SOME WARTIME MEMORIES OF A MEMBER OF R.E. SURVEY

By Richard Hussey

FOREWORD By Major-General J. Kelsey CBE

Immediately after I was commissioned in November 1940, I was posted to 518 Field Survey Company Royal Engineers and joined this unit in Dalmeny Park near Edinburgh as Officer in Charge of No. 1 Topographic Section. Aged 20, and straight from university, my total military experience had been gained from a 4 month's cadet course and I found myself commanding men with many years surveying experience in the Ordnance Survey and several who had seen active service in France. Among these was Corporal Hussey and we saw service together in Scotland and North Africa until I was wounded in April 1943 and evacuated to U.K. Thus, I have first -hand knowledge of only part of the events described in this history.

Now, over 50 years later, I find that Mr Hussey has written a most vivid account of day-to-day life and work of a non-commissioned officer in a Survey unit throughout the Second World War and as such this work represents a most valuable historical document. Above all, this history shows most forcefully that the ability of a unit to live and work effectively under war conditions depends almost totally on the steadfastness, integrity, and resourcefulness of its non-commissioned officers. Clearly Mr Hussey had such qualities in good measure, and I consider myself most fortunate to have had him and others like him under my command.

J. Kelsey

Introduction

As so many persons have found in their later years there is more time to think and in doing so, memories do come back, moreover they are not just idle thoughts.

Attending the annual reunion in Southampton each year of the messes of the Royal Engineers (1939) Survey Battalion it became most apparent that our numbers gradually decreased as the years went by. It was also apparent that as the numbers decreased so did the memories therefore, I considered that by putting all I could think of on paper some other people might find it interesting to compare them with their own experiences.

It does not hurt to gain knowledge especially from other people.

R.T.H. 1994

Preface

A book must obviously have a beginning and an end, at least most do. Whereas many authors have little difficulty in starting the first pages, or deciding their composition, they apparently have trouble determining the end.

In this case the opposite is the problem as the end is factual and is, in so many words, the death of No. 1 Topo Section but, to make it more of an obituary as on a grave stone, "Here lyeth the remains of No. 1 Topographical Survey Section of the 518 Corps Field Survey Company Royal Engineers which departed this life in the village of Guttaring Karnten, Austria, on the 30th November 1945".

Although the date may not be Army Official it was on that date, as the last remaining officer (Non.Com.), of the Company, I took the remnants of the 518 from Guttaring to Villach, there to wait for the journey home and demob. Therefore, as the last representative of No. 1 Topo I am able to confirm that date.

This book is not, repeat NOT, a technical publication to expound the virtues of trigonometry as applied to survey work for artillery control from 1939 to 1945. This day and age of computers and satellites such matters are dealt with in seconds but we, then, would need hours or days with our Tavistock theodolites, our Brunsviga adding machines and our natural tables. Thus, there is little purpose pursuing the subject.

This book then is what one might call a collection of memories of a sapper of No. 1 Topo in his later years from start to finish.

Sutton Coldfield 1994

Suggested Reading

Birth of an Army.
By A.B. Austin
First published 1943 Victor Gollanz Ltd.

Over to Tunis.
By Howard Marshall
First published 1943 by Eyre and Spottiswoode, London.

First Blood.
By Charles Whiting
Published 1984 by Book Club Associates
By arrangement with Leo Cooper with Secker & Warburg Ltd.

Private Army.
By Lt. Col. Vladimir Peniakoff (Popski)
First published 1950 Dewey Classification
Jonathan Cape London

The Battle of Flanders.
By Ian Hay
Published by H.M.S.O. 1940

The Campaign in Italy.
By Eric Linklater
Published by H.M.S.O. 1951

Goodbye to all this.
Published and printed by 518 (C.F.S.) Coy. R.E.
No longer in print.

Chapter 1

1939 to 1940 and the Phoney War

To examine the history of No. 1 Topo 518 the very beginning should first be considered and also from where some of its personnel were obtained, in other words, the very origins.

So far as can be remembered, of the personnel forming the Topo Section of 518, there were at least seven from the 19th Field Survey Company RE of the pre-war years and of those, four were in No. 1 Topo. The reason all this should be borne in mind is because of the experience gained from the training at Fort Southwick in the 19th Corps Field Survey Company during 1937-38, the light-keeping and Bilby tower building and on the re-triangulation of Great Britain in various areas of the United Kingdom followed by the field work under active war conditions with the 13th and 14th Corps Field Survey Companies R.E. in 1939-40-41, provided the basis of the technical ability of the section.

Dates in my possession give the formation of the 14th Field Survey Company at Fort Wallington, towards Fareham from Fort Southwick, as 10 September 1939, its move to Cherbourg as 30 September, a short break at L'Huiisserie as 2 October after a dreadful twelve-hour journey in French second-class carriages, followed by the remainder of the trip in cattle trucks to Lievin near Lens as 4 October while just over Vimy Ridge were our neighbours the 13th Company.

The Section had several detachments from the Company to the Lille-Tourcoing-Roubaix and Arras areas plus one or two panic moves towards the Belgian frontier based on the assumption that the enemy was coming. On one such occasion we were housed in a cow shed recently vacated but the farmer had cleaned and even scrubbed it for our purpose. Where the rafters reached the wall by my bed head there was a cavity into which fell some of my shaving tackle, on looking for same, I found a 1917 tin of bully beef and a clip of cartridges all still in a usable state. The work was to establish, or otherwise, the value of the French trig for our artillery and so far as can be remembered appeared to be quite reasonable.

There were other jobs such as a survey covering several acres of small interconnecting mine workings about 40 feet deep apparently considered a suitable hiding place for Corps H.Q. from enemy air attacks. This place did have a serious handicap, all along the bottom on one side was an open sewer used by the village above. It was obvious where all this sewage came from but we could not find where it all went.

The Maginot Line was being extended northwards by building a line of small concrete pillboxes. Someone at G.H.Q. apparently thought that it might be a good idea to have a plan showing each box with its lines and arcs of fire moreover it was wanted in a hurry. The result was that the two section despatch riders were given the job, myself being one. Much of the riding was over plough land and being winter was very hard.

Although these boxes had very thick walls, they were hardly suitable for the warfare that could have fallen upon them. The walls were simply vertical off the ground and not angled above base level. No attempt had been made to disguise them or to use land shapes to give added protection. Because of the construction there was little room for the troops manning them, with a two-pounder A/T gun and other weapons sleeping space must have been very scarce. One of the boxes was situated in a hollow about 100 yards wide and that was its length of fire and the officer I/C was most concerned and on finding that I was a surveyor seemed to think I could advise but all that could be suggested that he establish strong points on a small hill 800 yards away. He was not at all happy.

As the situation later developed, they were of little use when the breakthrough occurred on the 10th May the enemy very unobligingly and inconsiderately made a different approach. Being section D/R, I was delegated the task of being Company D/R as the actual Company D/R had been sent "over the wall". The roads were covered with a thick layer of ice and I found that on seeing other road users had to make immediate plans to avoid them. One time I found ahead of me an old man wobbling about on a bicycle and further on a young boy doing likewise, my plan was that if they fell or stopped all I could do was to lay the bike on its side and hope the footrest would stop us, they did and I did, fortunately.Something I saw while on the m/c in this weather was a company of guardsmen billeted in a brickworks yard. The only cover they had in the open were the brick drying racks draped with gas capes and groundsheets. They must have been tough.

One time a staff car came belting at me on a narrow road and I had no alternative but to go for the ditch which had thick ice over the water and I went through it. My gauntlets were full of water so by the time I reached the company office my watch was …….. [*Line missing in original manuscript*].

Lievin was a reasonable-sized mining town, and it was there the Company was lodged in the "Equipage" a large store and workshop for the mines and where we in the Topo sections were placed in a storeroom made of steel frames and single thickness corrugated iron walls. The very small stove in the centre was blocked as the thick smoke indicated and even we, the Engineers, could not clear it, so we had to call on the mining people to do so. They had to remove all the chimney pipe but it did result in some warmth. That became very necessary when, as the icy blasts began to blow we had thick ice forming on the inside of the steel walls.

All that did not matter when we moved to the Church Hall cum Community Centre which was equipped with a massive cast-iron stove about ten feet tall with a long chimney pipe crossing right over the hall. The bottom two feet of the stove was an ash box - the next three was the firebox and the rest a zigzag flue. As the town was "coal rich" the coal box was large and could take a full ton of the black stuff with an open end for shovelling. Just before bedtime it became the duty of an individual to charge the fire with the "nutty slack" which was all that was left by then, to keep the fire in all night.

This task had to be learnt the hard way although tricky - but eventually the drill became thus; - after filling the shovel he would stand by the side of the stove and open the fire door - then rapidly and deftly would shoot this load into the fire and stand well back. His action caused a flame to emit with a tremendous roar before the door could be closed. This flame was never less than six feet long and twelve inches in diameter. It must be admitted - there was a degree of competition over the length of the flame but one could never afford to make a mistake.

After my ten days of purgatory on the D/R run and having fallen off ten times it was a pleasure and a relief to get back to work. It so happened the sappers had been teaching the NCOs how to use the "Tavistock" theodolite because prior to 3 September these NCOs had mostly been engaged on field work and thus had little chance to gain the experience.

It must be assumed that the observing by the sappers proved to be rather more consistent than that of the N.C.O's, it could have been that youth did it. Consequently, these sappers were paired off as observing teams and my partner for quite a while was "Dougy" Cooke. (Now, unfortunately, residing in the R.E. Valhalla at Brompton-in-the-sky.)

He and I had several "odd" jobs. One was on Loos Hospital to the north of the Seclin/Lens road. It was an almost completely finished building and seemed to be comprised of a series of turret shaped sections 20 metres tall attached to a central circular building - all probably wards, and all this was repeated several times to make a full hospital building.

These "turrets" had a disadvantage in that their concrete and asphalt roofs were Ogee shaped and were covered with a 12-inch thickness of frozen snow. As there was no protective fencing around the edge it was no joke cutting a path through to the centre of the roof to find the trig point and after that having to chip three leg sockets in the asphalt for the tripod legs which had to be tied together with cord to prevent any movement. However, the job was completed, and we were very glad to carefully vacate the roof.

The water tower near Carvin was also another problem as the access to the top was through a central concrete tube with a ladder and had a circular concrete lid at the top, only half of which would move to give access onto the summit. Above that was a three-legged lightning conductor about four feet high.

It was not possible to have an off-centre point due to the roof shape so we had to occupy the trig in the centre of the lid. With much effort we chipped, with our engineer's knife three holes in the concrete - borrowed a candle and matches from the café below and established a candle wax setting for the tribrach. Unfortunately, if at any time there was a need to vacate the top - the Tavi had to be moved but we found that reinstatement did not affect the level of the instrument. Once again, we were glad to leave the very cold station and get down for a hot coffee at the café.

Whilst the detachment was in Tourcoing, Doug and I made the acquaintance of "The Soixante Quatre Regiment d'Artillerie" at least of the French troops of that Regiment manning the telephone exchange in the central post office.

This was because we had visited the café used by these Frenchmen and they insisted we had some of their regimental drink. What was in it shall never be known but it tasted foul. Those Frenchmen should not be trusted too much as this drink had a nasty taste in its tail. Whilst in the café the only effect the foul liquid had was its unpleasant taste until it was time to go home and then as we met the cold night air the footpath came up to meet us very violently. How we got to our beds is not very clear but I believe there might still be some French locals with a memory of two R.E.s crawling back to the factory.

The reason the Topo sections moved to the church hall cum community centre was that some bug or other had infected us consequently we were put into isolation and were not allowed to mix with any others whatsoever. However, after a week or two the ban was lifted. So, I must introduce you to Paddy O'Brien who was or is a tall slim, almost thin, Irish man and as many members of the Survey R.E. knew full well as someone to be treated with respect. On one occasion at Fort Southwick either 1937 or 1938 he sat on his bed reading his "Dublin" news or whatever the newspaper was called, it had only just arrived. Some mad or insane person crept towards him and, unobserved, put a lighted match to the bottom corner of that essential paper. Immediately the barrack room cleared in seconds and even other rooms, infected by the expectation of mayhem and sudden death, did likewise.

During the evenings at Lievin it became almost a habit for me to meet Paddy and a character referred to as "King Kong" Stevenson at the Café de la Poste. Madam there had been a governess to an English family so it was very easy to chat with her. One evening, as we arrived at the Café there was a row going on between some French customers and Madame was upset. That was something that Paddy would not tolerate and insisted they stop the nonsense and they did. However, it started again with several of them ganging up on one small man and, again that was something that Paddy objected to. He leaned over to me and said "When I give the signal go and open the door onto the street". They once more started so Paddy nodded so I opened the door and Paddy put his arms round the ringleader and swung round and ejected him through the door. Thus peace came upon and Madame was much relieved for quite a while until a woman came in enquiring about a man laying unconscious on the footpath outside the door. Paddy looked at me and said "I seemed to have forgotten the steps" and there were four of them. Thereafter I was never allowed to walk on my own to my billet but always with those two even though their billet was in the opposite direction.

In the midst of winter, I was on guard at the Rollencourt, a sports field in Lievin, used as a vehicle park for the Company and right opposite its entrance and pay boxes was our company office which also housed our Sgt/Maj and Q/M. I knew they were out on the town so had to keep a careful watch and eventually spotted them approaching so hid in the other ticket box the brightly lit brazier being in front of the first one. I could hear them whispering "Lets catch him out" and when they found I was missing from the first box were greatly pleased until I cocked my pistol and said "one move and you are dead" they consequently froze. After that I was never popular with certain persons, but it did lighten up my guard stint.

Chapter 2

1940

Being a lucky one I went on leave starting the journey on the 8th May 1940 and therefore heard the news of the German breakthrough on the wireless while having a nice cup of tea in bed at home on the 10th. It was staggering and I immediately thought I would have to go back straight away so that same morning contacted the Military Police at the railway station but was told to enjoy my leave, so I did. At the end of my leave, I returned from my hometown, Farnham, to Waterloo station where I was grabbed with many other troops by M.P.s, rushed to another platform and put on a train which promptly started off for Southampton. Once there we were shipped aboard, and that night were on our way to Cherbourg. Our arrival there on May 21st was very different from previously. Then it was a welcome for heroes, now it was very restrained. The stay at Cherbourg was only an hour or so when we, a group of about 200, marched in hot sun to St. Mere Eglise, of U.S. Airdrop fame in 1944, it was something like 18 miles. I had met up with a driver from my own section so was pleased to have company. On arrival at a château the usual army confusion was very prevalent but we did, in due course, receive food and after which we had to bed down in a wood. It was comfortable as the weather was fine and there was an ample supply of dry leaves to make a bed.

Next morning we met three young survey sappers from the 19th Company (no names unfortunately) so we kept together as a group. The fact that I was armed with a 0.38 pistol attracted the attention of an officer - he, apparently being without a side-arm - demanded that I hand it over to him. This would leave us five with one rifle and five rounds of ammunition. I refused his request by saying that I would have to have a receipt issued by a senior officer - not him - and this was done but it somehow resulted in all five of us being allocated a space on the top floor of the chateau and becoming members of the staff in the new formation of the "Cherbourg Lancers".

News was coming through that all was not well up at the front. There was talk of Sedan and a breakthrough. It must have been about May 23rd when we moved to Blosville and there we five were asked to prepared plans for the defences of the Carentan peninsula. The only maps available were Michelin road maps of a scale unsuitable for planning fortifications so had to be enlarged on foolscap typing paper and allowing an overlap for pasting them together we got on with the job and had reached the halfway stage when an announcement came through that we would be on the move again. The defence of the peninsula was a non-runner and also as our C/O had been posted, the name of our organisation had now been changed to "The Cherbourg Chasseurs".

Until then I had imagined that my old section would have been doing just as previously on the "flaps" to the Belgian frontier and carrying on with the old survey work as before. Now, with the odd reports trickling through, it seemed they were really in trouble and the circumstances would be very different and chaotic. However, at that time my mind was really concerned with our own circumstances and I felt I had a responsibility for the lads with me. There did not seem to be any real form of direction from above so we just had to accept things as they came along.

The following morning, May 25th, bright and sunny we entrained with absolutely no idea of our destination and the transport turned out to be the usual "12 horses or 40 men" cattle trucks. Someone had even found a copy of the Daily Express a few days old and that really depressed us. It appeared that the armies were in retreat towards the coast and Dunkirk but what alarmed us more was the speed of the German advance.

After a long and tiring journey with little food the destination was reached, Porniche, on the estuary of the Loire on the Biscay coast. It was a reinforcement camp and much to my surprise to find in the despatch office another Survey R.E. I am sure his name was "Ginger" Wilson and he was most helpful in many ways except with food and that was very scarce.

We having established a sort of reputation previously were now called upon to act as pay clerks. It seemed simple enough to pay all N.C.Os certain fixed rates and divide the remainder between the Ors evenly as possible but to have nothing left, and that requirement was unobtainable. We tried very hard but due to the value of the notes could not balance out as zero. There was always something left. Eventually the officers decided - share what is left between you five - but the O.R's did not like that. It did help us though as it enabled us to purchase food either from the N.A.A.F.I. or by sneaking into town. Food was the biggest problem for all, you would be lucky to get a piece of bread and a cup of tea at breakfast and three men had a loaf of bread with a spoonful of stew each at midday, but the loaf was mouldy and when all the mould was cut away there would only be a two-inch cube left.

Living in bell tents with the weather roasting hot and little water available was a bit much, but we were able with "Ginger's" advice to move from one "unit" to another. It appeared that an NCO with a couple of men would be sent "up country" with a truck and limited petrol and explosive to blow certain bridges. Fortunately, I met one such group on their return and was horrified at their tale, they were, in fact, not expected back, the amount of explosive was insufficient to "blow the skin off a rice pudding" and both petrol and rations did not last for the whole journey and they had to "scrounge". Not only that it was fortunate they found an M.P. detachment from whom they learnt that the enemy would not be coming their way at all. It was only with the help of the MPs they were able to return to camp. I don't mind blowing things up but a reasonable chance of success is paramount to such an exercise.

"Ginger" called to see us - There's a chance to get away by sea - a ship, laying in Saint Nazaire was to be loaded with 5,000 men and to sail in a day's time. Somehow, I did not like it, I could not say why, so told the others of my feelings and that I would not go but suggested that they make up their own minds and that they could go if they wanted to. It was very lucky they decided to stay with me. As we learnt later, as that ship steamed north it was bombed and, I believe, was torpedoed and 2000 men lost. Again our luck held, it was now the 11th June and once more had orders to move, this time to entrain in Porniche so as soon as we reached the town we set about buying food and were not very successful. The haul was a two-inch cube of margarine, two tiny tins of sardines, a loaf of bread (fresh) and two bottles of brown beer. Once again cattle trucks were going to convey us but that was better than carriages, taking us north,

we hoped, and to a Channel port. A careful note was kept of the towns we passed through but we were not happy about direction until we passed through Avranches.

