in conversation with two very pretty women for whom we bought drinks. Doug then enquired if there was anywhere we could go for a dance, at which the young ladies informed us that they danced upstairs. There was no sound of music and we were just a little confused until the worldly-wise Douglas suddenly rumbled that we had stumbled into a brothel whereupon he became immediately interested in sampling the wares. Our fellow traveller from 2 Troop, a quiet lad like me, was reluctant to become involved but eventually succumbed and disappeared up the stairs with Doug and the two ladies, leaving me to contemplate my beer and debate my course of action. This did not take long - a matter of seconds - by a logical, simple appraisal of my current situation. Less than a week before I had narrowly escaped 'the grim reaper', I was nineteen and a half years old, never partaken of sexual intercourse at any time, and more to the point, in my present occupation the odds against such an opportunity arising again seemed to be somewhat stacked against me.

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Whilst musing over these imponderables I was rejoined by a broadly smiling Doug followed shortly by our other colleague, red-faced and looking distinctly uncomfortable. The two ladies reappeared and I heard one say to the other "tres jeune"; apparently my fellow virgin soldier had experienced a rather expensive premature ejaculation at 400 BFr. Egged on by my crewmate I was led upstairs by the very attractive brunette who speedily and most effectively taught me the facts of life Belgian style. One more landmark in my life!
Our remaining 24 hours involved more wandering about before being whisked back to the squadron to resume the war. I liked, and still like, Brussels and enjoyed a wonderful respite from our normal daily activities.

Our new tank had arrived upon my return from leave and I learned that our new troop leader was Lieutenant Brian Leather for whom I would be tank gunner. This was a happy coincidence as he was my troop leader in 5 Troop in England when I had also been his gunner at that time. The replacement operator was a chap from Gloucestershire, with a fresh co-driver from Cheshire, a tall, awkward and clumsy individual - sometime later as he left our 'bivvy' to go on guard he stumbled; his Sten Gun was cocked in the firing position, this went off and drilled two neat holes through my blankets just missing demolishing my toes.

Christmas was now upon us but I have scant recollection of this time and we were not in any great demand as far as I remember. There was a period when we were called upon to evaluate a new infra-red device for night vision. Aptly named Tabby' it was designed as a portable fitting in front of the driver's hatch through which the driver, supposedly, could peer and clearly distinguish objects at night. Several night excursions took place and, almost without exception, resulted in complete chaos and confusion as tanks lumbered around like rogue elephants on the loose as the portable framework collapsed with frightening regularity around the driver's ears. Nothing more was ever heard of Tabby' but it was certainly great fun at the time.

The Rhine crossing was the next major operation involving detailed planning for all those units involved. In the prelude to the assault we took up position in the Forming Up Area awaiting the landings of the Airborne people on the other side of the river. A pontoon bridge was thrown across the Rhine over which we drove the tanks to link up with Airborne. Mother heard on the BBC News that evening that the Westminster Dragoons were in the vanguard of those crossing the river, and was promptly worried to death. The Dropping Zone resembled a scrapyard littered with abandoned and destroyed airborne tanks and other equipment, above all else were gliders and parachutes. In keeping with our inquisitive and acquisitive natures we were delighted to find new playthings left behind by the Wehrmacht, such things as rifles with cup ejectors for firing grenades. Armed with these and some grenades we spent some happy moments blasting grenades into the water, which brought scores of dead fish to the surface. Happy hour was ruined when our activities were mistaken by troops on the other side of the river as being a German counter-attack and we were suitably admonished to play at proper soldiers once again.

There was intense activity on the part of the allied air forces and one of our aircraft, obviously in trouble emitting a trail of smoke, passed low overhead from which a number of parachutes descended. One failed to open and we recovered the body for burial prior to which we searched for identification documents and came across a letter, two days old, sent by his wife. At the time it seemed totally incongruous that this man, alive and breakfasting in England a few hours previously, and possibly reading this letter from his wife, now lay dead before us in a field in Germany.

Our travels had now taken us to the promised land, der Vaterland and in the ruins of the ancient Rhenish towns of Xanten, Cleve and Goch we were, for the first time, meeting German civilians. In customary fashion the Wehrmacht had fought a determined rearguard action in defence of their homeland with pockets of resistance and snipers delaying our advance at all points. Entering one town, watched by a silent group of civilians, we were greeted by a young lad, possibly not more than four years old, who raised his arm in the Nazi salute, which he probably thought, was appropriate to the occasion. I found this rather poignant and wondered what sort of future lay in store for him, surrounded as he was by absolute desolation and misery. Very much, I thought, the sins of the fathers visited upon the sons.

Our final operational role in Germany was in support of 6th Airborne Division in the capture of Celle, an old and very attractive town some 6 or so miles from the infamous Belsen Concentration Camp. Having secured the town we were informed that General Patton's Third US Army had been accorded priority with regard to petrol and other supplies, and that we were to remain in Celle as an occupation force until further notice. This involved assuming responsibility for the day to day running of civilian services and maintaining law and order generally. Celle at this time was overflowing with recently liberated Allied prisoners of war, American, British and Russian, all at a completely loose end and capable of infinite mayhem with little or no provocation - particularly the Russians. The German population was also quite arrogant and surly and openly resented our presence, and it was therefore essential that firm control be established to counter all these latent problems.

Foot patrols monitored food and fuel stores ensuring, as far as practicable, fair distribution of supplies to the population and the prevention of 'black-market' activities; interrogation and identification of individuals, and manning of key points in the town against looting by both civilians and POW's.

Alcohol was widely sought by the POW's, especially our Russian friends, and one of our vulnerable targets was the local distillery to which I and six other troopers were despatched to provide overnight protection. Within the building we discovered a veritable Aladdin's cave of wine and spirits with which we regaled ourselves generously. In the meantime one of our number had been stationed, fully armed, in the outside yard to deter transgressors. After a while someone remembered we had this chap outside from whom we had heard nothing and thought it might be a good idea to check if he was alright. Opening the door we were confronted by a yard full of Russians, all drunk with some even lying beneath the open taps of the vats; surveying this and backed-up in a corner unable to move stood our prowler guard. Dashing in amongst the Russians we dragged our chap back into the safety of the building and slammed the door to against any further invasion. It was a nasty moment which could have developed into a general riot had we used our weapons. The following morning with the arrival of our relief guard we picked our way out of the yard over the insensible heaps of bodies and through the miasma of alcohol pervading overall.

Fraternisation was forbidden with the Germans but there was little danger of this In Celle as the local population were distinctly unfriendly, possibly as a result of some actions forced upon us during our stay - we had on one occasion been required to use rifle butts to break up near- riots at bakeries to ensure fair distribution of bread.

Our relations with the populace were not improved in the knowledge of its proximity to Belsen and the underlying belief that these people were aware of what had been taking place at this extermination centre. This was forcibly impressed upon me one evening when several of us went to the railway station recently bombed by our aircraft. The remains of a train littered the track surrounded by hundred of corpses shrivelled by heat, and bearing remnants of striped pyjama type clothes worn by inmates of concentration camps. As we walked through the bodies we were confronted by a German in railway uniform, presumably the station master, ordering us off the premises. Not only sickened by the spectacle of the mass slaughter and the obvious identity of those killed, we were filled with blind fury at this representative of the Herrenvolk to the extent that we threatened to shoot him on the spot. As stationmaster he would doubtless have known the destination of the victims. I regret to say that I have grave doubts over the protestations of many Germans that they were in ignorance of events, which took place in WW11.

Lighter moments occurred instanced by an evening stroll with one of our drivers, Miles Flynn, who spotted a woman waving to us from the top floor of a building. Unable to find any access to the ground floor Miles suggested that we find some ladders to liberate her - we then discovered this to be a local women's prison.

A few days later having liberated a private car, siphoned some petrol from one of our tanks, we set out for a drive in the nearby countryside and chanced upon a Russian POW camp, set up by the Germans. The Russians welcomed us with open arms and invited us to a drink of vodka - at least that is what they termed it - we noticed a film of oil on the surface and the taste was execrable and viciously strong. One sip was enough and thanking them profusely we took our leave and motored on but we did leave one of our number behind, at his request, promising to call back for him. When we subsequently returned poor Willy was practically comatose lying in bed with a Russian girl. We understand that the vodka was home distilled probably from a mixture of engine oil and other substances.

Some of us went to Bergen-Belsen, an experience one will never forget. It is fashionable in some quarters today, particularly from those too young to have even lived though the war let alone participate, that the accounts relating to concentration camps and extermination programmes are untrue and that such things never existed. When I read of these denials I am angered by the naivety of some people but more so by the doubt they encourage in the minds of future generations who may, quite understandably, fail to understand the evil and suffering unleashed upon the world by Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

EXTRA TIME

Orders were now received to return to Holland for a complete change of role. Flail tanks were no longer in very great demand. Our new playthings were to be amphibious tanks for which training was to be undertaken at Kampen on the Zuider Zee (now known as the Ijssel Meer). The Sherman flail tanks were to be replaced by the old British Valentine tank, and the regiment was to lead an amphibious assault on the strongly fortified Friesian Islands. The prospect filled us with no little alarm being fully convinced that the Germans would simply blow us straight out of the water. Notwithstanding such upbeat thoughts we went about our training, 'pootling' about in DUKW's on the Zuider Zee and diving overboard for the odd swim from time to time - it was quite good fun. The nightlife was good too; this part of Holland was clear of Germans and many normal activities were beginning to take place, dances for example, with a chance to indulge in female company. In the latter connection strong opposition was voiced by the extremely puritanical local church elders who issued edicts to the local maidens to eschew the company of the lecherous, licentious soldiery now in their midst. Fortunately the local Dutch meisjes paid little or no heed to these instructions.

The only cloud on the horizon was the proposed visit to the Friesian Islands - a task we considered more suitable to Japanese Kamikaze lads than us but unfortunately the Japanese were fighting on the other side - we were obviously lumbered with the job. Such are the fortunes of war where every silver lining is hung about with several black clouds.

Shortly before leaving Kampen the regiment provided a Guard of Honour for Prins Bernhardt of the Netherlands for which three weeks of intensive preparation was involved. Many months had elapsed since we had engaged in any activity of this nature, and we were suitably rehearsed in the almost forgotten procedures of sloping arms, presenting arms, slow marching etc., to ensure an impressive display for our royal visitor. One of our number, to the consternation of our officers, refused to participate on the grounds that Prins Bernhardt had, at some time in his career, been a member of the German National Socialist Party. This was I believe true, and the trooper was allowed to stand down from the parade.