It was here as we waited in the main station a lad in the truck ahead of us obeyed the call of nature and got down between two trucks - at that moment a train full of refugees pulled in alongside us - also at that same moment our train began to move so out he came clutching his trousers as best he could and with help clambered up into the truck. The women and children crammed into the corridors were doubled-up with laughter.

A little later we had a spot of bother after we came through St. Lo when we were turned towards the east and Caen at a signal box and the train stopped. The driver and his mate obviously knew this line and came back along the track in a very concerned state of mind and had a discussion with our officers which resulted in all of them going to the signal box after which we were reversed onto the original line and we once again headed north. It was said that the signalman was shot as a fifth columnist, but I am not at all sure of that.

It was again a sunny day the 7th June when our train reached Cherbourg about midday but there were no ships in sight except those on the bottom of the harbour destroyed by bombing. A Padre was dashing backwards and forwards from the town with a van dispensing tea and many apologies for not having any eats left. He was a marvellous man with no thought of himself nor, apparently about the advancing Germans. I wonder what happened to him, we hoped he got away. Having got thus far my thoughts went to my old section, the Daily Express, still reaching us but no food, informed us about the mass evacuation from Dunkirk, a new name in our mind. I could only hope they reached home but it left us with no-one but the French between us and the enemy. As the senior decisions were left to me, I suggested that we prepare to walk from Cherbourg in a westerly direction should no ship come in. For some reason or other I decided on 2.30 pm as the start time, and we set to, changed our socks and washed the others under a nearby stand-pipe, hanging them on a wire fence to dry. We had no cigarettes so, just in case, I purchased a tin of St. Bruno pipe tobacco from the Padre, being all he had. That tin became very useful, later, in the 1st Army. I thought that by walking west we would come across some small fishing villages where we might beg, borrow or steal a boat and get home. We had come too far and were too near home to give up now.

My watch was reading 2.30 so we got up from a rest and began to move out from the harbour and as we turned a corner there was a ship coming in. What a relief that was. About turn we went and headed back into the harbour at the double and after much pushing and shoving got up the gangway and reached the forward saloon below the bridge where we found a table with seats for us all. With one lying on the table we could all sleep somehow and if the ship was to be bombed we had no intentions of being caught below decks. How that ship managed to cross the Channel and come in broad daylight I'll never know.

We passed scores of small craft of all sizes loaded with troops heading home all giving us cheers and victory signs. So soon we were steaming up the Southampton Water into the docks a month after we had previously left. My mind was not functioning properly, it would have been a simple matter to have contacted someone in movement control and explained that all they had to do was to give us a rail warrant to Portchester Station just below Fort Southwick.

As events had it, we just obeyed orders and climbed into a train waiting in Dock Station with very comfortable carriages to wait for a full load - we were unaware of the tremendous disruption the authorities were trying to handle with so many men. While waiting someone noticed that within a few yards of the platform were stacked cardboard boxes of crab, lobster and jam. We had had a little food in Cherbourg and that was the last, while here was a little more. A few of the lads were soon passing boxes into our compartment where they were hidden under the seats and hardly done so a watchman appeared kicking up merry hell. He soon reappeared with two officers in tow and took them along the platform but as they went by they were waving their hands behind their backs to indicate for the "borrowing" to proceed.

By then we were wondering about our possible destination - Aldershot or Tidworth as military establishments seemed likely and these impressions grew when we stopped at a small station outside Romsey. A girl on the platform was dispensing lemonade from a large glass container on a trolley with lots of small simple tin cups. She disappeared with wild shrieks under a welter of troops - but shortly reappeared, somewhat dishevelled but smiling, without a drop of lemonade nor a single cup.

We were extremely tired and almost asleep but when someone produced a lot of army biscuits. Tins were opened and a part of our hunger was satisfied. Also, some plain post cards appeared, about three each, so they were written to our nearest ones and thrown out of the windows every time we passed people beside the track. Many of them reached our homes eventually. Then we fell asleep, to wake at the next stop at the bottom of some gardens on a loop line. People climbed over the fences to tell us how sorry they were they had no more food left - so many troop trains had come there. These people of Bristol had tried to help all of them.

Promptly the lads all along the train were handing out boxes of crab-lobster and jam.

At long last June 10th we arrived at Hereford and after a mile march to the racecourse were allocated a bell tent, two blankets, a huge bully sandwich, a hardboiled egg, and a large mug of hot, sweet tea.

We, the five, subsided into a deep sleep. Bell tents and hard race-course turf did not appeal to us and a return to our units and our army beds would be more to our liking - so I collected all the money we had, French of course, and went to the office and, after much arguing, got them to change it into English. There was sufficient for me to send a telegram to my father that morning but all that could be said in it was "S.O.S. - L.s.d. this office" and gave my name. The answer arrived late that afternoon - showing the efforts being made by all those "behind the scenes" people to help us. It was a telegraph money order for five pounds. So, into town we went, stopping at a pub en route where, no matter what, you could not buy a drink at all. You could drink as much as you wanted but could not get to the bar. It was lined two-three deep by the locals and pints were handed out to those who wanted them.

In the town we found a small restaurant - it was packed - but a very helpful waitress found us a table on a landing and immediately brought us a large pot of tea with all necessities followed by a large meat plate of bread and butter. We ordered steak chips and tomatoes but had to wait a little while for that but it was worth it.

From there a visit to the cinema was indicated so got into a queue at the entrance. Right away the doorman and the local folk in the queue insisted we go in without waiting and with no charge so settled ourselves down in the warmth and comfort. Two full programmes later the doorman woke us to say they were closing down. We had not seen a single thing - just slept.

The next morning, still bright and sunny, I paid another visit to the office, they knew me now so it was easy to explain that if they would give us a rail warrant I could take all five of us back to our unit. Thereby, continuing our travels reaching Southampton, again, by mid-afternoon of the 22nd June. The three young lads were, like myself, of the town so sent them to their homes, with bus fares, and instructions to be back for the four o'clock train. My driver was a Londoner and my home, then, was in Farnham, so we could only phone our folks.

They all turned up in time, complete with parents, so had a good send off. I explained that, in all probability, they would get some more leave soon and see their mums and dads again. Eventually we reached Portchester Station and on being confronted by the steep hill up to Fort Southwick and it being about supper time did as the station master suggested and phoned the fort. A vehicle was requested for five very tired sappers - which was refused by the office orderly, so I had to request a word with the Orderly Officer who immediately sent a truck down for us and we were now back in the war. I still had no news of the section so was very apprehensive about what might be found on reaching the Fort. We had learnt much from the newspapers about Dunkirk and the army authorities at Hereford obviously knew nothing about other units so I was hopeful on getting into that truck to meet my pals again.

Chapter 3

1940-1941

In this day and in this age the effects of the happenings to the B.E.F. would probably be referred to as trauma and counselling would have been prescribed. At that time, the word would have had no meaning to us but the real feelings were that we had had a nasty blow and we had been knocked down - but significantly not out. There was no feeling of utter defeat - there was more of a sense that we would win - in the end - possibly a long time hence - but that we would.

It was such a relief to find the section still intact but without a single piece of equipment but they did not seem to want to discuss the events over Dunkirk. They seemed to be much more interested in what had happened to the driver and myself. One event gave them some degree of pleasure describing the dumping of my kit into a lake and I deplored the action until I heard that the same thing was done with everybody else's to avoid it falling into the hands of the enemy.

Events at the Fort after Dunkirk etc. were not, in my opinion, conducive to promoting a new effective fighting force. For some peculiar military reason, it was considered that all we needed was some backbone stiffening by means of much foot drill on a rough "square" and were marched backwards and forwards with little variation for hours at a stretch. Somewhere along the line the physical condition of the men from the lack of food and sleep, let alone the mental state was ignored. I hasten to explain that the three young surveyors were sent home on a four-day pass so missed all this. Not one of the section objected to any form of exercise except large amounts of boring foot drill, but would have preferred P.T. or football or cross-country running, even marches. It was clear the officers appreciated our feelings and tried to initiate other forms of employment such as digging anti-tank ditches across the tarmac approaches to the Fort but luckily the brain somewhere, thought it impractable and transferred us to a more useful pastime making Molotov cocktails.

Without survey gear there was no survey work and the rest of the Company was in a similar state with the printers having no machines and the M.T. section no transport. Consequently, a lot of effort went into finding something to keep us occupied. Myself, muggins, landed the job of establishing a test and training place for gas-masks, in an old bunker just off the parade ground in the parapet of the Fort. Still, it gave us some fun and, at least, allowed some of the others to get acquainted with gas and the real value of gas masks.

For the Topo sections liberation arrived quite suddenly in the shape of replacement survey equipment and transport. The poor old printers and M.T. had to carry on with whatever could be dragged up for them. Our "new" conveyance was a bit varied and ancient consisting of a Rover saloon 1928 vintage, two small vans, one large van and a shiny black limousine, a Ford Zephyr with a V-8 engine. Thus we went to Norwich it now being July 13th, still with only a few side-arms and some rifles which had to be shared for guard duties. Our new billet was a T.A. drill hall and, despite of the lack of comfortable bedding, we were very glad to be back at work. Survey results for many 6-inch guns along the Suffolk and Norfolk coasts were soon completed much to the anxious battery commander's pleasure.

One morning about 6 a.m. we nearly received a bomb from a "hit and run" raider when he dropped two in a bus station only yards from the back of our hall. One landed in a street leading to the station and the other through the driver's seat of the bus lifting it up leaving it leaning against the building. Fortunately, although it was morning rush time, passengers had not yet arrived, and the bus crews were either in the office or the canteen.

I was lucky when I was sent to Chelmsford as section D.R. with a very old Norton, the same model as the one I rode in France. On a section of curved road between fields the machine began to snake. I straight away thought I had a puncture and stopped but could find nothing wrong at all. I remounted and set off with no signs of trouble. A mile along the road I came to a pub that had only just been hit by a bomb a matter of minutes before I got there. I have always considered that I could have been passing the pub when it was hit so gave thanks to the old bike for saving me.

Our next assignment was at Colchester, accommodated in a brand-new hutted camp where we had a grandstand view of the Battle of Britain taking place over the Thames estuary. One Heinkel came crashing down and looked as if it might land on our doorstep. Luckily it landed about half a mile away and blew up with its load. There was little left of its occupants and the blast really shook us.

Once again, the work was mostly concerned with coastal guns but as more 3.7's were arriving.

Our workload increased considerably but there was something that really was interesting begin to appear near the A.A. gun sites. It was the new radar sets. Compared to the original ones near Dover they were very small more like a small caravan but placed about three feet above ground with a large rectangular aerial. It would also be surrounded by a horizontal area of chain link fencing likewise three feet above ground which acted as a ground effect.

Any work on the east side of London, during the daylight bombing, was a bit dodgy so one had to keep one's eye skyward and to make mental notes of likely funk holes. In the meantime, the Company, to the relief of the printers, had moved to Hayes, Middlesex, to the factory of Harrisons the printer of postage stamps. It was probably the print machines the Company was after as they were soon producing maps. Our move to join the Company just about coincided with the end of the daylight battle and Goering began his night bombing. Because of that, orders were issued that "if you were in camp after 4.30 p.m. you had to move into the air raid shelters" and would likely stay there all night. It was obvious, the thing to do was to be out of camp at that time. The practice one had to follow was to walk along streets as close to high walls as possible. The ordinary shrapnel from 3.7's wasn't too bad but the 4.5's would send down some quite large lumps at times. Evenings out in London could be exciting at times but it was advisable to know of some good cellars in the area.

Cambridge became our next area of operations and, so far as can be remembered consisted of checking trig stations and establishing errors due to the old county boundaries. It did give us a chance of pleasant pastimes, like hiring horses for a few gallops (and getting thrown off) also while living in a private house was an improvement on the previous billet.

It was there I was acting as Corporal "Chuck" Avenal's assistant, he was always most correct in his dress and always sat up in front with the driver in the Ford Zephyr while I sat in the back. It was not long before I realized that soldiers on the side of the road were putting up salutes. It was such a shame to disappoint them, so I just had to return the salute. They obviously thought that a General was on board.

From Cambridge it was a short visit to H.Q. at Hayes and then on to Hythe on the south coast of Kent, I should think about the 7th December. The weather was beginning to get cold but work was very interesting as apart from a 9.2 in Dover harbour there were no more coastal guns to fix. More 3.7's were appearing with also several of the new radar installations but, to me, the really interesting job was the marking of the rail track of a 9.2 railway gun of 1914-1918 age. It was on a heavy carriage about 40 to 50m feet long on 32 wheels and to give it a full traverse was on a quarter circle of rail. Its own traverse was only about ten degrees. The location was at Lyddon Spout four to five miles north of Dover. I had been allocated the task of establishing marks at every ten degrees round the outer rail of the quarter circle, but a singular difficulty arose. The quarter circle was not of a constant radius so as time was of essence, the gunners had arranged a test shoot in the next few days, I ran a traverse round that outer rail with short legs and interpolated the required marks from that, to give bearings for the tangent lines. I was invited to witness the trial, possibly to have me on site should anything go wrong for the solid shot was to be fired over Dover into the sea just east of the harbour. The locomotive appeared and shunted the great mass of steel into position over a selected mark then lined up with its limited traverse and the gun loaded. All the wheels were locked the loco and ammunition wagon moved well away and I was advised to watch from well away to the rear. It was fired with a gigantic roar, and I could see the shell leave the barrel through a huge smoke ring. After that we all waited for the phone call but, not to fear, it had landed just as predicted.

Further surveys were to complement that already done for the 16-inch and 18-inch cross-channel bombardment guns in St. Margaret's Bay. It was, to us, of considerable interest to be shown their calculations being rather more complicated than ours. After allowing for humidity - the wind strength and direction plus cloud height and depth then for the rotation of the earth as the shoot was almost due north-south.

A sudden request for our services resulted in a move to Brighton - more 6-inch coastal guns. The accommodation was in a seafront hotel, but that was all that could be said about the place. We shared it with a battery of coastal gunners brought down from the Western Isles of Scotland where they, apparently had had a very bad time. Messing with them was a dangerous pastime and was not up to our own standard. So far as we could find out several of their officers were in trouble. The weather was bad enough with very cold winds and snow but our nightly sleep was often disrupted by the sound of floor boards, up above, being ripped up for firewood. Under the circumstances it was not surprising our work was rushed through in a couple of weeks and we gladly returned to our detached house in Hythe on or about the 19th January. There was, however, a slight drawback, the enemy was now sending over 43cm shells at Dover and Folkestone during the night and it sounded more like a train of coal trucks flying through the air. We did have some entertainment, it was possible to read a newspaper by the light of the bombs bursting on the German invasion preparations on the other side of the Channel.

After all that freedom of detachment from the Company we again returned to H.Q. and the London blitz on the 29th March, which was acquiring a steady regular practice, in fact had become a habit of life. Even going out for a drink required a tin hat as the occasional large lump of shrapnel could damage a lidless cranium.

Apart from John Armytage and I breaking the Olympic record in a dash to a surface shelter on an evening out once or twice and myself falling into a bomb hole while riding a motor-cycle in the dark, the days passed in a normal fashion until April Fool's day (the first of April) we were rushed up to Tadcaster in Yorkshire in an almighty hurry.

It was not until after we arrived that we found the reason for the move. Our fellow Company the 516 was due to move abroad to Norway as some believed and we had to take over the survey obligations. The new billet was the polo stables at Toulston Lodge, owned by one of the Smith brothers of brewing fame. Mind you it was the grooms' quarters we occupied and did not disturb the horses.

Meeting old friends was just great fun but on this occasion an arrangement had been made of a blind date for me at a dance. Now, I knew few young ladies and did little dancing so had words to say to my friend Chas Lucas, the culprit, who obviously knew more about this move from London than we did. I had to find excuses, one being that I had no shoes, which was true. But Charles came back with four pairs and, as one pair fitted, I had to go. As things turned out eventually my blind date made an honest man of me by marrying me.

The work there only lasted a month enabling us to visit familiar places from our activities in 1939 on light-keeping for the retriangulation of Great Britain. All that we did do did not need any rushing about so we enjoyed the "holiday".

516's trip to Norway became a non-runner so our faces, once again, turned southwards - to Dunstable, but it was there that, for three of us, our adventure with 14th (CFS) Coy R.E. came to an end.

A posting to Ruabon, the Survey Training Centre for promotion, so it was said, reaching there on the 19th May 1941 a year after the German break through at Sedan. The three lucky ones were John Armitage, "Titch" Elks and myself. The dates show we were not sent to the 518 until the 2nd June, so we must have been given some posting leave.

Chapter 4

June 1941

It was with some trepidation as we took the long journey north, to that wild Scottish Land, such wartime travel was very tiring after being used to our own transport. It was fortunate that it was a friendly driver who collected us from Waverley Station in Edinburgh. He obligingly gave us a run down about the Company and it was pleasant to find out that there were quite a few persons we already knew there. However, it was a nice welcome and, as always, a good meal was very much appreciated. So commenced our first and only posting for John and me.

First impressions on joining 518 were a little vague for we three from S.T.C. Ruabon and except for two members of No. 1 Topo we knew very few of the troops. It would take some time for new friendships to develop and for us to be absorbed into the Section as full members.

As no record or little memory exists about the beginning of No 1 Topo, 518 Coy, some history can only be jumbled together. It should, however, be sufficient to give a reasonable picture of the preparation that stood the section so well in its future role.

It was Sergeant Bill Cutmore, our immediate authority to look to. The Section Officer, Lt. John Kelsey, was, at that time a vague figure in the background and, I believe he was finding us to be in a similar state. He too had probably only just joined the Company.

Very soon we were at work on A.A. and Radar defence of Glasgow, Rosyth, Edinburgh and Gourock with a fair bit of coastal defence put in for good measure and with a touch of aerodrome defence for good luck.

While being involved in the Glasgow blitz, a rumour was spreading about that the A.A. boys were looking for assistance and it had been suggested that other troops in the area would become involved and help them load the guns. This was quite understandable for they were equipped with the old original 3.7s where the round had to be pushed right up into the breech by hand. They had no mechanical ramrods on these guns, London and the Home Counties had all those. To some it might be a matter to treat with scorn, but those critics should first try picking up 3.7 full round before casting such a stone. Nevertheless, we were glad to avoid such a possibility when we were moved to work further north.