Another chap and I were detailed for guard duty on the evening of 7th May 1945. In the small hours of the morning we entered the squadron office to find a signal from Divisional HQ to the effect that all hostilities would cease as of 8th May; this effectively, and thankfully, cancelled out our proposed involvement with the Friesian Islands. I was also granted ten days UK leave.

My name came up once again for a few days local leave in Brussels, however my stay in the city lasted for six weeks, this time in 108 British Military Hospital following a leg injury in an accident involving the truck carrying me on leave. I have a very distinct recollection of VJ Day when, as a special treat, we were given some plums for tea. I spent the night with violent stomachache and retching uncontrollably.

Military hospitals were unbelievable institutions imbued with strict military disciplines, when the surgeon carried out his daily Ward inspections he was accompanied by the matron, a fierce termagant with an eagle eye for any breach of discipline by the inmates. As a comparative newcomer I was lying in my bed reading a book when she approached and ordered me to put down the book and lie to attention. As ridiculous as this may seem today, it was the pattern of things at that time. If one could walk one stood to attention; those who could sit would accordingly sit to attention; the remainder, including those about to expire would lie to attention.

The bed opposite to mine in the Ward was occupied by a character awaiting surgery to remove a cartilage from a leg. Prior to the operation he was instructed to place a stocking on the leg not requiring treatment - unfortunately he placed the sock on the wrong leg resulting in removal of the cartilage of his good leg; this effectively disabled the use of either leg and necessitated a further operation to rectify matters. Naturally distraught, particularly as he was shortly due for demobilization, he gave vent to his feelings in no uncertain manner. During Matron's inspection one morning the peace and quiet was shattered as he deliberately hurled a large metal tray onto the floor. For this outburst he was confined to bed for seven days as punishment notwithstanding the fact that he was unable to walk in any event.

Life generally was reasonably tolerant - the hospital was situated in a pleasant suburb of Brussels within easy reach of the city centre, which we were allowed to visit most days as we recovered from treatment. Wearing hospital blue jacket and trousers, white shirt and red tie, we received a very friendly response from the local people. One Saturday morning, prior to my usual trot into Brussels, the ward sister told me to report to the operating theatre at 1500 hours. Much aggrieved at this intrusion upon my leisure activities I duly reported to the theatre to be confronted by serried ranks of hospital staff comprising the audience for the afternoon's events. I was minded of a Roman arena as I stood in the centre awaiting the arrival of the lion. He duly appeared in the guise of the surgeon, a captain in the Canadian Army. Addressing the multitudes he gave a brief synopsis of my problem and how physiotherapy had played an important part of enabling my damaged limb to function normally once again.

I had other thoughts, still seething with the injustice of the occasion. Coming to the end of his discourse he then, with triumphal flourish exclaimed that I would perform a full knees bend. Seizing my opportunity I commenced the knees bend, gave a shriek of pain and collapsed on the floor, to the amusement of many in the audience. The surgeon was not amused, swore and told me to get to Hell out of it.

My stay in hospital lasted six weeks and I entertained high hopes of convalescence or sick leave in the UK; this was not to be, instead I was sent to a convalescent base at Knokke near Blankenberghe on the Belgian coast. Knokke is a very fashionable seaside resort with long sandy beaches and a wealth of entertainment facilities. It was summer and, having disposed of our hospital blues, our dress now reverted to standard shirtsleeve order.

Our billet was a requisitioned hotel and each man was issued with three blankets and fed daily. Blankets had to be handed into store at 0800 hours daily to prevent pilfering by the local employees who sold them for conversion into blanket suits - very common amongst the Belgians at the time. My companions at Knokke were from many regiments and corps; our time was spent mainly on the promenade watching the newly formed Belgian Army undergoing drill instruction on the beach, also passing suitably rude comments about their performance.

Our hotel was closed until 1730 each evening with the result that the whole day was spent wandering aimlessly about waiting for evening and a visit to the local dance hall - "The Minerva" where the local females congregated. I had struck up a friendship with a chap from the King's Own Scottish Borderers and nightly he and I would make our way to the dance to chance our luck. One evening we noticed an overwhelming presence of Belgian Army but paid little or no attention to this until they attacked a Scottish lad. With this everybody joined in with chairs and glasses whilst the band still played merrily away. Somewhat bemused at the sudden onslaught I looked round to see a Polish Army paratrooper coming at me with a chair with the obvious intention of wrapping it round my ears. I quickly shouted "English", and held my black beret up for him to see; he grunted, turned around and happily clobbered a nearby Belgian instead. We were very relieved to have the Poles there that evening, without them we would have been heavily outnumbered. Eventually the mayhem ceased when a section of Royal Engineers of the garrison-holding unit arrived, complete with fixed bayonets, and cleared everybody out. We learned later that the trouble originated from an incident the day previous when a Scot had thumped a Belgian in town.

Whilst convalescent I threatened to hit a member of the military town security patrol in a bar. I was, I suppose, slightly under the weather and took exception to the fact that he was wearing a black beret and a member of the Royal Army Service Corps. Naturally I was charged with an offence under the Army Act, paraded before the local commanding officer and given seven days confined to barracks. During this period I, along with other malingerers, was given the task of whitewashing some Belgian civilian properties to which I took exception having recently undergone treatment for an injured leg.