Some of our jobs were not all pleasant. Such as the camp or depot site at Dalmally set in a wide expanse of boggy ground where a visit to the pub was an experience all on its own. It was a large timber shack, possibly like a community hall, but had no furniture whatsoever with no sign of a counter or beer pumps or barrels. It was only when a local appeared, clad in his kilt and sporran, we decided to see what he would get up to.

His actions were simple but surprising, he went to a hatch in the middle of one wall with a small shelf, placed his money thereon, tapped the hatch then stood with his back to the wall. The trap opened - the money went in - the trap shut - then it opened again - a glass tot appeared and the trap shut. After downing his drink, he went through the same procedure and then departed. It was obvious, we must follow the same pattern. We did but this time it was not a tot that appeared but a rosy bearded face that glared at us momentarily - the trap shut - opened and a pint made an appearance. It took some time before we all had a glass in our hands.

Another job was a new hutted camp on a hill on the side of Loch Fyne but in the middle of winter. There was no mess-room so you had to stumble up and down steps from and to our barrack hut by which time our breakfast which started fairly hot was definitely not when we ate it.

A further trial of our ability was participation in a forty-eight hour exercise. Pretending to land from Loch Fyne at Strachur on the east side of the Loch immediately opposite the winter camp job, our instructions were to provide road maps, not necessarily dead accurate, with some contours to show something of the hill features. This could only mean plane tables - ray and ……. with odd shots into the …….. be remembered no one told us off so we must have provided all that was required.

One particular effort did not involve the whole section, it was just "Geordie" McBain and myself. We had to be on a specified section of foreshore at Largs, on the Firth of Clyde, by 5 a.m. after travelling from Dalmeny. We were somewhat puzzled - the instructions were for us to board a ship and yet here we were on a gently sloping shore with no jetty, no quay, what next? The answer became very clear as a very large ship hove out of the morning mist and made straight for us. To all intents and purposes it was going to run aground and so it did. As it did so, enormous bow doors opened, ramps went down and vehicles came trundling out. We were watching the very first tank landing ship and our purpose was to show that the Skipper was correct in his contention that the ship was ten feet longer than shown on the ships plans also that his water supply tanks were 35% less capacity than indicated.

As the ship would continue its exercise of landing at various landfalls around the Firth we had to become members of the ship's crew for that duration and could put away the rations we had brought with us.

That arrangement definitely had our approval for the food there was really something. On queuing at the galley, one received larger than its plate and the vegetables had to be parked on the top of it while at other meal times the bread was white and fluffy like the French bread.

Measuring the ship's length was a little awkward because of the deck houses and gear but proved the skipper was right. The water tanks were a different matter, they were below the main deck and as the ship was still cruising we had to be bolted down after descending through a manhole to the space with three feet of headroom below between the keel and the deck. Although rather claustrophobic we soon had that done after checking several times to make sure because we would rather not go down there a second time and once again he was correct.

We could not return to shore until that particular cruise was over so enjoyed a sort of holiday while doing a few odd jobs for the skipper round the ship before returning to Largs.

After I had enjoyed a week's leave - returning to Dalmeny on the 19th July - the Section moved again on detachment to Bothwell, south-east of Glasgow first, and then to Bishopbriggs on the north side.

All this was related to more A.A. defences of the city but this time included more radar. The section accommodation consisted of a large comfortable wooden hut of the social-club type and stood in an extensive parking area. Bill Cutmore was not concerned with vehicle parking but thought this large area the very ideal for P.T. so had us out in gym shorts, vest and shoes before start of work each morning.

The weather being pleasant no one really objected - especially when a young lady on the balcony of a house backing on to our area kept us company in time with our exercises. The instructor with his back to the vision - clad in little or nothing wondered why we were not paying him much attention.

From there, after paying a visit to the H.Q. at Dalmeny, the work took us north to Oban - to fix odd coastal gun-sites on various sea-facing peninsulas - one being "Rubha Garbh-Aird" and the first to occupy our energies so our "camp" was situated in Lochnell House nearby. It was a fine typical Scottish house of the Victorian era built adjoining a small ancient ruined castle. It belonged to the Campbell's and apparently had a curse upon it from the MacDonalds of Glencoe to burn down every seventh year. In fact, the Laird had secured a ban on any aircraft passing overhead to prevent such a chance of starting a fire.

So far, little mention has been made of our Section officer apart from at the beginning when he seemed to be a vague figure in the background. That, he no longer was - and certainly not shadowy but very much in evidence and it was very much a pleasure working under his command. We felt much more involved with him and in the Section generally.

Lochnell House itself had never burnt down although it must have been about 100 years old but the castle had. Secure in the middle of the ground floor, at the bottom of a spiral staircase, was a small room with no windows and one door being used as a telephone exchange for the battery on Rubha. It was manned all twenty-four hours by two men who never ventured out after dark. We were intrigued as to why? I found out on the first night as I drew the short straw. It had been decided by all members of the section that to have a full guard on would upset the work programme the next day, be better to have one man on all night and let him have the following morning off. The kitchen, with a nice large fireplace, was to be the guard room just off the stone-flagged passage-way from the back door to the "little room" and had a big cooking-range and a large wooden bread-making bin complete with a wooden lid which was about four feet long, two feet wide and high. Once supplied with a table, chair, fuel and food I was ready for the night. By 10.30 all had settled down so I made a circuit of the premises, lit the fire, made some tea and thus prepared for anything that might happen. At least, so I thought. Midnight came and went so the next circuit was made and as I sat there began to think of the spooky stories the two gunner telephonists had told us. Then I realized I had company, two rats appeared, took a long look at me and wandered round the kitchen so I threw the broom at them. At that they scattered but came back to sniff the broom so I considered it better to live and let live but before I could say that about six or seven more appeared. Apparently, the bread bin was the object of their attention for they just chased each other round and over the bin. At about 12.30 a rattling noise was coming from the wall behind me. It sounded like a rat moving along a passage-way inside the wall and each direction was moving a stone backwards and forwards. This was most intriguing but with my nice fire and food I was not bothered except when the clock showed 2.00 and all my little friends disappeared and I was suddenly cold so much so that when I tried to warm my hands at the fire I could feel no heat at all. This began to alarm me but thought it might be the psychological effect of the tales but then heard sounds of footsteps. Someone with soft shoes was coming into the house from the back door. I then thought that a person had performed a necessary function and was returning and expected him to call in. I listened carefully when he did not but I could hear the sound of a fabric like taffeta of a woman's dress. After a while the footsteps came back and went out of the back door. At which moment all my little friends were back playing and I was warm again. That did not seem to me to be the reaction to the funny tales. I then decided to leave any exterior inspection until daylight.

Another tale told by the telephone lads was of a visit by someone with large clumsy boots, they thought it was a lad from the battery who went up the spiral stairway to the room above and clumped around and then left the building. On contacting the battery by phone it transpired that no one was sent from the battery.

Arrangements were made for men to be at each end door of the room above them when "clumsy boots" arrived and on a given….. [*line missing in original manuscript*] ..... reason the telephone lads never came out after dark. After hearing more of the tales some of our chaps while walking nearby decided to ask a local woman at a garden gate if there was any truth in these tales. After opening the conversation with her they put the question and she was about to answer when, looking up the road saw a figure approaching, at least a mile away, and immediately she fled indoors slamming the door. The conclusion reached was that she had been about to confirm that there were happenings at the house and castle. One thing we did learn was that a young woman, not a Campbell, had died in one of the early fires so I presumed that it was she who walked past my door that first night. The trouble is that our training had never allowed for a situation like this.

After Oban my memory is a trifle blank and there are no dates available but Inverary is mentioned Why, is not certain but it is in a sequence after another return to H.Q. and there is nothing in my memory of work in that area except the possibility of us being involved in an exercise. Placing this exercise into a time scale has always been difficult but features about it spring to mind when on the first night it rained like mad and we had no shelter except under the trucks. My awakening was accelerated by a pressure on my face from my gas cape being full of water.

While in that field a local grocer sold us some bread, bacon and tomatoes so on the next stop we cooked them. It was necessary to think quickly when Mr. Kelsey asked about the pleasant smell and I had to say that we were "living off the land".

The end of 1941 was approaching fast with winter beginning to show in the chill winds but it does lead to the visit to Dunbar and Berwick-on-Tweed. The purpose does come to mind easily but there were a few coastal batteries newly placed and sited to cover likely beaches considered suitable for invasion by Adolf from Denmark or Norway. I am more inclined to think the effort was to think our services were needed to fix a new long-range radar on a hundred-foot tower. The range was apparently two to three hundred miles.

These radars were being installed all along the east coast and small group of McBain, one other, and myself were sent to Aberdeen to lodge with troops at Fort Torry and to do all that was necessary to fix the new one there. There was a little trouble with the levels coming from an O.B.M. a mile away but that was soon resolved. Soon everything was finished except for one essential long range and bearing point. Sea fret was obscuring it no matter what time of day we reached the station, even when we got there at dawn. Being concerned with the delay I phoned the Company hoping to get Mr Kelsey but was put onto Major Harris, and I can still hear him thumping his desk as he said "I don't care if it takes a day - a week - a month - or a year, you will finish it. So we did stay another week. Travelling further north to Lossiemouth we discovered that the tower there would not be started for some time and even the actual position had not been decided. That meant a return to Company H.Q. at Dalmeny.

While at Dalmeny we began to have "war games" to toughen us up - for what we asked? The work kept us tough enough. This energetic pastime involved the local Home Guard and the R.A.F. Regiment on aerodrome defence and resulted in exciting "battles" in village centres and round aerodrome perimeters using much blank ammo with the throwing of "bombs" of stew tins full of sand with a length of safety fuse. The Company printers were taken prisoners by the Home Guard on one "do" but they produced a hidden pistol at the right time and turned the tables on the guard, thereupon escaping taking some prisoners with them.

One training episode utilised a 15-cwt as a tank and the class was being trained in the use of a "sticky" bomb as an anti-tank weapon. Everyone was instructed that on the final approach to the "tank" the metal cover of the glass bomb was not to be removed in the interest of economy. However, one bod did remove it and with great enthusiasm smashed the glass on the side of the truck and vigorously rubbed the sticky mess onto the truck. All in the vicinity vanished including the driver bearing in mind the instructors comments on what would happen. All waited for the bang but it did not occur. So we all ventured out - it transpired that the primer in the handle had been removed so we all breathed a sigh of relief except the driver who was demanding "who is going to get this mess off my truck?".

Leith on the north-east corner of Edinburgh and adjacent to the docks became our next training area for street fighting. After getting a great deal of instruction that dwelt heavily on the safety factor we began the exercise by throwing plastic grenades (69?) at bedroom windows across a street from a doorway. These grenades had a screw cap on the bottom which when removed revealed a tape wound round and attached preventing a lead ball from moving. The idea was that as the grenade was thrown the tape unrolled allowing the ball to detonate the bomb. In most cases the thing just blew the case to duct but the lead ball could still prove dangerous as Mr. Kelsey found out as while sheltering in a doorway one came across the road at high velocity and ran across an area of tightly stretched khaki - must have burnt somewhat. The next event was to repeat the series with the No. 36 grenades and for that purpose some of us sheltered in the house which was being bombed. Having settled down on a floor by a front window I waited for the first bomb but while doing so realized there was quite a draught on my right leg and found a large hole in the wall and as I looked the No. 36 arrived but bounced off the wall and rolled along the road and into my sight. Very gently it rolled down beside the kerb before going bang. The following evening it was decided to hold a night event with some sections defending and others attacking. We were in the building when the attackers let off smoke bombs and one of us did likewise resulting in total blindness for all. Getting out of the place with many floorboards missing was almost a disaster. Luckily, no one got hurt but many were sick.

Moving well into 1942 the Company suddenly up-sticks and moved to Peebles about twenty five miles south of Edinburgh but there seemed to be no logical reason why as we were quite happy at Dalmeny. The place had become our "home". A moderate amount of work was carried on there but not with the same intensity. More effort went into physical education and we even played a few games of seven-a-side rugger in the field alongside the parade ground, much to Mr. Kelsey's approval, he being a Cambridge Blue. It was becoming obvious that all this was leading up to something. That some obscure purpose was in the minds of the Gaffers was obvious when a series of events took place.

One was the intensification of physical training like both Topo Sections clambering up very steep Scottish hills with heavy weights in our packs, the other, a little later, when leave was dished out, not in the usual ones and twos but in batches. As many as half of each of the Topo sections were going together.

In the hills, after having been up and down a couple of these menaces we crawled up the last one on our hands and knees and after a gasping rest were shown how to assemble a cordtex net (F.I.D.) which was laid over one or two land mines which had been somebody's load up the hills. Next - we were to lie with our heads towards and behind a stone wall. There was an almighty bang, we all jumped and lumps of the wall came crashing down - fortunately only landing on one or two of us with only minor injuries. It was plain that somebody or other wanted us to get used to these nasty bang things should it ever occur that we might even be in such a vicinity.

As the days went by lectures were given about our work and so on, we even practiced sun and star shots actually getting pretty good at it. With the weather being quite reasonable night work was pleasant but we also knew we had the next morning off duty.

Once the section complement was restored with returned-leave members, several small parties were made up in groups of fours with an N.C.O. in charge and were sent off to local farmers in the area round Peebles to help gather in the harvest. Being in Scotland the harvest could only be oats or barley.

As one might expect the weather promptly turned to rain and with that the job of following behind the reaper and binder stooking the stoocks could hardly be worse. We, in my section, were housed in a cottage just down the lane from the farmhouse and although we had the means of making tea all the food was supplied by the farmer's wife at the farmhouse. Porridge was for breakfast each morning and it was surprisingly good and after that, off to the fields we went. Gloves were supplied by the farmer but in the wet they only lasted a day or so - the stooking was extremely boring but it got done, I think the anticipation of the open-air lunch of bannock and cheese with plenty of tea and the evening meal in the farmhouse of plain but real cooked food was what made up for it all.

At the end of the two weeks of hard work we considered a pint or two had been well and truly earned also it meant our return to Coy. H.Q. The land girl was invited to come with us even though it would mean a long walk along a railway line of four miles. On reaching the village we found it so crowded with troops engaged in pursuit of a similar pastime it was impossible to even find a pint. All the pubs had sold out their quota, so we had to retrace our steps farm-ward.

The return to the Company opened our eyes - many more people were on leave and those of us who could drive were allocated the vehicles of drivers on leave so that in the event of a vehicle being required somewhere else it could be moved there. The large truck I inherited was normally driven by a short slightly-built Lancastrian who I had seen changing gear as easily as I would in my Austin Seven. The truck was a Scammell with a roof to the cab and no windscreen while behind was a large cabin that could be opened out housing a massive print machine - in other words - a print trailer. Not only that, hitched behind was a 350-amp generator on a trailer, the engine of which was larger than the Scammell engine.

After a careful start, with a companion to help me to keep track of other people on the road, we managed to get the thing moving but without its generator. I found my greatest problem was changing gear. I could not emulate the real driver but had to stand up and use both hands on the gear lever. Still, by the time the Scammell "owner" came back I could even reverse the thing and he was most pleased that (a) it was still in one piece (b) it had not been taken and loaded on a ship or such.

All this was causing the word "embarkation" to become a much-used speculation so when the following events happened it became very positive, at least to our minds though nothing official was said. First, all our Chevrolet 15 cwt trucks were called in and exchanged for Bedfords which, unlike the Chevrots were equipped with small aero screens much to the drivers' disgust. They were far from new and it was thought we had been given a load of junk, but the checking by the M.T. section showed they had been completely rebuilt as their later dependability showed. Secondly was the order to fully load all vehicles, lower the hoods for lashing down and prepare them for, "yes, you heard" embarkation. My wise move was to include my own camp bed in the full load of the section's H.Q. truck.

With the loss of the vehicles all future movement in the Peebles area was somewhat restricted, so much was made of lectures to occupy our time. There was some evidence of our destination from the health talks when they dealt with "nasties" in hot countries. Of course, our minds were endeavouring to think of a likely place we could be sent to. So 'hot Countries could not mean Scandinavia nor very likely to be Europe, assuming we would be leaving Scotland.

Many letters got written in those last few days - time dragged - we knew little of Peebles or the folks there as our stay had been fairly short and much of the events occupied our attention. So speculation was digging away at our minds - was this to be the 'big adventure' or was it not?

Chapter 5

November 1942

It must have been about the 8th November when our journey from Peebles to the Clyde began. There was nothing particular about the train trip but there was much being thought about by the lads of 518. This was very much out of the ordinary but everyone was fairly quiet - wondering what was to befall us - news had filtered through about something happening in North Africa - talk about "Monty" the Eighth Army - Alamein - Rommel being pushed back - so the guess was that we might get involved somehow - but it certainly gave us a reasonable supposition as to our likely direction of travel.

On reaching the "open" sea at Gourock there - before our very eyes - was a flotilla of large passenger ships anchored offshore so it was very evident we were in for a long trip - and not a cross-channel type.

Some of us had experience of Army transportation by sea previously to the Dunkirk incident but almost all the others had only seen the odd ferry or two - so clambering up the side gangway of this massive great "boat" they became as excited as a lot of kids on a Sunday-school outing.

After exploring as far as we were allowed or even further - we stowed our kit - rigged our hammocks - note the navy type reference - for those who wanted them and claimed a little floor space for those who did not. A little later each section received a lecture by our respective officers which did not, at that time, reveal all - at least not to our satisfaction. The weather was clear but overcast and not particularly cold so we all would have liked to get up on deck for a look-see but our first meal was about to be put before us and two members of each table were appointed to collect same. The cabin was about 20ft x 20ft and was furnished with three tables lying parallel with benches either side to sit 22 men at each, with a reasonable space from them to the door wall. When we set about getting beds ready although some people were in hammocks floor space was at a high premium so one had to take what could be found which included under or on the tables.

As the two delegated hands fetched our first tea up came the anchors and our "boat" set sail. This resulted in a rapid disappearance of the meal as we were told we could go "up top" for a short and last view of Scotland we had got to like very much. Clearing Dunoon off to our right, we passed between the tip of the Isle of Bute and the Great Cumbrae Island and on, leaving the Isle of Arran off to starboard and Ailsa Craig to port swinging round the Mull of Kintyre to pass north of Ireland into the Atlantic.

It was going to be a long time before we would see the shores of our homeland again. As the convoy moved into lines as it sailed into the Atlantic what we noticed most was the absence of any naval escort. From newspapers and such there was much said about convoys and escorts and the battle against U-boats consequently we expected the same. The wise ones made murmurs of the escort being over the horizon but later it transpired that, being a fast convoy, no escort would be required. Such information was not accepted as being reassuring.