Instead of kneeling to brush the whitewash I flung the contents of the bucket at the wall, which unhappily coincided with the appearance of the lady owner of the villa who went berserk. I made no apology merely pointing out that I was a convalescent with a knee injury. In the event neither of us was happy but the incident passed without further comment.

The regiment then 'pottered' about various German villages taking up occupation duties eventually in the region of Braunschweig where we undertook patrolling in a hunt for 'Werewolves'. These were reputedly members of an underground German resistance group. In the event they proved non-existent but involved us in many nights of patrolling and observation of likely areas of activity.

The standard routine for these nightly patrols commenced with imbibing copious amounts of potato schnapps before heading off into the countryside where we would take up position on the ground to check activity in and around farms and other properties. This was an exceeding cold pastime relieved only at dawn by the arrival of transport to take us back to the squadron for a generous ration of rum before retiring to rest. Throughout the whole period I was only involved with any incident on one occasion. Some three hours into the patrol we were alerted by screaming from a farm immediately below our position, and apprehended several displaced persons intent upon raping the female occupants of the farm. I sat in the back of a White half-track with these characters with my gun trained on them as we made our way back to base - as the half-track lurched over some rough ground, I was pitched forward towards the prisoners who genuinely believed that I had decided to shoot them, whereupon they all shrieked mightily as they cowered together on the floor.

The regiment was still intact but had long since lost its role as an armoured regiment - instead we had a variety of jobs of which one proved highly significant over a period of many years. This was the result of the apportionment of areas to the Occupying Powers. In our case we were instructed to pull back some thirty kilometres for the Russians to advance and take over. Our new position was equidistant between the villages of Weferlingen and Grasleben, where we erected a roadblock with orders to prevent, if necessary shoot, any person attempting to cross from the East. This proved an impossible task; we erected several road blocks but there were still many other minor roads and tracks available to those intent upon getting through. In a very short time we were confronted by a seething mass of humanity, refugees, displaced persons etc. Shooting this lot would have constituted a massacre; we therefore merely pointed out that there were other unguarded points where they could cross. A typical British soldier's solution to an impossible situation. They were happy and we were content with our humanitarian approach.

A few evenings later we became aware of the Russian presence with fires glowing in the woods to our front. The same evening some German girls came along from behind us saying they were visiting friends in the village of Weferlingen. We had no orders to prevent people leaving our area but we pointed out that the Red Army was now occupying Weferlingen and that they would be extremely unwise to cross in view of the Russians noted propensity for rape. They decided to cross however and we never saw them again. With the advent of the Red Army the flow of refugees ceased completely and, left to our own devices with the aid of a gramophone and some records belonging to the 2nd Lieutenant in charge, we took up ballroom dancing lessons at the house adjoining the checkpoint. A somewhat incongruous sight - "hairy -arsed" tank men cavorting about in ammunition boots to the strains of the Victor Sylvester Orchestra.

Shortly afterwards we received a visit from our Russian allies. A car swept up to the roadblock disgorging an arrogant little Russian officer who pointed to the obstruction, gesticulating that we were to raise it. I spoke to MacGregor, the 2nd Lieutenant, who said "Tell him to F.. Off". This I did in so many words to his evident fury, and he stamped his foot, turned his car around and sped off back to his own lines.

One evening I spotted somebody making his way from the Russian area across our front to gain access to some woods to our right. I fired over his head to deter him but he continued and I then aimed at him, and missed. He disappeared but I was then alarmed to hear the rattle of a Bren Gun from one of our positions firing in the direction of the Red Army. This turned out to be Willy Kershaw who, hearing my shots, was under the impression that the Russians had opened fire on us. For some quite inexplicable reason the Russians did not return the fire, and a Third World War was averted.

The checkpoint we installed eventually formed part of the "Iron Curtain",

A parting of the ways now took place as the Westminster Dragoons, being a territorial yeomanry regiment, was placed in suspended animation and members were posted to regular battalions, the 3rd or 7th Royal Tank Regiments. Those going to the 7th RTR were destined for India, whilst the remainder, myself included, joined the 3rd in Flensburg in Schleswig-Holstein, the most northerly town in Germany alongside the Danish border.

Flensburg on the Baltic Sea was cold with frequent snow and icy winds. There was a shortage of fuel and other essential commodities, not just confined to the civilian population but also felt by we service personnel. The 3rd Royal Tank Regiment was part of 4th Armoured Brigade with the black Desert Rat insignia, and forming part of Guards Armoured Division. Upon arrival at my new regiment I renewed my acquaintance with tanks, this time the Churchill tank, spending countless hours in the tank park chipping ice off these creatures and being lectured by young newly commissioned officers upon the technique and application of armoured assault vehicles. Deciding there were more amenable situations elsewhere I was lucky to spot a notice inviting persons with clerical ability to apply for a post in the Orderly Room. Despite my lack of clerical ability I was accepted and eventually re-mustered in the trade of Clerk Class III, and pleasantly surprised to find myself in company with a number of ex-Westminster Dragoons in this comfortable niche. No more petrifying nights standing in blizzards on guard, constant hot drink facilities, and a warm environment in which to work. I was happy apart from an unwelcome intrusion on the part of the HQ Squadron Sergeant Major, "Honest John" who had risen through many years in the regiment from Latrine Orderly to his present position. He had a decided antipathy towards me, as also the HQ Squadron Leader. I must confess this was in the main due to my own activities, having become somewhat rebellious and constantly in trouble with the Military Police Section in Flensburg, and with a number of our own newly promoted NCO's. Much of the difficulty probably stemmed from heavy drinking and boredom of peacetime soldiering. Against this I had a buffer through my relationship with the Adjutant, an extremely influential personage in any regiment. He was very appreciative of my assistance with his workload. Another ally was the Regimental Sergeant Major - with friends like these one can get away with quite a lot of misdemeanours. We clerks were in a position of influence with our superiors by virtue of our responsibility for allocation of rotas for orderly officers, local leave and such like.