The first day was pleasant and a boat drill organized, it was almost entertaining as it consisted of attending on a stairway for 30 minutes. In all it took 45 minutes to reach our boat station and as the sea was, in nautical terms, beginning to rise, many made a hasty retreat to the 'head' or loo. Later that night we began to appreciate a considerable change in the weather conditions and, down below, where all dead lights over the portholes were fastened down tight, no lights to attract U-boats, the claustrophobic atmosphere did not mingle with seasickness very well for those affected. Our 'nice' boat for all those unfortunates was not a nice 'boat' any more.

The ship, the "Strathallen", was starting to dive-twist-climb and turn constantly without a let up. We were, by dawn, in a full Atlantic gale. There were now very few of the "Sunday school outing" lot on their feet and the 22 per table was reduced to 6 only. It should be noted that those six rose honourably to their duty to dispose of the other sixteen rations in a suitable manner which did not necessitate throwing them over the side.

John and I found that by creeping along certain passages, in the officers' quarters, they being rather ill, we could reach the after deck under the stern gun, and could do it in less than the boat drill time. First, we had visited the canteen in the bowels of the ship and purchased a 7lb tin of pears so settled down out of the wind and consumed them as we watched the ship astern rising high on a sea then falling out of sight in the trough. Those waves must have been 30 to 40 feet high.

Remembering the boat drill and not being happy with the locked-in effect of our cabin we wondered what we could do should a U-boat get us. Our appreciation did not realise that the gale was our best protection. Our appreciation did not realise that the gale was our best protection. A U-boat at periscope depth would be plainly in sight in the trough of the waves. However, the general consensus, that is, of the six of us still on out feet, held that in such an event we should get out through the porthole. That was agreed until someone realized that it would not suit all. They said how about John? It was clear that his girth and the porthole would hardly match so we must try, in daylight, of course, and John duly tried but almost immediately pulled back in, rather damp, making the comment he would have to swim. Those big waves were even larger than we thought.

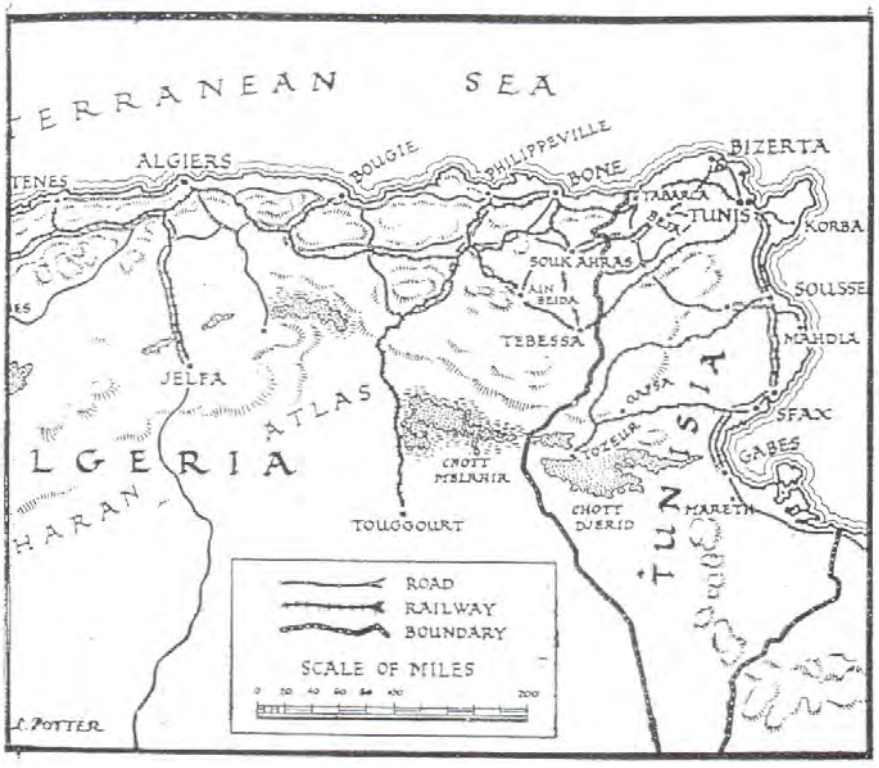
Although we, on our feet, felt extremely sorry for those suffering from seasickness there was absolutely nothing we could do for them. All so-called remedies had been tried both from the medical staff and from the crew on board to no avail. After about a week of it – it was surprising they were keeping going with practically no food.

John and I found that wandering around the ship, where possible, helped to pass the boring moments. Up on deck it was an entirely different environment – most exciting – with the big seas – the ships all astern when visible – and the adventure of being involved in all this.

It was about the sixth or seventh day out when the gale began to abate – we had deduced that our journey had been from north to south about 1500 miles off the U.S.A. eastern seaboard. It was still very rough and no respite for those suffering. That evening an announcement was made on the ship's address system that (a) there were 50 U-boats waiting for us and (b) that at midnight the convoy, with our "boat" leading as the commodore's flagship, would form up in line astern and charge through the Straits of Gibraltar flat out.

Just before dawn we felt rather then heard some thuds and thumps from the north but by light of day there we were, all of us, out into the calm of the Mediterranean and had our first sight of any escort miles to the north. This is where things went sadly wrong, for, all those who had been refusing food had a lot of backlog to make up and we, who had so diligently disposed of the surplus were now reduced to a single ration at each meal time – it seemed doubtful we would last the rest of the journey out.

A certain amount of freedom was permitted on deck and exercises encouraged particularly for those who had suffered but it was enjoyed by all. Night time the confinement to our mess deck was just the same but the flotilla soon reached Algiers Bay. Thus for the first time we found out where we were going.



After anchoring in the bay, it was made known to us that disembarkation was not possible right away as a ship had run aground at the entrance to the dock. Limited access to the deck was again allowed although night had its particular restriction. Never-the-less, it enabled us to have a look at the city and it was most attractive.

That night the fleet was the recipient of a heavy air raid – all the watertight doors were closed and locked – all deadlights shut and clamped, which resulted in all sixty-six of us sitting on the benches at the mess tables fully dressed and most apprehensive.

The A.A. defence was most dense – very noisy and at one point a massive explosion happened which, later, proved to be a torpedo plane and its load getting a direct hit. That made us wonder who did the survey for that gun.

One plane nearly got us, dropping a bomb either side of us, rocking the ship so violently that most of us slipped off the benches and putting all the lights out – it was a bit nerve-wracking until the emergency lights came on.

There was little sleep that night but we were cheered by the movement of our "boat" as she moved towards the docks as the sun rose and then we could see that our neighbouring ship had received a torpedo in the bows but was still very much afloat. On landing, as so many of our "sea-sicks" were anxious to do – we had to shoulder our baggage – including kit bags – and started marching. Everybody was keen to see something of the sights but remarkably it was evident that we were well out of condition so it was fortunate Major Harris called an early halt. Then, strangely enough, the lectures we had at Peebles regarding all the nasty things that could happen to us abroad were "most up" in our minds – no one would sit on the ground – on packs yes – on kitbags yes – but not on the ground.

And so we marched on to Maison Carree – this very new, to us – and very interesting and intriguing land – to see the locals, French and Arab, especially he and his donkey. So the march had begun which went all the way to Tunis and back also much further and it seemed such a short while ago we were in Peebles.

For a few days at Maison Carree we were lodged in a small workshop, apparently to allow our Company equipment to catch up with us so then the main bulk of the Company moved on to Menerville further east and set up the printers etc. and commenced producing maps. We in No. 1 Topo moved into the centre of Algiers to set up a Map Depot in the Rue Michelet utilizing some lock-up garages, which were beneath some buildings. It was necessary to use our Tilly lamps as there was poor lighting and much writing would be the order of the day. Most of the vehicles had been impressed for use in the docks carrying a multitude of materials out of town to the various dumps. In short time boxes of maps were delivered to, so the depot was soon working at full pelt. There was one advantage to us – these same boxes would fit nicely between the rear wheel boxes of the 15 cwt's and having bolt-down tops they made a handy store for our many bits and pieces.

The collection of rations, petrol, oil and water was one of my duties and it took me a while to find the respective dumps which, it so happened, were in the Valley of Les Femmes Sauvage to the south of the city. Fortunately, the ladies had vacated the premises but it took me a long while and a bottle or two of the local wine to persuade the issuing NCO's that a unit of under twenty men was entitled to a 20% increase in rations which were, at that time, in Compo boxes of 14 men per day. The day was won so we had two boxes a day for the immediate future.

On receiving the rest of the transport from the docks it was considered by those above that we should get on with the work we were intended to do. So, handing over to the freshly arrived map depot people we moved south of Algiers to a vineyard near Blida onto a track between the vines with some trees down one side. It was obvious that Mr. Kelsey did not approve this "billet". The rain was continuous – the truck canopies leaked and even the two tents (one for our leader and one for the computers) were far from watertight. As two of the trucks were still allocated to dock work on a daily basis, it occurred to me that the docks could provide us with an improved form of tentage. The drivers were told not to come back without a decent sized tarpaulin. It arrived that evening, so all hands opened it up and it seemed to get bigger and bigger almost to cover the vineyard.

With everyone assisting, a rope was fixed between two trees and the tarp pulled up then equipment was placed pushing the sides outwards made a really sizeable and very waterproof tent which would accommodate the whole section, even including the cook, Haggis, and all his pots and pans, while the remaining side portions folded under to make a floor.

The situation for the computers was much eased – the foolscap-size computing forms no longer got soggy damp – the Tilly lamps not only provided light but gave us warmth as well. So the work progressed - A.A. survey, mostly resections or intersections round Blida airfield and in the environs of Algiers. In the meantime, Mr. Kelsey had been busy, he must have put a good word in the right places, because after a week or so he moved us into a comfortable billet in the shape of a cottage on the estate of the British Naval Attache. There were actually two cottages back-to-back with a compound wall from between the cottages forming an enclosure wherein lived the Arab foreman and his family (four wives of very differing ages with offspring). At first, they all seemed to be scared of us, no doubt considering the possibility of the women being molested, so they were not allowed to see us. That soon changed and the women went about their business unfettered and happily while the lads often played with the children with, of course, the inevitable sweet from the compo rations.

All good things come to an end eventually and we were obliged to move. The Arab foreman and his wives and children all gathered outside our cottage – all in tears – to see us leave and it was then they presented us with a wonderful gift – an Arab puppy bitch, she was to become the best sentry one could possibly have and was with us for two years until the Company enshipped to Italy. Needless to say she was christened "Topo".

As the work at Blida was now finished, we were moved north nearer to Algiers onto a very comfortable farm. A few of the lads were housed in our large tent and others in various barns and small buildings. This suited the computers to be in their own premises. The farmer seemed to consider that the British Tommy should be treated the same way as the French Poilu. Each man to have a bottle of wine a day and promptly arrived with twenty bottles of white wine. This was marvellous, so we thought, until we tried the wine. If some wines are rough, this really was, so the bottles were carefully hidden and we hoped he would not notice. The obvious happened, another twenty bottles arrived and we were asked for the empties to be returned. Excuses were made and we had to find a means of placating the old man and being very much against waste I had to find the solution. The fact that I had to visit the ration dump at Blida that same day gave me the answer or the possibility. All the wine was loaded on my truck and at the dump I contacted a senior N.C.O. and told him of our predicament. I had to have at least 20 empty bottles to take back with me. His reply was a simple solution. He said "give me your ration chit, leave your truck where it is and buzz off somewhere for an hour and when you get back get in the truck and drive off without looking in the back". There were several cafes around so the spending of an hour was quite simple. His instructions were then obeyed to the letter and only on reaching the section did we find out the result. In the back were forty empty bottles and our rations but also a mass of various luxury foods we always heard about but never sampled. Not only that, there was fresh bread – a real luxury.

My future visit for rations could only follow the same pattern. The old man was happy – these British soldiers were just like Poilus and our emergency reserve of rations enlarged beautifully. Our farmer "landlord" was even more generous - he invited parts of the section in turn, probably seven or eight at a time, into his home to partake of "cous-cous" with mutton covered with a most appetizing sauce and his own brew of Benedictine. This happened once a week for each group about two or three times.

Too soon it was becoming apparent that the work was coming to an end, many A.A. sites were closing down and, as we believed, were being moved east to other African ports which were now in operation. The A.A. remaining were the more sophisticated types having more radar control. In any case Algiers was at the extreme limit of travel for German or Italian aircraft from the nearest occupied territory. In order to reach the area loads would be at a minimum.

As a consequence, those on high, decided our energy would be more profitably used in the areas further east and the instructions were to move the Company H.Q. near Constantine a journey of three hundred and fifty miles. This appeared to be unfortunate for one of our number who was down, really down, with something like influenza. There was no time to put him on sick parade where he would probably be put to bed and we would have to leave him but this is where our "landlord" once again turned up trumps. After visiting the sick one he dashed off to his residence returning with a large bottle of white wine - not the stuff he had given us before, but a good wine and a big tub of sugar. Then, under his directions, a pint of the wine was heated up but not allowed to boil. Then sugar was gently stirred in until no more could be dissolved.

The sick one was gently lifted so he could drink the concoction and was obliged to take it all – at first it was difficult until the inevitable effect took place – then it was easy. He submerged into a deep sleep so, thinking of the usual effects of over-indulgence, as we loaded the trucks, ready for an early departure, we made an allowance for his bed to be placed aboard so that he need not be wakened.

Time for us to sally forth in the morning was set at five thirty – so far as can be remembered it was ten minutes later – on top of that the confounded patient would not stay in bed but wandered round getting in everybody's way. Thus, with our grateful "au revoirs" sounding awfully British, - away we went.

This was where our real education began, not for the technical work we undertook, but for the question of living and surviving. Up till now the rations came regularly, the cook prepared meals and we lived in relative comfort. Now we had to find out how to feed the men reasonably well while on the move and to waste as little time as possible. We had two double-burner pressure cookers but just to boil water took long enough, let alone heat tins of stew or what have you. Not only that, it would be on the side of an open road.

Someone had learnt a little by hearsay in that, by placing tins of stew etc. on the exhaust manifolds and held in place by wire, they would attain reasonable heat if the journey was long enough. The only condition was not to attempt it with tinned beans as they were inclined to explode with dire results under the bonnet.

In that way a part of the cooking problem was solved and as two half-full dixies could be boiled up for tea in less time. In fact, it did not quite work out like that, as some tins did not heat up like others probably due to their position on the manifold, but we were learning, and on later trips the system was modified. Still, although some only had a warm meal we all had hot drinks, but, never the less, it needed sixty minutes to accomplish that and it was decreed as being too long. A significant fact arose during stops that no matter how bleak and bare the landscape looked, when the wheels stopped turning the inevitable little Arab boy or girl popped up from nowhere and offered “oeufs” for tea or biscuits. The remarkable thing was that should they run short of stock they would run like mad over the plough-land and come running back often falling over but even so produce eggs from the folds of the woollen garment undamaged. As the time passed these people soon learnt that our army biscuit held little respect from us so the number of packets of biscuits per egg increased. Tea, however, held its price.

The arrival at Conde Smendou, the Company H.Q. was, near enough, on time but our patient was immediately up and about with, apparently, no ill effects and was out on the town with the lads that evening as if he had only travelled five miles not three hundred plus. A mental note of that cure was registered.

The travelling had not been particularly pleasant, the weather was decidedly wintery. Those on motor cycles or in the Bren gun seat required every bit of clothing they possessed plus the gas cape on back-to-front. After settling down for a few days we were allowed time off and went to an open-air swimming pool – yes! – open air! We had to break the ice, it was only five mms thick, by diving into it and on reaching the other side, dashed to the lower one of three rocky pools and wallowed in warm water then slowly made our way to the top one which was hot. Something to do with the local hot springs, exploited by the Romans.

There an Arab waiter served us hot Arab tea and biscuit (not ours). That, we thought, was the way to fight a war.

Chapter 6

February 1943 and the American II Corps

It was on or about the 10th February 1943 when No. 1 Topo had only just arrived in Phillipeville, a port on the north coast of Algeria about fifty miles east of Constantine. The purpose was the usual A.A. survey work and the section had spent the first night in a quarry or such, used as a store for masses of stone-work from demolished Roman villas and temples. It was not a pleasant place, we felt the old gladiators resented our incursion, so the sudden order to leave was well accepted. We knew not from where our leader Lt. J. Kelsey had received the instruction but there was a hitch. The 3.7 A.A. batteries were likely to be left without co-ordinating survey results. Apparently only four batteries had moved into the area by that time and it would not be possible to establish battery pegs for those that would follow. So, our leader decided that two members of the section would go to two batteries each, mounted on motor cycles, and do our best with a prismatic compass. At least they should then shoot into the same area of sky. The arrangement became that we, the two, were supplied with a series of map references on the route the main body would take and hope to meet up before dark. What struck me was the route was going an awful long way south – much further than anything we had before.

To give the guns some bearings, however rough, the barrels would have to be set horizontal with the compass place dead centre on the massive trunnion axis to reduce a magnetic effect, and the gun traversed until a suitable prominent point was centred in the sights, such as a tall pole about a mile away or such. The gun bearing was then adjusted to that of the compass and the same proceure adopted for all the rest including the predictor.

In due course all the section met up again and went on towards our destination. The weather not being at all pleasant, riding in the Bren gun seat was far from enjoyable so others had to take turns.

Being so hurriedly torn out of our routine and having no information at all we all felt as being in limbo and I'm sure Mr. Kelsey was in the same frame of mind but there it was, we would have to wait for a contact in this southern area.

We were tired and cold when the little convoy of five 15 cwts – a P.U. and two motorcycles with its load of twenty bods pulled in on the side of the road passing through extensive conifer woodlands, apparently we were nearly there. Hardly could that be said when a crowd of American troops came down out of the woods – there must have been hundreds all looking tired and dishevelled but came round our trucks saying "say, it's good to see you Tommy". Cigarettes changed hands - whereupon they immediately showed which they preferred and on finding that our ration was seven per day straight away produced their large packs of cigarettes, and generously insisted we had some.

These men were American Rangers – their crack troops – and they had received a battering from Rommel and von Arnhem a few days previously. They believed we were the advance guard of "Brit" reinforcements. Their faces showed how disappointed they were to know we were (a) only twenty in number (b) we had only come to assist their artillery so cheered up a little on hearing that.

Right away we moved a few miles eastwards to a small place called Bou Chebka on the main road between Feriana and Tebessa and were allocated a piece of pine forest which included several two-man roofed dugouts with fireplaces, previously occupied by the Americans before the battering they had had. It took us no time at all to put them in functional order so soon smoke was rising in the still air with a promise of warmth and comfort after that long journey. None of this was achieved until both Mr. Kelsey's and the computing tents were erected with all the kit moved in and a dugout made ready for Haggis as a home and a cook house. I suppose all this took about an hour – and the evening meal prepared wafting a very welcome smell of food amongst the trees.