Notwithstanding this special relationship with higher echelons I walked a very fine line on more than one occasion - arguments with the Military Police detachment in the town, drunken brawling and disputes with some of our own town patrols resulted in the amassing of three complete pages of charges recorded on my crime sheet, to the evident satisfaction of the aforegoing 'Honest John'. Fortunately he remained unaware of an occasion, whilst on detachment on a course at Lippstadt, I along with another chap from the regiment stole a tank with which we raced around the barracks area and eventually demolished the wall of the cookhouse premises. Surprisingly we managed to evade capture. However, returning to the regiment shortly afterwards I became involved in another incident in Flensburg, again drunk, and was sentenced to fourteen days detention.

There is a well-known adage to the effect that one-way to deal with irresponsible individuals is to give them some responsibility. The day I was released from detention I found that I had been promoted from trooper to Acting Paid Lance Corporal which was an exceedingly clever move in that I had now been distanced, albeit only slightly, from my contemporaries by the single stripe on my battledress.

By now demobilization was in full swing, the wartime element being replaced by postings of young reinforcements from the UK, together with a number of older regular soldiers from the regiment who had been repatriated following release from POW camps following capture earlier in the War in Africa, Greece and France. The Adjutant tried hard to persuade me to sign on for a regular engagement but I refused; most of the chaps I had served with during the previous years had left, and I was under pressure from my father to return to the family business as soon as possible.

During my final months with 3RTR I was made responsible for arrangements for the marriages between our chaps and German women. The Adjutant, Captain John Wise, called me into his office one morning and, with a weary look on his face, pointed to a heap of files on his desk, which related to applications for permission to marry local girls from Flensburg. He said " I can't just be bothered with all these bloody things - be a good chap Ravensdale, there's an office with a telephone in 'B' Squadron block - get over there and look after these for me in future".

I was now God with complete autonomy over the lives and future of these suppliants. It was very interesting work, which involved vetting applications, arranging for medical records, reports from church leaders and political and party history etc. Of greater interest was that of knowing who was intending to marry whom. I knew several of the ladies in question and, of course, most of the fellows. It was not without it's lighter moments, one of which occurred when I had occasion to telephone GHQ 2nd Echelon, the administrative headquarters of Rhine Army. Having established contact and stating that I was dealing with an enquiry for 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, this 'plummy' voice at the other end of the line asked for my rank; informing him that it was no less a person than Acting Paid Lance Corporal Ravensdale, this distant voice rose several octaves as he shrieked down the 'phone "I don't speak to bloody lance-corporals" and slammed his 'phone down.

My days of soldiering were at an end. The night before I left the regiment I was sitting on my bed in the barrack room having a few drinks with some of the lads when the door opened and we were surprised to see the orderly officer. In a completely unprecedented gesture he sat with us and produced a bottle of whisky for us to share with him - an action, which could have cost him dearly if reported. The following morning, preparing to board the truck to convey me to the railway station I was apprehended by the Provost Sergeant, with whom I had had many run-in's over the years, and I had visions of forcible removal and cancellation of my demobilization. Instead he grabbed my hand, shook it warmly, and said "Don't bloody well come back to give me any more trouble".

I had waited impatiently for this day - now it had arrived, and with it I was experiencing some quite strange emotions, sadness and a feeling of loss, The British Army had, unwitting to me, become my family. I was leaving behind many memories and a life to which I had become accustomed, for the great unknown as an adult civilian about which I knew very little. A boy of seventeen tender years when I joined, a hard and cynical adult when I left. These were my formative but undoubtedly happy and rewarding years. In the company of like-minded individuals I found the true value of human strengths and weaknesses. Above all I learned humility.

DEMOBILISATION

An uneventful sea crossing from Cuxhaven to Hull, thence by rail to Fulford Barracks, York for issue of civilian clothing marked my final link with the British Army. Emerging from the barracks with my parcelled belongings together with a cash payment of £9.00, I took a train to Leeds where I was informed that the last connection to Morecambe had gone. Together with other stranded individuals we commenced a round of the local 'pubs with our new found wealth. Closing time found us bereft of accommodation and in quite a sorry state after our bibulous evening, but the local branch of the ubiquitous Salvation Army came to our rescue with beds and food. Forever grateful, to this day I regularly give financial support to this organisation.