That evening, at long last, a meeting was held to bring us up to date. It seemed that the American Survey Section consisted at that time, of five men who were struggling to establish a microphone sound-ranging base along the top of the ridge running north from above Bou Chebka towards Kasserine using as a base for their traverse a leaning Kouba, a trig-point. Our task was to establish trig. control over the immediate front to fix a U.S. 155mm battery or such from the French trig. values mostly on points on mountains three thousand metres high, around us.

So, next morning the observers plus the two bosses went off to reconnoitre and commence the observations. My job then was to establish contacts for oil-water-petrol and, if possible, food. All except food was on hand at Bou Chebka but the U.S. Quartermaster, when I explained that our British rations would reach us in a day or so, said "just come with me and I'll let you have something to go on with, then I will send you some every day". And so he did. They were not all that happy with their own rations so by delving into our reserve I let him have some 'steak and kidney' puds, also stewed steak. They were a meat part of the diet they were missing.

The observers brought the trig. control right forward having to spend about four hours on each climb into the mountains. It established an immediate control over the ridge running north-south with Bou Chebka laying in a south gap containing the road from Tebessa to Feriana. A useful item also brought forward by the observers was a whole set of rations from observation points on the mountain tops put there by the G.I.s and even included half a side of bacon sealed in a large tin.

Further north was another gap in the dorsal ridge with the town of Kasserine to the east, a name which could bring a chill to the hearts of many a soldier, 'Brit' or 'Yank'. That road led westward to the town of Thala, where many a good man died. To the north again was Sbiba, a name on the Guards' colours, while in the south below Kasserine, was Thelepte, the scene of an abandoned American airfield then on to Feriana and further south where the road split, going east to Gafsa, where the American Rangers had had a setback, to the south again to Tozeur and the sinister Chott el Djerid, a semi solid salt lake in the bottom of which lay the remains of at least two aircraft, apparently deceived by the very flat surface inviting to an aircraft in distress. With them, a B-17 and a Boston, are most of their crews

A fairly frequent visitor to our camp was a U.S. Captain who would, at times, come to collect any survey results if available. Other times he would arrive for a mug of our tea and a biscuit but always a chat. On one occasion he arrived as the two computers, 'Taffy' Davis and Eddie Burgess, were cleaning the Bren guns. He immediately asked if the 'armourers' had come all the way down from the First Army. We then explained that all the chaps had to be able to strip and reassemble the guns and pointed out that both ways it could be done in about thirty seconds. A demonstration was put in order to prove the point. He was duly impressed and informed us that the U.S. Forces had three jams to cater for, and one was lack of ammunition.

All the observers had departed and likewise Mr. Kelsey with the 2/i.c., so we, the computers, busied ourselves with some tidying -up of the computing tent etc. After about an hour or so one of the drivers brought my attention to some fire going on. We listened to it for a while.

I knew that to the S.W. there was a company of American Engineers with the advance guard of their Survey lot while to our south were some Derbyshire Yeomanry. Also, as the enemy were at Gafsa and in the habit of patrolling to the foot of our escarpment we thought it prudent to investigate. I put the cook and draughtsman also the fitter on camp alert with instructions to load a truck with all the computing records and gear and to depart should anything happen.

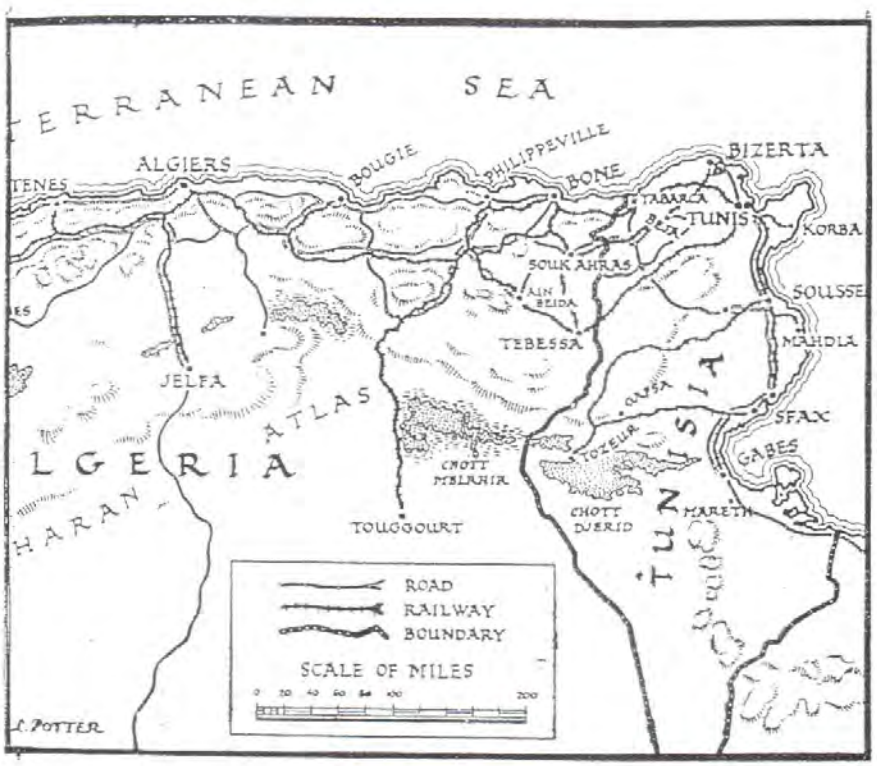
With two computers and a driver armed with a Bren, rifles, pistols and tommy-gun we proceeded through the trees aiming at the sound which had become persistent. There was, however, no need to be alarmed as we sneaked up on two G.I.s shooting with Garand rifles into a dugout. They had no idea we were there until I stood up in full view and promptly received a ricochet from the dugout into my left shoulder. Fortunately, my battledress contained the impact but a significant bruise, the size of a .30 calibre, developed by morning. The G.I.s were a bit shame-faced and promptly returned to their camp, so peace was again upon us.

A few times I had been doing some unauthorised practice with my Tommy-gun. From the early days I had had little confidence in the weapon, as while shooting at targets in Scotland it seemed that the bullet took an awful long time to get to the card. It was with some surprise I found my supply of cartridges extremely low so considered our American friends might help.

The Engineers' camp was only about half a mile away so made a contact and was immediately invited for a coffee and doughnut. During a pleasant chat one of the N.C.O.s stated that his father was a civil engineer contractor in the States, would I like a job there after the war? This struck me as peculiar but he explained there was a shortage of trained surveyors and gave me his name and how to contact him or his father later. Then, after I had requested if they could supply me with 200 rounds of tommy-gun ammo, presented me with a box of 2000 and a truck to take me back to our camp and would not take no for an answer.

The work went well by keeping to our new system, appreciatively aided by the newly acquired German computer forms (tear-off pads) and by early a.m. 16th February a complete set of information; battery and gun co-ordinates – bearings to points long and short distances, and also a fix on one end of the sound -ranging base, to ease their troubles, was ready and collected by the American battery captain by 7.30 a.m. The battery was set in the Bou Chebka pass. On receiving the list the Battery Commander, a Colonel, immediately invited most of the Section, particularly Mr. Kelsey, to witness a shoot. His order was a very simple one "twenty rounds shoot" with guns already laid onto a target we expected the usual "No. 1 gun shoot and observe". We were devastated so all our fingers were tightly crossed.

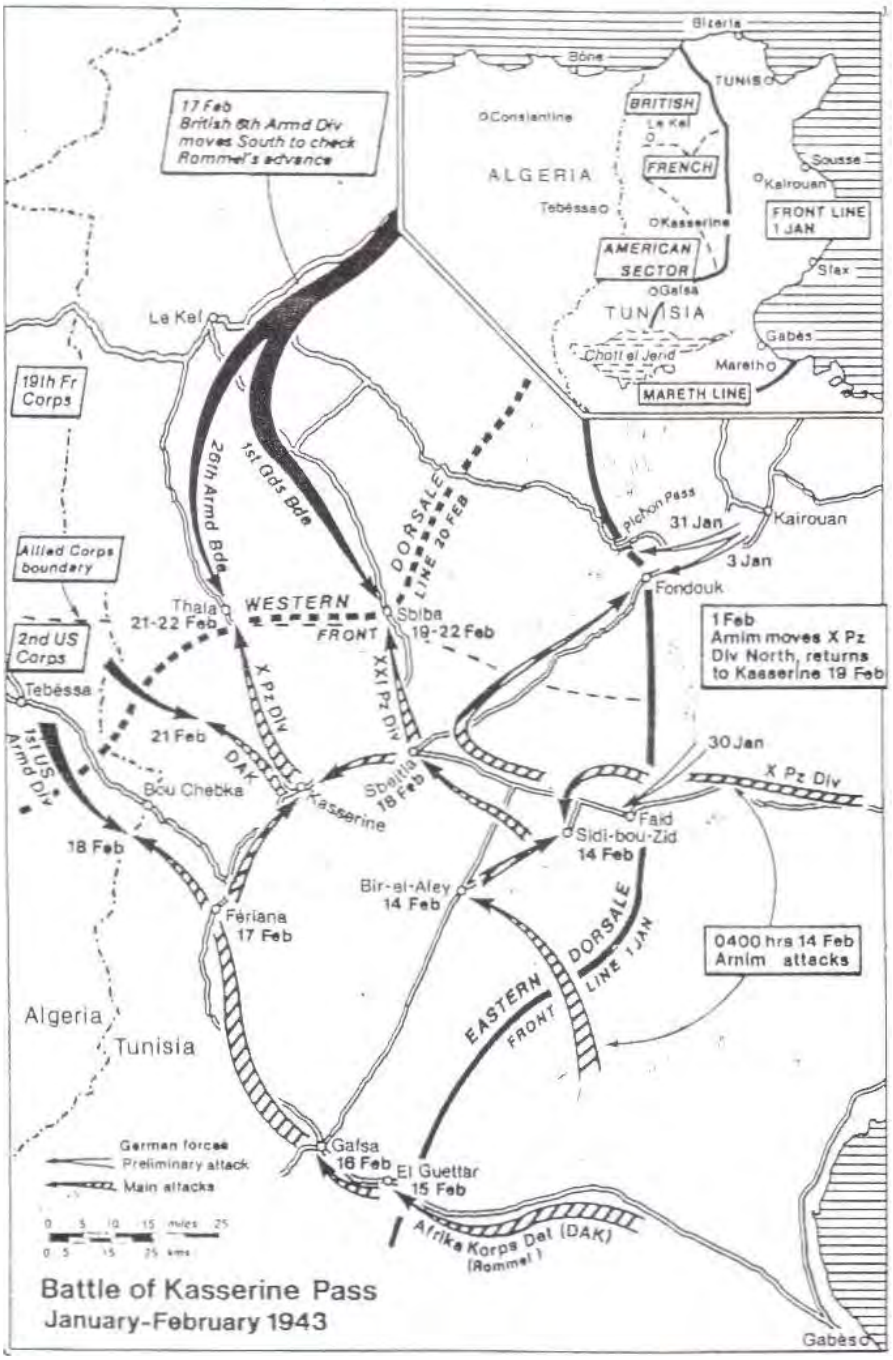
However, all landed in, or nearly so, into an 88mm battery, so



we were informed later. Result was after that, we could do no wrong and Mr. Kelsey was promised a mention in despatches but whether or not that was forgotten in the hiatus of the following few days' happenings is not known.

The next morning, the 17th, at 4.30 a.m. the sentry woke me – having had little sleep I was not amused – and got really irate when he said, "The guns are going back" – to which I replied "Don't be daft, they have only just been xxxxxx fixed". Thereupon I received a suitably worded invitation to go see for myself, so with greatcoat and boots over my "nightwear" covered the 500 yards to the road just in time to see guns numbers three and four obviously heading in the direction of Tebessa, i.e., westwards and away from the enemy.

The situation was, if not odd – serious, so sent the sentry to wake Bill Harris, the Sgt and I woke the batman to stir Mr. Kelsey. There followed a panic move in a true section efficiency. Everything had to be loaded and within an hour we were on the road moving 2 to 3 miles back to a road junction where, while Mr. Kelsey went off to ascertain the true military situation and "Haggish" set about preparing a quick breakfast as we set about loading Bren gun mags – priming grenades – issuing bandoliers of .303 to the drivers – loading tommy-gun mags and pistols then making sure all weapons were clean and ready. It was a matter of waiting for Mr. Kelsey to return with news and that wait was somewhat of a tension.



It transpired that Rommel and von Arnheim had attacked first from Gafsa towards our area at Bou Chebka, and, from further north from Fondouk towards Sbeitla. There appeared to be some disagreement in the enemy camp which was overruled by Kesselring who then ordered the attack to Tebessa via the Bou Chebka pass to be stopped and all efforts to concentrate on the Kasserine pass and move onto Thala thus making a serious threat to rear of the First Army.

That was most fortunate for us or our half hour move would have resulted in our capture. Fortunately, an American Engineer Company, our previous neighbour, move into our area as a blocking force while we were withdrawn all the way back to Tebessa. We were apparently too expensive to be lost to the enemy and, in any case, someone had a job for us to do. We were allowed a day to ourselves and had an opportunity to inspect American Tank-Busting equipment which had suffered badly after contact with Rommel's tanks who enticed them into traps and knocked merry whatsits out of them.

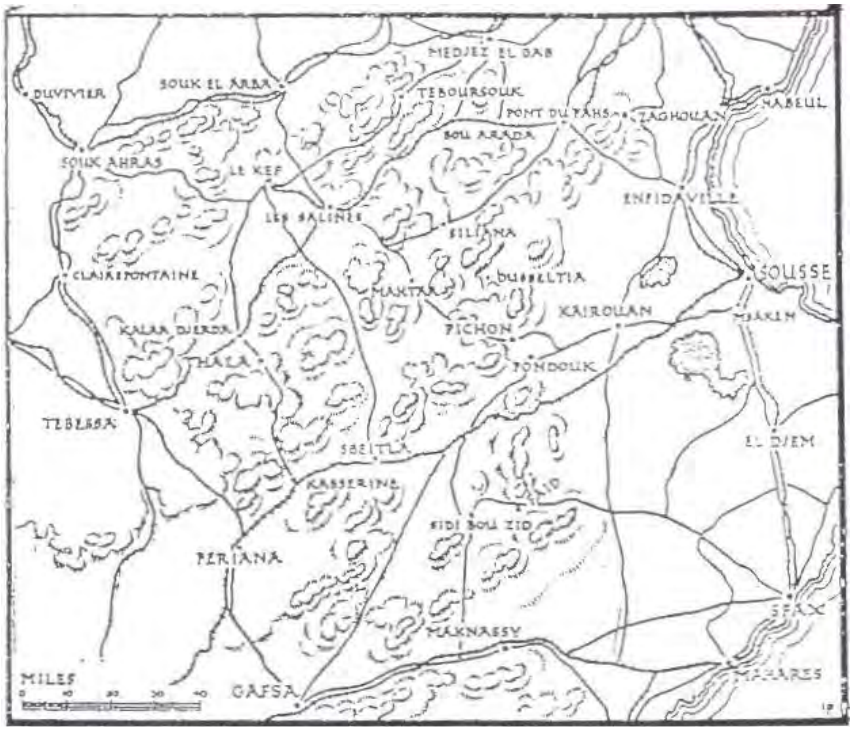
Our employment was due to be a twenty-four hour nonstop stint, working on large scale plans of the axis of advance proposed for the very near future but did not indicate to us just where it was. The purpose was to mark on the gridded sheets reasonably selected points at random, prick through and mark the co-ordinates on the back of each of these points. This would provide for artillery fire control during the advance to position guns and targets and to lay a protractor on those points read the angles and from that deduce co-ordinates, bearings, and distances. It would give a much quicker result which might be a better answer than from co-ords from a map.

By the time all the sheets were complete the section was exhausted and the American response very gratefully appreciated. The response was in the shape of breakfast being serve to each participant by G.Is. Bacon, egg, sweet corn, tinned sliced peaches, tinned cream and coffee. Unfortunately, no tea. Also, real bread and real butter.

The lads settled down for sleep but only too soon were aroused to prepare for another move. The military situation had been resolved sooner than expected as Rommel had been evicted from the Kasserine Pass and was retreating northwards towards Tunis Thus, after enjoying the American kindness and appreciation, we went from this place bearing a considerable addition to our reserve supply of rations and cigarettes but their pipe tobacco was, according to John, not really appreciated. And we began our return "home" to the First Army.

Chapter 7

25th February 1943 to 8th May 1943



Northwards we travelled avoiding Thala as there was much clearing up to be done there with the usual post-battle confusion. We headed to Le Kef and thence to Souk el Arba, the central Souk the others being, to the west, Souk Arras and to the east, Souk el Khemis. It was on this last stretch we ran into "Messerschmit Alley" and everyone was tense watching the skies and reading the warning signs. The Military Police had put up such warnings as "If in doubt – get out" – "It's NOT one of ours" and so on but the real warnings were there in the shape of wrecked and burnt -vehicles. The written signs were really superfluous. However, our twin Brens had a day off and the gunner breathed a sigh of relief.

The journey had been about 120 miles to Beja just to the east of the Algiers boundary and next along from Souk el Khemis. We were particularly pleased to find the billet allocated to us was a very pleasant bungalow in a street of similar buildings. It was just right in size – even sufficient to accommodate "Haggish" in a large kitchen, but then the light rain indicated the bugbear of our new residence. Bombing and shelling had displaced all the roof tiles and were not capable of keeping us dry as the wet floors and the few bits of wet furniture indicated.

Although roof-tiling was never in a sapper's training schedule, up onto the roof the lads went and just before nightfall the roof was watertight. So, with all the unloading completed and everything made ready for the next day's work we settled down for one of Haggish's fine meals followed by a natter before sleep.

Next morning it was reasonably dry so we could make an inspection of the surroundings. The house was on the end of a row of about twenty domestic properties complete with well-kept front gardens and over the road was a terrace of either offices or small warehouses but just over from us was a small square fronting a 5/6 storied building while further along our side were more houses. The town, rather knocked about, seemed to be very pleasant, and boasted a decent-sized hospital, which, in due course, became a necessity to us.

One day, after we had been there for about a week, besides being a brilliant day, it was discovered there was a lapse in our workload even though, previously, we had been going flat out out. Consequently, a dog fight between Spits and 109s occupied every bit of our attention. Of course there was always a commentator, who was saying "look, he's into that cloud with a Spit on his tail" and so on until all the aircraft had disappeared, apparently looking for other sky areas to play in. Suddenly a voice piped up "Are these the ones you meant?" We all said "They've gone now, what are you talking about?". There was a bright lad standing at the corner of the bungalow looking at right angles to our line of sight, straight down the road. We all looked and there were two 109s coming up the road just about roof level in line astern. As we watched the rear one suddenly dipped and let go a bomb. I must have been hypnotised for all the others had disappeared. Even now I can see that bomb travelling in a near horizontal trajectory abot15-feet above the road at a high rate of knots. It was only about a 50 kilo size but I was glad to recover and move into a more sensible posture and join the others face down with hands over my ears. We were plastered with dirt and stones as it burst about a hundred yards up the road in an empty patch. Some of the lumps descending upon us were rather painful but caused no real injuries. There was, however, an effect which was most unfortunate – all the rooftiles were again dislodged. So, before bedtime and before our Sergeant could read us a bedtime story, up onto the roof we had to go. A notice was therefore displayed asking all 109s to buzz off. One thing that stuck in my mind was that the bomb was not at all nice and shiny silver as one would believe – it was very muddy or discoloured.

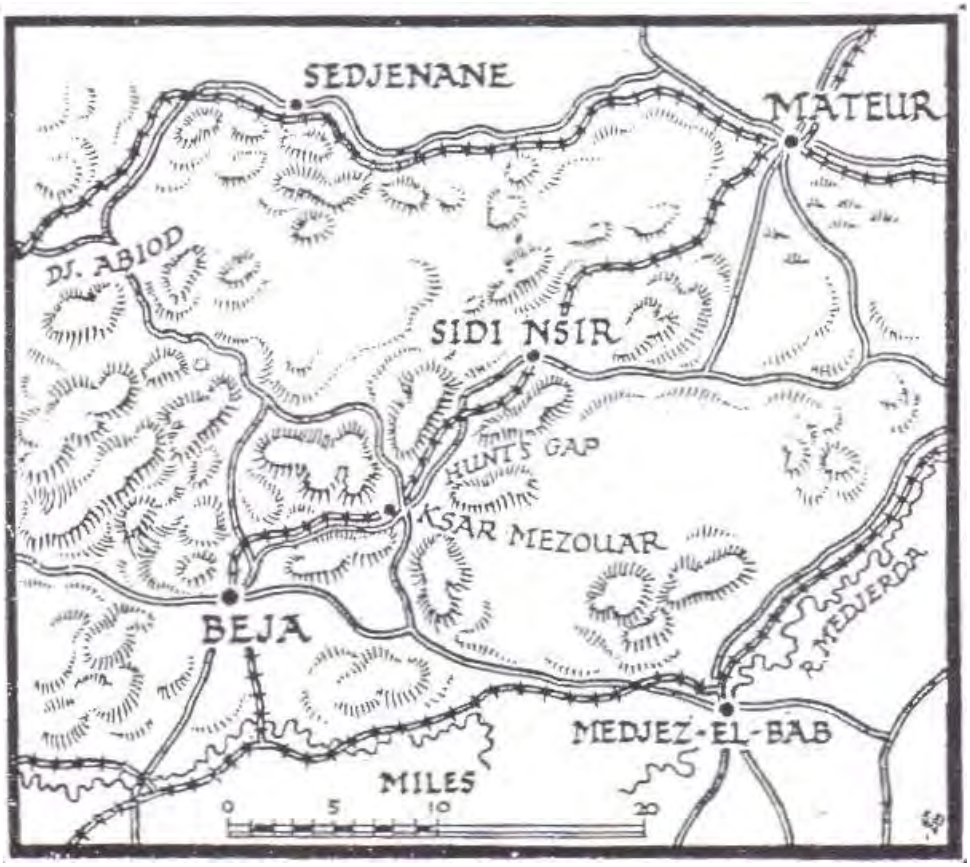
A bit later, about the 2nd April, on a bright and sunny day the three observer trucks complete with crews and accompanied by Mr. Kelsey and Sgt Bill Harris met members of the 5th R.A. Survey to arrange a typical programme for the day's work. All this happened on the road to Dj Abiod which wound between hillocks and beside a bridge over a deep wadi. The situation probably seemed safe from a visitation from the 109s.

That, however, was not to be, they were "jumped" by those very same pests resulting in all of them going to ground as best they could. John Armytage found himself sitting in the middle of the road with his back against the rear wheel of his truck and his hands clasped around his knees while some rather nasty things were buzzing and bouncing off the road surface. His comments later were that he felt damned stupid but fortunately no one was hurt. One A.A. driver considered that the bottom of the wadi was as safe place as one could want but on reaching that situation found his truck had likewise decided and joined him. There was considerable consternation in the R.A. camp.

The day after that episode I had returned from the task of rationing and was busy off-loading into the kitchen when we became aware of a tinkling sound after some American Spits went overhead in pursuit of some Me. 109's. Investigation revealed quite a few cannon shell cases in the road but before we could collect same the young Arab boys were there scrambling and fighting for them. It made us realise that our A.A. defence with the twin Brens was useless with the truck parked under a camouflage net. It took us ages to get the thing out and missed a chance to have a go at some of the 109's.

We considered the target had to be within 800 feet for the guns to stand a chance.

The observing crews and the Bosses had long since departed so we decided to move the A.A. truck out from under the net and, of course, all aircraft had vanished. We waited and eventually a 109 arrived going like mad with a Spit on his tail.



It looked as if he could come within range, so we hurriedly got into position – the Spit had to be avoided at all costs but the 109 came on getting lower and lower so I opened up with the prescribed three-second bursts and at once realised it was more than the 109 in my sights. It was the local chimney pots which were flying off in all directions. To keep the "entente cordial" we had to desist.

In the meantime, our Sergeant had had a tumble while riding the motorcycle and had damaged his elbow. At first it seemed a slight wound but, as later events showed, it was rather more serious and had more consequences than we could realise.

Our mail only reached us about once a week through the offices of A.D.D.S. but occasionally a 3-tonner would come right through probably bringing some of the printers of H.Q. staff for a few days out. Whenever we could, on such occasions, we would take our visitors forward with the observers for a day but not all of them would do so. We did point out that it was unlikely they would have to fight the enemy and that they could leave their guns behind. It must be understood that most of our guests were very keen and were very helpful. Mines were the essential danger they had to watch for and it was the "S" mine that was the most dangerous.

It was either at Beja or Testour that Mr. Kelsey and Bill Harris went out in the P.U. with Dvr. Holt, the batman, for a recce. They had managed to get a short way up the hill but then had to do the rest on foot leaving Dvr Holt to check for mines round the car although they were nor really expected. On doing just that and finding nothing he thought perhaps he should look below as there could be some under the car. As he got down, he glanced at his extended foot and saw a puff of smoke. He had the sense to run round the other side of the P.U. and as he got down there was a tremendous bang and, as he later said "it was like five house bricks hitting me".

The near side of the car was absolutely riddled with holes about a quarter of an inch in diameter yet not a piece of glass was broken. Although the hospital tried to locate Dvr Holt's pieces of metal they were that small they had to give up, so he must still have them, but they must be a bit rusty by now. The mine was a German "S" mine which had three small wire antennae which, when touched, caused a charge to blow an inner cup three feet into the air to explode sending two-hundred ball bearings in all directions.

For some reason or other, perhaps to give me a change of scenery, it was suggested that I might like to go to No. 2 Topo Section at Djebl Abiod, north of Beja, for a visit, documents may have been involved, I cannot remember. So, mounting my rusty motor cycle I went off out of Beja but a few miles along the road I found the surface extremely bad, probably from earlier shelling etc., so had to be careful. Ahead the road did a sharp left turn with a bank along its outside edge and even as I looked the top of the bank seemed to lift in a dust cloud and immediately I received a solid thump on my left shoulder which took my hand off the handlebars. Thus, the machine and I parted company and I bounced along the road with the bike doing likewise in pursuit and catching up rapidly. As it came near threatening to engulf me, I kicked it with my right foot but missed and thus rolled over whereupon it dropped right on the back of my leg and as we were still moving it ground my knee into the road.

The situation was far from pleasant, moreover I could think of no way of extrication as the machine still held my leg to the ground. Then, as if from nowhere, several hands were lifting the cycle, then myself. It was a team of R.M.C. lads waiting behind a house which was surrounded by a cactus hedge and they were equipped with an ambulance – how lucky I was.

There seemed to be no reason for their presence except that away across the flat land to the east our enemy lay ensconced in the hills – the "Ten Hills". They sorted me out, put me in the ambulance, and, as one rode the motor cycle, with difficulty, took me to hospital in Beja. As an officer examined my knee he said "I'll have to put a stitch in that", but a corporal looked at the white bone showing through the mess said, "He'll have a job doing that – leave it to me". He then cleaned the wound, almost filled it with "Novocaine" and placed a thick cotton wool pad soaked in "Acriflavin" over it with a loose bandage. I asked the corporal what the three lads were doing out there with the ambulance. Apparently there had been several incidents such as mine plus a few from enemy action. As those three were still waiting to take me "home" I asked if they would like a cigarette. It seemed they had to work sort of shifts in all weathers and it could be extremely boring, also they had just finished their week's supply of 'cigs'. I emptied my pockets finding about ten American but they would accept any sort. They would be at the house and cactus in two days' time so I took some of our Tebessa loot to help them out. It was amazing how quickly that knee healed up but I could not appreciate the more serious result would be later. The bruise developed from a shape about the size of a 20mm cannon shell into a large area something around nine inches across. After the first few days the stiffness reduced and gradually the bruise disappeared. Knowing full well the ribbing I would be due to receive from the others in the Section such as "Time you learned to ride the bike" – "Fell off again?" I reckoned that any explanation I offered would be treated as an excuse so decided to accept the ribbing and leave it at that.

On a sunny day, one of few, a little information was required in a hurry for the day's work so two bookers were sent out to check whether or not certain stations were visible from that point, which was, fortunately, easily accessible from the road. Before leaving they were advised or reminded of two most elementary points of safety, (1) Do not park your vehicle in a prominent place. (2) Do not show your person too much above the skyline.

It was inevitable – they and the truck were open to view by anyone and everybody and as one might expect they were "jumped" by a 109. The ground was covered with a weed about 6 inches deep and as the two ran looking for a hidey-hole from the 109 were pleased to see the top of a slit trench ahead, so took off together in a mighty leap into what they expected – safety. As the 109 screamed by overhead without firing they found themselves standing in a trench only 6-inches deep, feeling dreadfully naked. Fortunately, the only damage was four badly sprained ankles and one driver with a large bump on his head from the sudden contact with an exhaust pipe.

The next activity for our observers took place near Hunt's Gap an area previously of interest to the enemy. The Gap was about ten miles north-east of Beja above Ksar Mezouar. It seemed that the Germans had an intent to strike through the Gap towards Beja. It must have been near the end of February when our lads moved into that area during one of the German attacks. On seeing the northern approaches to the Gap through a "Tavi" telescope there appeared to be some large heavy vehicles moving about. It was difficult to tell what they were as there was a great deal of artillery fire landing around them, mostly 25-pounder stuff.

However, the guns held them and they retired leaving many of these large vehicles behind. They, according to prisoners taken there, had never experienced gunfire like it but what we had considered to be large lorries were, in fact, the latest addition to the German tank strength, the Tiger tank with its large 88mm gun. It was monstrous and seemed impregnable. The lads were mighty glad to get back in one piece, they said the gunfire, even experienced from our side, was frightening.

From then on it was not possible to move towards Medjez el Bab on the direct road from Beja as all the hills above Oued Zarga to Medjez were held by the Enemy and would shortly be the subject of "the battle for the ten hills"! Consequently, when I was required to move the section to the new location while Mr. Kelsey and Bill Harris concerned themselves on other matters, I had to use a rather minor road to reach the map reference the boss had given me, needless to say, that reference was plotted and replotted and checked again. So the section seniors went off on their mission and we on ours.

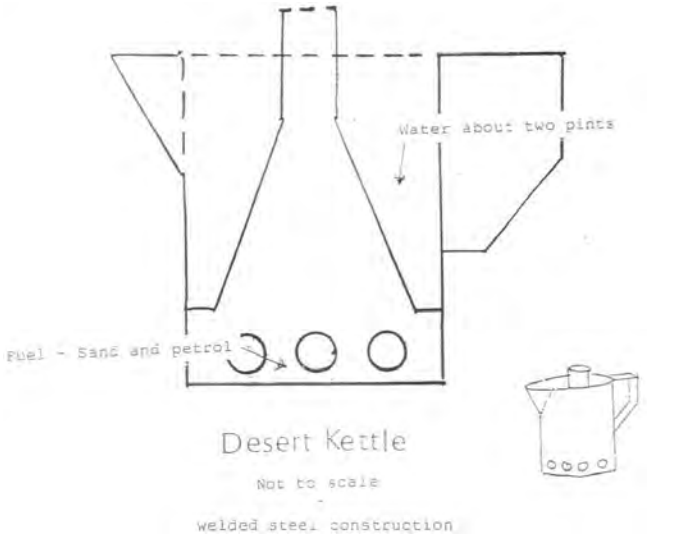
There were several moments of doubt, when in all probability, the lads would mutter to themselves "there he's lost us again" but we pressed on and reached the aiming point, when we came upon some of our very nice soldiers who were digging away on the top of a bank alongside the road we were looking for. The situation was not appealing, to the east the land sloped down to an enormous plain which seemed to have a threatening atmosphere. I could not help but think this was a most unlikely place for the section to set up camp so had a word with the soldiers who turned out to be Lord Lovat's Scouts and were digging in for the night. These military stalwarts were not particularly concerned with our presence but did volunteer the information that as they were digging in we could use the gap in their minefield but would we please inform them when we left so they could close it, also not to stay there too long as Goering's Jaegers were in the habit of patrolling in that area.

My mind was somewhat in turmoil but I had to decide what to do next. The reference was obviously wrong but where was I to go? Just along the road on one side was a hedge so we moved the trucks about turn and beside the hedge which would, at least, give some cover and decided to wait until dusk, another hour or so, then, if the bosses did not materialise by that moment, we would up sticks and retire behind the minefield and find a place for the night. The waiting was nerve-wracking. We could not unload nor cook a meal except for individual brew-ups with cold bully or cheese and biscuit. It did not seem so bad as time went on with nothing happening, even cigarettes were carefully guarded, when a sudden violent explosion ripped through the calm evening and everyone went down to ground level. As more such bangs happened, we investigated and found just up the road some twenty-five pounders handing evening hate to Jerries across the Goubellat Plain for that was where we were in front of the front line – no place for surveyors.

Our relief can well be imagined to see the Bosses come onto the road through the minefield and made an about turn giving a signal for us to follow. It could only have been a few minutes before my deadline as we followed. As I had to take the rear-guard to inform the Scouts we were all through and they could close the gap my driver refused to drive through the minefield in the dark so that job was left to me.

We went through like an express train and went on to a wooded area for the night, the trees made a shield allowing the cook to provide us with a much-needed hot meal before settling down for a sleep. Something always puzzled me after that although nothing was ever said. If I had the wrong co-ords, how did they find me? A later examination of the maps showed that those co-ords given me were about 5 miles to the east of the true position which was our real destination – Testour.

I have made no mention of an extremely valuable piece of equipment we had acquired. It was a desert kettle – the person, probably a German, who invented it did us all a great service. Although this thing could only hold about two pints of water, with sand and petrol in its base it would boil that in a few minutes. To make a good quantity of tea the half dixies would be heated up and just before they were ready the kettle would be lit up and that boiling water used to mash the tea and added to the bulk thus providing sufficient for the whole section.



Testour camp was just to the south of the main road Tebour-souk to Medjez in a small area surrounded with olive trees. We were really getting into our stride and co-operation with Fifth Survey R.A. was very good and A.D.D. Survey was encamped up a wadi a mile or so along the road. There was plenty to do, not only for twenty-five pounders but also the 5.5 howitzers. Most of the gunnery was directed at the "ten hills" previously mentioned. The camp site was well-equipped with slit trenches round the perimeter. As my job would go well into the night and made me the last person into bed it would only result in disturbance for anyone I shared a bivouac with. Not only that, I would be entitled to have additional sleep after first parade and the observers sent on their way. Therefore, I chose one of the slit trenches, a clean one, half back-filled it and packed the earth down – then placed my camp bed therein and covered over the top with a piece of canvas. Not only was I remote but also immune from all sorts of camp noises and even from air raids

The work at Testour was about the most interesting we had done – even to the computers who did not have the daily advantage of being in visual contact with the war in our locality.

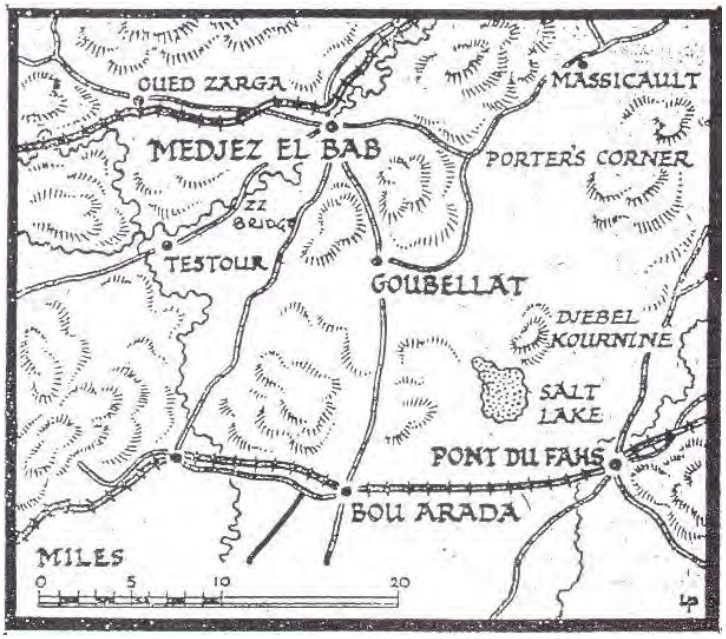
There was a considerable interruption in our flow of work when we had the remarkable shock of a visit by the O.C. of the 518 – Major Harris himself. But as he was looking around our camp site with Lt Kelsey he commented on the sound of gunfire and explosions not so far away. There had been a recent attack by von Arnhem which was stopped but the Major considered it would be too late to form a defence if the enemy were on our doorstep.

With absolute calmness the Major brought his military skills into action and with our leader set about his defensive dispositions. On the south-eastern corner of the camp was a sugar-loaf hill about forty feet high with a slit trench up top. Into that was placed a team under John Armytage with a Bren gun and a rifleman in support – to complement that the other Bren with Cpl Denley was put, also with a team in a slit trench, on the south-west corner and the remaining complement, except drivers, disposed in slit trenches around the perimeter with all remaining arms including the stock of war loot.