With a massive gratuity of £56 awarded for my five years service, I embarked upon a nightly prowl around town when I arrived home to catch up with old acquaintances. I was to be sadly disappointed as the majority of my old playmates had entered, or were about to enter, the matrimonial stakes. My dissolute habits were by no means appreciated by their respective spouses or girlfriends. Nevertheless I managed to dispose of my gratuity with regular withdrawals of £3 per day from the Post Office in fairly quick time.

I was back in the promised 'land fit for heroes'. Somewhat ironic as I found shortly afterwards when I married my first wife. Audrey had served for a number of years in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, i.e. the Women's Army. We bought a house on mortgage and prior to moving in, left the house unoccupied to redecorate the property. A 'friendly' neighbour reported the lack of occupancy, and the house was requisitioned by the Ministry of Health for occupation by an applicant on the local housing list. Upon enquiring as to what my wife and I were to do in this situation I was blithely informed by some idiot at the Town Hall that we must make arrangements to find accommodation elsewhere. We were therefore in a situation whereby we had a mortgage of approximately £2.00 per week to find; additionally it would be necessary for us to find rented accommodation elsewhere, in return for which we would receive a rental of 15/-d per week from the council tenant. A Labour government was in office and, as is customary with idealists, displaying all the worst possible aspects of Socialism. To compound the mischief and add to our bitter feelings we learned that the proposed tenant would be some character who had spent the war in a reserved occupation in England throughout.

Eventually I regained our property by ripping the requisitioning notices from the door and ensured that somebody stayed in the house each night.

The War was over and with it began the gradual breakdown of the community spirit engendered through the perilous events of recent years. As early as 1947 it was possible to perceive that future years would bring about changes in attitude of an unwelcome nature. Regrettably this has been the case - I am extremely thankful that my generation enjoyed a society where tolerance, responsibility, self-discipline and, above all, respect for others were imparted by parents.

EPILOGUE

Greater prominence has been given to events in Holland during the Autumn and Winter months of 1944/5, a period of intense activity to liberate the southern Dutch provinces. Heavy casualties occurred, not only military personnel but also to the civilian population along with extensive damage to property. Accompanied by food and fuel shortages the local Dutch population endured much hardship and suffering, caught as they were between the opposing armies, a fact probably unappreciated by many.

Over the last few years in the course of visits to Holland my wife and I have been met with unfailing courtesy and sincerity at all times, signifying an unspoken bond of affection between our two countries. Visiting war graves some fifty years on we were impressed by the evident regular visits by Dutch men and women, and annotations of gratitude written in the Visitors Books of Remembrance. The fallen rest in a foreign, but friendly, field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many friends and contacts in the compilation of this account; in particular to those residents of Broekhuizen, namely Mhr Wies Peeters and Drs Ton Clevis for their hospitality and assistance during my visits to their village, and the wealth of information afforded in my research of events in November 1944. Arising out of these contacts I met Colonel John Walker, coincidentally resident in my village, who took part in the attack on Broekhuizen whilst serving as a lieutenant with 3rd Battalion, The Monmouthshire Regiment. Former private in the Monmouth's, Mr Eric Paylor also telephoned with recollections of the battle.

From my old regiment I am grateful to my former crewmember Doug Tyler; troop member John Wadey, and squadron member Dave Martin, also Colonel David Squirrell OBE, who, as Captain and Technical Adjutant, was involved in endeavours to recover our damaged tanks at the time.

My thanks also to Mvw Emmy Mos of Amsterdam who patiently provided me with a translation of the Dutch account of events as recorded in "De Bevriding van de Gemeente Broekhuizen", presented to me, together with a brick from the ruined Kasteel by Wies Peeters on the occasion of my first visit.

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DAILY TELEGRAPH
2/7/00

William Hall

Officer who led his troop of flail tanks across a Dutch canal in the face of concentrated German fire

WILLIAM HALL, who has died aged 75, was awarded an immediate MC when commanding a troop of flail tanks at the crossing of the Molem Be[illegible] an anti-tank obstacle near Overloon, Holland, on October 16 1944.

No 4 Troop, A Squadron, of the Westminster Dragoons was equipped with Sherman tanks fitted with a revolving drum at the front. Hanging from the drum were heavy chains with a ball that flailed the ground ahead of the tracks, exploding any mines.

These tanks were one of the many ingenious devices — popularly known as "The Funnies" — used by 79th Armoured Division, commanded by General Sir Percy Hobart. They had been demonstrated to General Eisenhower, but the Americans decided not to use them and in consequence suffered heavy casualties on Omaha Beach and elsewhere.

[illegible]vard vision was not always possible from flail tanks and they needed guidance by radio from the leader, who kept on course using a very accurate gyro-compass. They were an easy target for enemy gunners since in order to explode the mines ahead their speed could not be much faster than a slow walk.

At Overloon — in appalling weather, over boggy ground and under continuous fire — Bill Hall beat a path up to the bridge across the canal, then led his squadron across, though well aware that enemy tanks were waiting on the far side and that his flanks were exposed. His was the first tank to cross the Beek and in the ensuing battle his troop gave invaluable assistance to Allied armour and infantry.

He kept the squadron leader constantly informed of the situation ahead, engaged an enemy anti-tank gun and also knocked out a German mortar position which was inflicting losses on the infantry. He also engaged a Panther tank.

Although constantly under enemy fire, Hall showed complete disregard for danger and earned the highest praise both from his squadron leader and the commanding officer of the 4th Coldstream Guards.

Hall had had to change tanks when his own became a casualty, and the flails in his troop frequently had to be replaced after being damaged, but this did not stop them pressing on and killing 24 enemy and assisting the infantry to take 20 prisoners.

Hall, who was also mentioned twice in despatches, was in the forefront of the action at Broekhuizen the following November when his tank cleared the approaches to the town before being hit by a bazooka which wounded him. His tank was later recovered by the Dutch authorities and is now on display in the War Museum at Overloon, complete with flails.

The Dutch were particularly grateful for the liberation of their town, which lies on the west side of the Maas and was the last pocket in the area to be held by German forces.

Hall: at forefront of action

William Sydney Hall was born on January 31 1924 and educated at Dolgellau Grammar School before joining the Army. After training at Sandhurst, he was commissioned into the Westminster Dragoons.

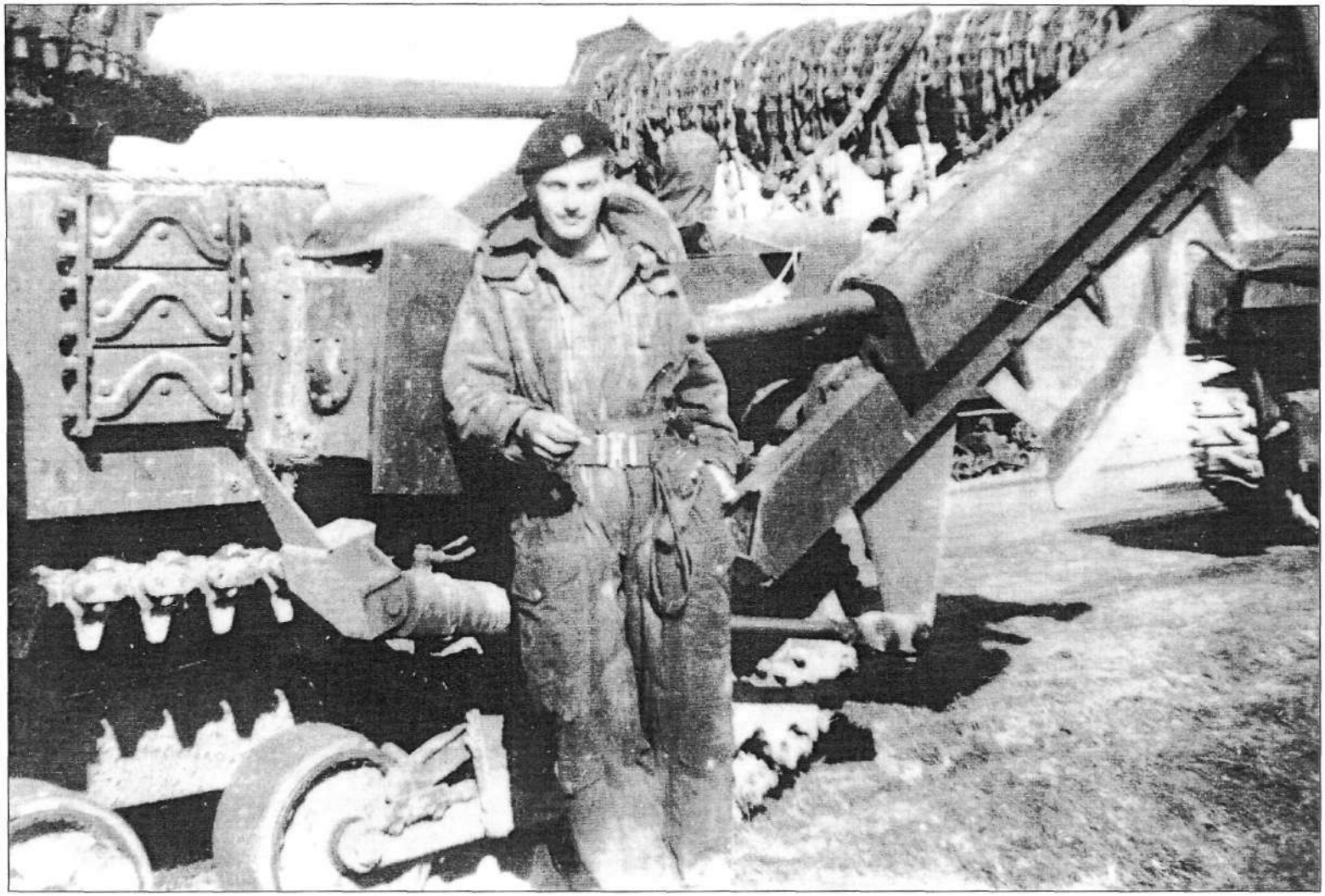
His troops landed in France on D-Day, after a rough voyage in which he was one of the fortunate ones not to be seasick. He recalled an enormous volume of noise from gunfire as they landed and lined up before the Staffordshire Yeomanry, who were destined for Caen (although they did not reach it as had been hoped).

Near Pegasus Bridge, Hall's troop had to flail over a minefield, and experienced considerable trouble as parachutes discarded by Allied troops wrapped themselves around the flail chains. He was twice recommended for an MC before he received his award at Overloon.