The date must have been about the 20th April. All the trucks were moved towards the road and behind a bank facing the way out. The section braced itself for the impact of von Arnhem's troops – and waited – and waited – when suddenly a certain person gave an almighty gastronomical sound and found all weapons trained in his direction.

So, again we waited and it must have been a hour or so when we all began to think that "haggis" the cook should have been preparing the midday meal – but was not - then a suggestion was made that at least he could make us a cup of tea and in view of the fact that von Arnhem had still not appeared that was allowed to proceed. Here it must be explained that our sergeant, Bill Harris, was in hospital for treatment to his elbow which was refusing to heal after an incident on a motor-cycle and that I had been made up to that acting and, fortunately, paid rank.

Even as the first mugs of tea began to arrive there was a shout from the lookout on the hill that, on an open patch of ground, about half a mile away, troops were playing football. It transpired that a Guards unit had been evaluating some captured enemy equipment, hence the explosive noises, and had then gone on to take advantage of a flat field for a game of football. In the light of this a stand down was ordered, to our relief.



So then everyone relaxed – a meal was put into preparation and an effort was made to repair the loss of a day's work. Very pleased with his handling of the situation – totally unexpected on the visit – the Major took his departure and expressed his appreciation of our attitude and ability. A rough estimate of dates then was that it was about the 23rd April, later confirmed, and that some of the "Ten Hills" had been taken which enabled the battle for "Longstop" to come nearer to fruition.

It was so sudden as all totally unexpected events can be – disaster came down upon us. Mr. Kelsey would, each evening, go forward to the Assistant Deputy Director of Survey and Fifth Survey R.A. to arrange the next day's stint. Usually he would be back by 10-30 to 11-00 – but this time he did not take the P.U. but went on a motor-cycle – the one which had caused both Bill Harris and me so much trouble. By 11-30 John Armytage and I were worried by his non-appearance so walked down to the road in the hope of seeing him but what we got was something vastly different. An ammunition convoy was moving up towards Medjez in preparation for the scheduled attacks on the remaining "Ten Hills", but up above was at least one marauding enemy aircraft. Due to the faint light on the road he could distinguish dark objects like trucks moving on it so the M.P.s were directing the convoy by whistle signals so that after the plane had passed over, would bring the trucks out of the trees and along the road and as the plane approached would whistle the convoy back into the trees again.

This time, as John and I watched, there was a difference, a second aircraft sneaked in from the direction of Medjez while the trucks began to move out of the trees. He must have spotted something and dropped a small bomb which landed in soft soil to the east of the road but then continued to unload a long string of small fragmentation bombs heading directly at us.

We made a rapid dash from the road and got down just in time as the shrapnel went whistling overhead and as soon as the plane cleared the area got up expecting to see a lot of damage. Surprisingly, there was none to be seen and as there was no sign of the Boss thought it best to go to bed and have the sentry and Topo wake us as soon as he arrived. It must have been about one a.m. The enemy had failed to illuminate the area with a burning vehicle so we thought everything would be alright. The bomb run gave me much to think about as we were sleeping in small bivouacs ……..

[*Text missing in original manuscript*]

The shrapnel could be devastating so considered we should dig our beds deeper and put kitbags round if there was room.

About 3-00 a.m. the sentry wakened me to say a D.R. had come from the Advance Dressing Station. Mr. Kelsey was there and in a bad way so the batman and I gathered his small kit plus a note-book and dashed off. We found him laid out among a row of wounded and was obviously badly knocked about so I had a quick word with the Doctor who said Mr. Kelsey had several arm and leg bones broken plus concussion but would not take any more pain-killers until he had seen me. The main thing that entered my mind was that he had somehow been involved in the air raid but I had to keep my stay as short as possible but he did manage to describe the location of the A.D.D.S's tent as being up the third wadi to the left of the road to Medjez after the zig-zag bridge over the river Medjerda. Also, he passed on to me his notes of the next day's work and as he was beginning to worry whether or not I had sufficient information and was getting confused I thought it better to let the Doctor give him treatment to allay the pain and give him some peace. In order to set his mind at rest we told him we would bring more of his kit to the hospital in Beja as soon as possible and that all he had requested would be done. After the Doctor had given him the injection we saw him subside and relax so departed leaving him to the tender mercies of the A.D.S.

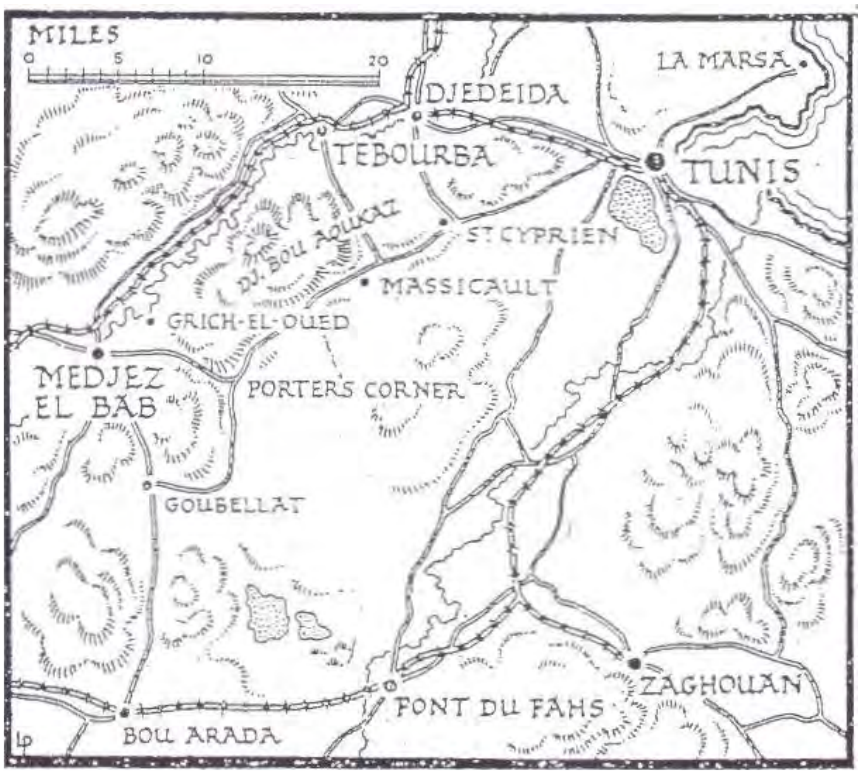
It could hardly be described as simple to find a wadi amongst others in the dark so it took us some time but met with success – it was just as Mr. Kelsey had described and our news was a very hefty blow to A.D.D.S. His immediate reaction was "But he has hardly been gone from here". We had now lost our two leaders with Bill Harris in hospital so it was decided the section would join the A.D.D.S. in his wadi but it seemed to me that a lot of time would be lost so suggested that, as I had the Boss's notes, to send the observer crews first and let them leave what kit they could with him and go on out to carry out the programme. The rest of the section would need to take longer but could follow up very soon after – in any case I would need my breakfast to cope with this new situation. It was all agreed and more of the leader's kit was sent via the batman to the hospital with instructions to get a word with him and to say the Company was being informed. After that our new camp was established.

The day and the work went smoothly much to our surprise but the batman, Dvr Noble, had unsettling news. He had been unable to contact our leader as he was in the operating theatre at the time and that Mr. Kelsey was likely to be sent to Algiers very soon, at least during the next few days.

However, as is often said, disasters go in threes and so it was for us, but in this instance two arrived almost together. One booker, Bert Simpson, was taken violently ill with a stomach disorder, it was that serious, in spite of the treatment of the Dr. Collis-Brown's, mixture I gave him would not stop it so he had to sit no more than ten feet from our new toilet. Then, on top of that, Spr Evans, another booker, had twisted his knee the day before and now it was up like a balloon. He was taken immediately to the Dressing Station who sent him back saying that apart from wrapping they had applied there was nothing more to be done except to put him on light duties. Some chance of that, at least he would be capable of computing.

In the meantime, I had, partly by chance, met up with a Sergeant in the Military Police who was on duty the night it all happened to Mr. Kelsey. It appeared that when our leader crossed the River Medjerda on what we called the zig-zag bridge, so called because the road ran parallel to the river then turned across it and then ran parallel on the other side, he had run into the front of an ammunition 3-tonner. According to the driver, as he turned out in obeyance to the whistle signal that indicated the enemy aircraft had left the area there was a bright flash and, an explosion, followed by a tremendous bang on the front of his truck and then a series of smaller bangs. He waited, absolutely stiff with fright expecting his full load of twenty-five pounder H.E. to go up. When they checked up they found Mr. Kelsey and the M/c lying in front of the truck and the conclusion was that the bomb which had exploded in the soil at the side of the road had caused the lieutenant to swerve into the truck. It is therefore my contention that, in spite what has been said elsewhere, he was wounded from enemy action.

The section was now down to eight and a half of technical strength which meant that in order to continue our field work the computers had to act as bookers. Although others were willing to stand-in for computing it was not the same as with the experts. Therefore a plan hammered out between the A.D.D.S. and the Fifth R.A. was put into action where with what strengths we could musterfor field observing would be used in conjunction with the R.A. then all hands would be put to computing. The results were the absolute priority as the battle for "Longstop" was due to start any day so full cooperation was essential.



In accordance with this arrangement the first observer had departed and the others about to follow when the next disaster arrived. In all probability that should not have been said, I do so with hindsight. The Company C.S.M. had arrived.

Little should be said here as the C.S.M's very mistaken enthusiasm to uphold the name of the 518 created an action which was tantamount to a disobedient change of the agreed programme for the day. Although I fully informed him of the decided stint and that one truck had already left, to my amazement, he wanted all available men to go out and compute in the field. This would mean loading tables and chairs and adding-machine, paper, forms, tables etc. onto two trucks and having to inform observers and the D.R. of the locations which had not even been fixed. Moreover we were reduced to one M/C. My feelings were very forcefully made known to him, but I was helpless to prevent his action – the A.D.D.S. was not available so I could not refer to him. It seemed the C.S.M's lack of appreciation of our state was due to his experience being from the days of peace and as so many have found out to their grief such practices so often founder during active service conditions. He did not realise it was too late to arrange meeting points between our people and the R.A.

A full attempt was made to make his scheme work but it failed, and it must be understood he later apologise to me so I could only surmise that a rocket had been received from A.D.D.S. However we all settled down to recover what we could from the day and, as the duplicate copies of the observed angles had been brought in, with the R.A. we managed to conclude the required results, although a little late.

Like a good sport the C.S.M. joined in during the following days with the work and by dint of his help we were able to operate independently of the R.A., in other words as in a normal function. It would seem that Major Harris, on being informed that Simpson and Evans had recovered, and the section could function in all respects recalled the C.S.M. He seemed a little excited that he had experienced something more than the usual Company routine.

"Banana Ridge" to the south-east of Medjez and the west of "Porters Corner" was one of our choice observing points it was not an original trigonometrical point but by resection a point had been established there as a much more convenient position than the actual trig point higher up which was more open to enemy view. In any case it was a useful addition to the control. It did have a drawback to its use as its only access was along a track behind the ridge, well worn by many vehicles during wet weather the liquid slurry was at least twelve inches deep and as trucks moved along each tyre had its own bow wave and D.R.'s were in a difficult position if they could not ride with their feet up. In contrast, in dry weather the dust was almost as deep as the slurry and again tyres had their own bow wave. That should appear to be not difficult but the infantry manning the ridge would create hell as you travelled along because your vehicle would be putting up a dust cloud several hundred feet high – a very suitable target for enemy mortars or guns.

Aircraft, theirs and ours, would often cavort above us and one day the inevitable happened when a 109 was shot down. We were watching from our camp site in the wadi with a clear blue sky. Our interest was intense as we watched the German pilot quietly swinging down in his parachute. As he neared us we became assured he would drop into our camp or very nearly. So, grabbing my tommy-gun, climbed up the hill ready to catch him as he landed.

This he did into the wadi next door and as he did so two hundred men rose out of the greenery all pointing guns and surrounding him whereupon his hands shot up into the air. Having surrendered he then tried to unbuckle his harness but every gun jerked at him so up the hands went again. He tried nothing more until an officer arrived and took him away. So my moment of glory sadly sagged.

We were well into April and the weather was improving, the last of the "Ten Hills" had been cleared and preparations against "Longstop! The Djebel above Aoukaz were well in hand. Our own work had been concluded and all required trig stations were confirmed for the R.A. and it was entirely up to them. We must wait for the hill to be cleared as it was a necessary major observation point for the preparation of the final assault on Tunis itself.

There had been many attempts on the hill – a lot of men had been lost and as many times the efforts were rebuffed. At one time the drain on manpower was so severe M/P's were going round collecting units from all over the place. Our wadi had been so raided – that morning it was difficult picking a way through the masses of tents etc. going down to the road but on return found it entirely empty – leaving one's expectations that our little camp would also be denuded. Perhaps they did not penetrate far enough but it makes one shudder at the thought we may have been in that last push up that hill.

Our Leader was still very sadly missed we were certain he would have wanted to watch the assault. The guns, both 25 pdrs and the 5.5s hammered away all day and all night when the gun barrels glowed and flights of bombers kept arriving over the hill to bomb. It was obvious that as one flight bombed the others were either bombing-up or flying in between.

Eventually the hill fell after a surprising resistance by the enemy so we moved up to a flat area part way up the hill with a track leading there and a farmhouse at the far end against a cliff face. There was a trig point on the edge of the flat space overlooking the valley and, to the south, the other two trigs occupied by the other two observers on hills giving a strong base to swing the control towards Tunis. Our instructions were to make as much noticeable activity as possible as one officer put it – "Chinese Warfare". My situation at the time was with John Armytage on "Longstop" while on the hill immediately south was Cpl Denley and further south was L/Cpl McBain. While waiting for things to develop I did a little investigating and found a German halftrack badly damaged but in the racks at sides were some good-looking helmets. After making sure there were no booby traps, found a steel bar to lever the damaged racks and got a helmet out. There was no-one in sight so I got the thing on and putting my hands up walked forward saying "Kammerad". To my intense discomfort infantry lads came bursting out of the farmhouse with rifles and bayonets shouting "Here's another one of the B-----ds.

Just in front of Dis Denley was a squadron of tanks on the foreslope waiting to move forward but something was holding them up. The three stations were marked with beacons of wood, wire and canvas making them most obvious but not actually needed by us as each observer and instrument was clearly visible via the instrument to each other.

The tanks suddenly began to move – it was that they had waited for the infantry, the Gurkhas, to clear an area of dense scrub first and this the men did without firing a shot.

About the same time a shell burst on Denley's hill about a hundred yards to his south. At first not a lot of notice was taken, assuming it to be an odd one. However, it was not and shortly another burst nearer. Denley continued working as another arrived even closer but it was becoming evident that the shells were definitely been directed on the station that all we could do, at that distance but wait and hope they would vacate the point. After another had landed, he took hold of the theodolite the, his booker, Alf Birkett, the tripod and they both went like mad for the truck which did a super rapid start, hardly had they had done so the next round landed right on the station destroying the beacon and probably the trig. mark as well.

The work required in the "Longstop" area was now finished and the three points on the last ridge before Tunis 10 miles ahead of us as requested by the R.A. fixed by intersection so we had a little more time to ourselves.

Several times the batman, Dvr Noble had tried to find out what had happened to the leader but met a blank wall each time. A.D.D.S. Had forwarded two letters for me – one to the O.C. Major Harris and one to redirected to Mr. Kelsey also the rest of the Boss's kit had been forwarded on. The only conclusion was for us to accept that Mr. Kelsey had been sent to Algiers.

The ridge on which the three points had been fixed had been was anticipated to be the enemy's last base of resistance to our forces. However, the weight of the thrust with reinforcements from the Eighth Army and the American II Corps cutting off all the advantageous high ground to the north of Tebourba took the attack on the 6th/7th May right through into Tunis.

A day or so later we were allowed to advance towards Tunis passing a cemetery behind the wall of which was a still-burning Tiger tank. Unfortunately, the next orders were to return to the Company H.Q. at La Sebala a most desolate camp seemingly full of wind-borne dust and very-very hot. The general mess tent was the top section of a marquee with no walls and boards lashed to the uprights as tables. We felt extremely sorry for the Coy. H.Q. bods when we left, so gladly, and made our way to Bone with our friend the C.S.M. i/c to carry out more A.A. site surveys.

Once there, our camp site was established on the top of a 1,000 -metre mountain to the south-west of the town. Just why we had to be on the top of the hill was not really clear. Never mind – we will cope.

The first of the tasks was to fix a rocket projector battery sited in a sports field in the middle of the town with 28 projectors each containing two rockets. We were not clear as to the method of control but each one had an operative to hand. At first it was thought that each projector would need to be fixed but, gladly, we found otherwise. As memory is not always reliable, I cannot this day remember how it was fixed.

The enemy raiders always seemed to approach the town and docks round the top of our hill whereupon 28 rockets screamed their way up towards us. We could look down and have the same view the pilots would get – these six-inch shells with a long flame behind them. It was not too bad when they went bang and we could take cover under the trucks to avoid the shrapnel but it was the 10-pound propellant tubes dropping and penetrating the truck canopies landing on or equipment inside.

There were some trees quite handy, so it was considered safer to shelter under them. However, we could not win – this shelter was infested with a mass of caterpillars which managed to get into everything including our food. So out we had to come again but this time carefully avoiding the tube-drop zone and was very close to a radar-controlled searchlight. The performance of this light was remarkable – every time it lit up there was a bomber in full view only about 400 or 500 feet above us.

Our practice at A.A. shooting was getting rather rusty, so I approached the C.S.M. and asked permission to open fire when we got the chance and, as we had surplus ammunition, he agreed.

The idea was to use the 50-round drum magazine and use the guns separately hosepipe-fashion, also we noticed we could anticipate the verbal orders given to the searchlight crew and line up the guns with the direction of the body of the searchlight. We waited and sure enough, the next night a bomber approached – we rushed into position and lined up. Their sergeant shouted "Ex" we opened up and our tracer went tearing up there together with the light beam and our shots and tracer were bouncing off the fuselage just behind the wing root. It must have startled him because he dropped his bombs much too soon to hit the town and they must have gone bouncing down the side of the hill.

Two or three nights we had several goes at this exciting pastime but then, for some unknown reason the searchlight crew asked us to stop firing and gave no real reason. It was most obvious our shots were not going anywhere near them. In fact, we had made sure no such thing could happen – not only that a short distance away was a 20mm cannon pit and crew doing the same as us. However, we had to accede and had to just sit and watch.

There were plenty of 3.7 batteries to fix and that and other computing work kept us very busy but being so well away from the town gave us little opportunity to sample the fleshpots.