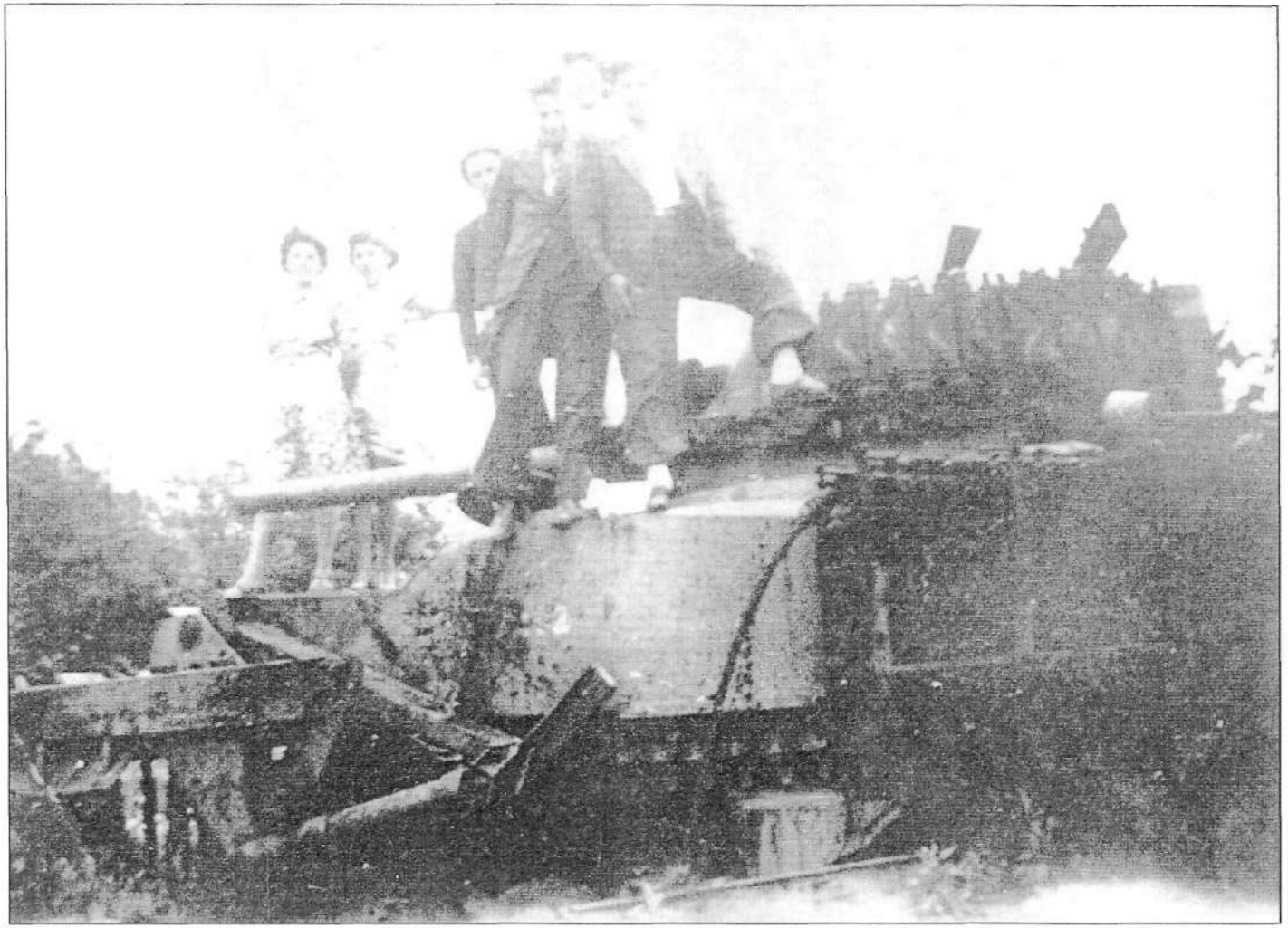
After the war, Hall opened the very successful Bontddu Hall Hotel, on the Mawddach estuary by Dolgellau, which he ran for 40 years. Each of his three brothers also ran hotels in the area during the same period.

Bill Hall was a keen golfer and was captain and later vice-president of the Royal St David's Golf Club, Harlech. He was also a prolific watercolour painter and held many successful exhibitions.

He married, in 1950, Sheila Black, daughter of the film producer Ted Black; they had a daughter.



4 Troop, 'A' Squadron, Westminster Dragoons at Westerhoven, Holland, in January 1945 – author with flail tank.



Author's 'brewed-up' tank at Broekhuizen, Holland. Photograph taken in the late 'forties/ early 'fifties, prior to recovery from battle area, and used by local children for play.

Another photograph of the 'brewed-up' tank.
(Both these photographs kindly donated by Mr Wies Peters of Broekhuizen, who appears on the photographs as a young man)

Photograph taken by Wies Peters in 1986 (forty two years after the action had taken place) showing the tank tracks still evident at the time. The top left of the picture shows the opening between the trees where our tanks drove through to assemble on the Start Line for the attack on the village of Broekhuizen and the Kasteel.

Regimental Reunion at Cavalry House, Duke of York's Headquarters, Chelsea, in September 1995 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the ending of WWII. Author on left with wartime crew member Doug Tyler.

Author with flail tank exhibit in Dutch War Museum at Overloon, Holland.