Somehow or other John Armytage managed to contact his brother-in-law, I never did find out how, but he was in the navy and at that time was serving on M.T.B's and in Bone harbour.

The C.S.M. gave permission fore the brother-in-law to join us on the mountain top for a week if his skipper would agree, and he did. The young man was very pleased and joined in the work we were carrying out, sleeping in a bivouac and really enjoying himself. As all good things come to an end, and so did this, but on the day that he had to return to his ship we had an emergency and all trucks were in use so I had to fix a cushion on the back of one of the motor cycles and carry him back to the docks in Bone. On reaching his ship tied up alongside the quay I was invited aboard but was not very enthusiastic on seeing the gangplank. It was a mere nine inches wide and sagged alarmingly. Never-the-less we managed to get aboard, and I was introduced to his messmates. Apparently, we were just about on time as they were due to cast off very soon at which point, they insisted I had their rum ration pouring it all into one glass and would not let me leave until it was all down my throat. After leave taking that gangplank was ten-feet wide and the road up the mountain, instead of winding about, was as straight as a die, also the bike just managed it in top gear. About a week or two later the terrible news became known, John's brother-in-law was dead – he had perished with all his crewmates and the boat lost in the Straits of Messina.

However, it was not long before the survey work at Bone was finished and we were moved back to the Company, or rather, to the new Company camp site at Maxula Rades. This was a job with a difference.

The idea was that we, No. 1 Topo, would prepare this site for a more or less permanent occupation by the Company and that meant large toilets had to be dug for all three lots, Officers, Sergeants and O.R's.

But first, there was a lot of clearing up to do, and the area carefully checked for mines, that was not so difficult, and the bare nature of the ground gave immediate signs of disturbance but the verges along the main road was rather awkward. Luckily a gang of those useful chaps, the Royal Engineers, came along with some P.O.W's and set about the job. Our main bother was the explosives and grenades – most of the explosives were British gun-cotton – the cased stuff seemed in a reasonable state but the uncased was sweating, showing globules of nitro on the surface. We dug some holes near to the collection point and slowly and very carefully burnt it all. The remainder was carted off to a tip with all the grenades except for the Italian ones. No-one would accept them, so the previous holes were used, and we blew them. All the arms found also went to the tip after everyone chose their souvenirs.

Then the positions of the three loos were fixed from the sketch plan and digging commenced. This one was for the O.R's, the biggest one, and then half-way down we struck a slab of rock so thought we would have to move its position until one bright lad tried one edge and found it soft so after investigating only moved it slightly and continued round and under the slab.

By teatime we reached the bottom of the trench so decided to place the top boards and seats already constructed by the "carpenters" as soon as tea was finished. It was then that a member of the section was missing and no matter where we looked was not to be found, until a clever lad investigated the underside of the slab of rock and there he was, fast asleep. The top boards went in extremely quietly – also the seats but on placing the frame of the hessian screen made as much noise as possible which resulted in a certain person creating a lot of noise from under the seats.

Guard duties on the site could have used up a lot of manpower had it not been for our four-legged sentry – Topo – The size of the area really needed four men out but with Topo only two. These two would select a position and Topo would prowl around and report in turn to each of the guards, if she suspected anything would check up and if she was doubtful would go and growl to the guard and he would investigate. The Arabs could play rings round a guard but not round the dog and they knew that.

Chapter 8

[*no title in original*]

Not long after the arrival of the Company at Maxula Rades the Section was moved to Carthage on the West side of the Bay of Tunis about the 14th June. The purpose was to carry out a detail survey of the area something like 20 to 30 acres, from traverse lines we would have to put down. Main traverses were laid out along principal roads then broken down into smaller traverses and setting up detail lines. It was to be on a scale similar to the old O.S. 25-inch plans.

Obviously, we had to have a billet in that area and this new one of ours was a billet of billets. The house, two-storey, was a terrace building right on the waterfront of the Bay. There was the house with its verandah, then the sandy beach, then the sea. At the back of the house was a small garden with out houses leading on to a lane. In the flat roof was a bomb or shell hole but as the weather was really fine that did not matter.

On the one side, our neighbours were an old couple, one a French person, the other Italian and very much devoted to each other. We offered them a sandbag full of haricot beans, it had been carried from Algiers, but we could never use them as they required soaking in water for about three days and we never had sufficient time for that. They were absolutely delighted with them as they had not had such beans for ages and they were one of their favourites.

Resulting from our gift the old lady suggested she would make us a meal but as they were on scant rations we would have to supply the materials (ingredients?). That was simply done and we all enjoyed a typically Tunisian meal of "Tomate Facine". In other words, a beef tomato stuffed with tinned stewed steak and unusual herbs baked on a biscuit of dough. Even the most sceptical member of staff had to agree it was delicious and wanted more, even Haggis, but that was not to be, at least not immediately. Her next suggestion was to take our cook, Haggis, into Tunis each day and help him get fresh vegetables as she knew all the stallholders in the market. Each member of the section agreed to subscribe a small amount of cash each week and that enabled our "chef" to "cook properly" as he put it, and so he did.

The neighbour on the other side was rather different. A young lady who often swam across our frontage in a becoming costume but had a peculiar swimming action. General concensus was that she moved along with one foot on the bottom and splashed with the other behind her. We believed she had been left behind by the previous tenants, either German or Italian.

Someone suggested a fish supper would be very enjoyable even though chips were not possible due to the lack of sufficient frying fat and as our "chef" pointed out, we could not have his "fat" nor expect him to do the cooking. Moreover, all the shops were closed so we could not buy fish.

After much rumination one individual proposed we used the inflatable dinghy we had to row out into the bay and catch some fish ourselves. But then another person asked, "what the fish would be caught with ?", as we had no lines or hooks. So, the obvious response was that we use grenades or any explosive - then the fish would rise to the surface in a stunned state and all we had to do was collect them all.

After considering all these proposals a hunt was made for explosives and to assist our motion over the sea which had a slight breeze over it surface a "groundsheet" sail on a simple mast and the rough oars used as rudders.

The explosive problem was resolved by attaching a 36 grenade to the pressure cap of a Teller mine we had and then tying a long length of field telephone wire to the pin of the grenade.

Thus, the intrepid sailors set forth to sail across the bounding main but must have seemed more like a lot of naughty kids let loose.

After reaching a suitable point the Teller etc. weres carefully lowered until it reached bottom and almost used all the wire but left us enough to row a reasonable distance away before pulling the wire to release the pin.

It was most disappointing – where we expected a gigantic waterspout there was only a mild disturbance and a lot of bubbles. The mine could not have gone off.

We waited for the fish to appear – and waited and waited until someone considered we should row round and look. All that this effort realised was a small tiddler about three inches long. After consultation it was agreed it should be put back and, if it recovered, it could swim away – if not it would be a tasty snack for a local sea bird.

It was then we realised that, not having taken the sail down as we fished, we had drifted further away from our beach so had to make all efforts to return home, but the boat, not having a keel, would not respond to rudders and sail. Therefore, it had to be done the hard way and it was a very hard paddle home, and not to a fish supper.

Records of the daily temperature had not been kept, as there did not appear to be such a necessity to do so when we first arrived in Carthage, but around the 17th-18th June it really began to go up and up. Lt Mann who had been sent to us just after our arrival decided the parties on traverse and detail work required some sort of head protection and managed to get us some pith helmets. These proved to be almost useless and cumbersome while observing or detailing and as there was quite an abundance of overhead foliage it was decided to dispense with the helmets.

Therefore, I suggested to our Lieutenant that first we should, with our survey thermometers, which could read to 128-degrees (F) establish just when the unbearable temperatures were reached. This was not an easy task as it became obvious that the heat was going way above the 128 – thus the chief decided the office staff would take a set of readings against the time and so build up a graph. From this it was possible to show that at peak time, i.e., midday it reached a theoretical figure of 142 degrees (F) and the absolute bearable limit in the morning to be at 11 a.m. and the afternoon to be at 3 p.m.

By starting early at 6.30 a.m. – stopping at 11 a.m. then starting again at 3.00 pm until 7.30 pm we could manage to get the required amount of work in for the day. Everyone, even the cook agreed wholeheartedly with this arrangement but provision had to be made for relaxing between 11.00 and 3.00 pm.

Some wanted to lounge in the sea so boards were driven down into the sand at an angle so that a person could be well immersed and in a comfortable posture and also, through our helpful old lady next door, purchased large straw hats from the market. All that was next needed were floating blocks of wood so arranged they would hold our books above water. Bottles of wine or beer could keep relatively cool pushed down into the sand below water and the book rests could have the means of maintaining a glass above water. Those who were not so interested in the wet means of relaxation could only resort to lying on their beds although there was one room in the house suitable for this purpose as it was built on the ground floor entirely independent of the rest of the house. In other words, its walls with doors and windows were inside the main room downstairs so was very cool.

Thus, every effort was made to ensure that the workforce was not overstressed. Information we had received about the other Topo Section was that they had several cases of sunstroke and as they seemed to favour a prison style haircut I got permission for our lads to maintain a good thickness of hair over the nape of the neck but also to keep it tidy. Subsequently this proved an essential during such weather.

Where these extremes were most noticeable was when travelling along main roads where the vehicle would pass through belts of super-heated air which felt as though one's lungs were drying up.

On odd occasions we managed to pay a few visits to notable local places of historical mention. Near to us was the amphitheatre where Churchill had addressed the victorious troops of the Mediterranean Forces while much further north was a small town Sidi Bou Said which had some connection with the Bey of Tunis, who apparently was under house arrest for his pro-axis attitude. This town was absolutely clean, it seemed almost possible to eat one's food off the roadways, its buildings well-painted so was most attractive but one thing was missing – there was not a single human to be seen.

Under pretext of survey work we also managed to visit El Aouina Airfield where, apart from an interest in our own and American aircraft, there were plenty of German and Italian most of which were wrecked. One German plane there was merely a fuselage, but the shape was very similar to a shark – it was a long time later we found out it was the Messerschmidt 262 one of their latest jet-engined planes.

It was about this time I was getting some severe pains in my left neck and shoulder, sometimes that bad it affected my sleep. After a week or so of it Lt Mann thought I should see the Medical Orderly at Coy. H.Q. (Maxula Rades) but he could find nothing obviously wrong so sent me into Tunis with a sick note. There, the consultant surgery was in an office block in the middle of the town and on an upper floor. I was by a window when the sound of many marching men could be heard. It was a large contingent of German P.O.W's heading for the docks and prison camps in possibly Canada or the U.S.A. or even U.K.

What was so strange was when one of them looked up and his eyes and mine met for just an instance but a message seemed to be exchanged between the two of us.

On going in to see the Doctor, I spoke to an orderly and explained what was wrong with me – I was concerned that all I could say to the Doctor was that I had severs headaches and that seemed very simple but he said I would be alright. Unfortunately, the Doctor was not very compassionate and said "Women get headaches" but he could give me some aspirin. I did not like that so refused the offer and returned to Coy. H.Q. where I saw the O.C. and thus Lt O'Brien of No. 2 Troop was sent to see the Doctor and came back with a profuse apology and a small bottle of Phenol Barbitone tablets with instructions to use them whenever needed. It made a tremendous difference for me.

It was about this time we had a sudden call from the Coy H.Q. for the whole section to attend at the camp site for a Company photograph but as we were the last to be informed were the last there and had to form the very back row. Also, this was about the time Lt. Mann was recalled to the Coy and his place taken by the Coy. Sgt. Maj (C.S.M. Spelman).

I seem to have mislaid an incident in the Section's life and have only weather to assist in defining the period. It was very wet so it is very possible to have been before the extremely hot period. On this occasion we had been sent to Bizerta the port on the very north tip of Cape Blanc.

The reason for the visit escapes me but must have been in relation to A.A. survey as British 3.7s were moving into the area to supplement the American A.A. defence which consisted mainly of Bofors guns.

The journey to Bizerta was very interesting as with American desire for large items the roads approaching from the south had been widened by scraping almost everything in sight but the rain and Tunisian mud made them dangerous. Most particularly on the bends forming the winding climbs up the steep parts where it was found that the only way of getting the trucks round them was to have all members of the Section pushing up from the lower side of each truck to prevent it sliding into the ditch.

Our line of travel took us through Ferryville as the direct road to Bizerta from Tunis was closed due to the ferry being non-operational. But it was here we saw the entire bow of a reasonably sized ship complete with anchor and anchor chain laying beside the road. The whole area was evident of catastrophe. Obviously a very large explosion had taken place, whether during the German occupation or not is not certain.

Our tentage was immediately opposite an Italian P.O.W. camp and to watch the performance of these men was a comedy all on its own. Morning start was when they unlocked their gate and wound up the peculiar starters on the lorries and then loaded up the personnel for their particular task for the day. Evening was just the opposite but first they had to service the vehicles before they locked themselves in for the night. Apart, that is, for those who undertook to help clean our tents and clean our very muddy boots, all for a few cigarettes or rations.

We found these administrations very useful for, on rising in time for breakfast, all one had to do was to leave the agreed amount on one's bed so that on return found everything in apple-pie order. Boots clean and beds made up while dirty linen was taken away for dhobying.

On the aerodrome, many of the Americans were living in the huge packing cases the aircraft had arrived in but there was mud everywhere. In fact, it was distressing to see the American "chain-gangs" working in the roadside ditches up to their knees in slurry scooping the stuff onto the banks with shovels, almost a pointless task.

It is possible our presence in Bizereta was to supplement the work of No. 2 Topo Section and therefore the dates could have been about the beginning of June 1943 and on completion of that work we were returned to the Company H.Q. at Maxula Rades and given the task of preparing for a very long trip. It was fortunate we had exchanged one of our 15 cwts for a three tonner otherwise there would have been a problem with the 170 lb tents.

Our surprise could be well imagined on being informed that the O.C., Major Harris, would be travelling with us.

Page 15 contains a reference of the journey that was about to commence going from Algiers to Tunis and back – that "back" journey was about to start.

Chapter 9

Back to Algiers

The Sicilian Campaign 10th July to 10th August was over and we, of No. 1 Topo, had not even been invited to take part – it was a sorry oversight on the part of the Generals. However, as from the 10th July the 518 printers, etc. would have been released from the "cage" where they had been incarcerated, in the interests of security to print the maps of Sicily. Also it would mean that Maj. Harris would likewise have those same responsibilities lifted.

The company move from Tunis to Boufarik, about 25 miles to the south of Algiers, was on or about, 26th – 30th August 1943 but the advance guard, No. 1 Topo, would have left about the middle of August.

On this occasion the Section was led by the O.C. himself, Major Harris, but what bothered me more was that the lads had purchased large woven reed mats to augment the floors of the 170 lb tents and would not take kindly to leaving them behind.

However, very generously, the O.C. agreed that the mats could be taken with us but looked rather uneasy on finding they had been carefully placed over the canopies of the 15 cwt trucks. I had to point out that the bulk of these mats was too much to be placed inside the trucks and also they would give very useful head protection from the sun which was still very hot. With the front and the backs of the canopies being tied back, a reasonable draught was conducted through each vehicle.

Of course, everything convoy-wise had to be exact – but as we now had a replacement m/c the two D.R.s were able to shepherd the trucks along and as required by the O.C. I had to be "tail end" Charlie.

Our first night stop was right on the coast giving us a superb view from the cliff down into a small horseshoe bay with a tall pinnacle of rock in the centre. After our hot travelling, the scene was remarkable with the water of the bay in varied greens and blues out from the white beach. Nothing could be more inviting.

The "Boss" was therefore approached and permission given for half the Section to go at a time but only after all night preparations were completed.

The first group rushed off down the hill in a truck to the water's edge and discarding garments in all directions splashed into the cooling embrace of the water.

All things changed in that instant – there were howls and almost screams as these first entrants stood in the water, in fact many of them collapsed so those still on shore had to go in and drag them out. The water was so cold it was causing severe cramp and muscular pain – that was the end of the swim – the best they could manage was to sit at the edge of the water and splash by hand. Our conclusion was that due to the shape of the bay and probably other factors the water never received the benefit of the sun.

The rest of the journey was uneventful but, at least, illustrated to the O.C., the travelling benefits of our "Desert Kettle" which speeded up our midday halt.

Accommodation in Boufarik was in a school very central to the town and consisted of a central rectangular paved area with rooms on two levels all round it.

Once all the work was completed and we had ensured that the existing toilet facilities would suffice the Company, there was little else we could do so were promptly put onto some Air photo inspection and plotting work but with the hot sun it was very sticky inside the building so we moved out below the veranda and found a great improvement.

This was when Major Harris and I visited the ration dump where we managed to convince that authority there that a section of under twenty men was entitled to a 25% increase in rations thus establishing a format to be followed until the main body of the Company arrived.

At this point my faithful watch ceased to function, after all it had gone through, in ice at Lieven, in the Firth of Forth at Dalmeny, in the bath at home while on leave. I had little confidence in getting it repaired under the circumstances but a local Frenchman advised me, while we were having a chat in a café one evening, not to take it to the local watchmaker, a Frenchman, but to an Arab whose shop was just round the corner. This was done, and to this day the watch ticks away quite merrily.

Sadness came on us as our stalwart companion and guard dog was killed on the road to Blida very near to where she was born. Apparently, the lads had taken her there thinking she would perhaps like to renew her acquaintance with the area. An occurrence which happened soon after this leads me to think that she thought the lads were deliberately trying to dispose of her and consequently turned straight under the wheels of a passing lorry. I doubt anything now shows her grave beside the road.

Very soon after this, the Company again moved, this time to a farm which, being known as Madame Loups, I presume was owned by her. The fact that the only growing plants visible to us were grape vines (wine type) led us to conclude that the title of "farm" was not really applicable in the sense we would nationally apply it.

However, it did mean that the accommodation was more suitable for everyone and facilities such as "Programme A" etc very acceptable.

I did have a problem, one I could not solve to a certain person's satisfaction, he being our cook, "Haggis" while with the Company and not on detachment resulted in "Haggis" while with the Company and not on detachment resulted in Haggis having to assist in the general cookhouse and I think others took advantage of him. The only thing I could do was to promise to be sure he would be with us if we had another detachment but that was not to be for quite a while.

With such a possibility, however remote, and as we had a reasonable amount of time to ourselves enabled me to attempt to solve what I considered a problem. For a long time I had played with the idea that our cook would be better served with a reasonable-sized trailer which, on arrival at the site, would be detached from the tow and immediately set up for his use, and, having a frame and hood, would be weather-proof as well.

With 'Haggis's blessing I began to use much of my spare time obtaining the bits from scrap yards etc., and got with it. The chassis, axle, wheels and tow attachment came in very useful when a job given to us relieved the lads of much boring air-photo work. It appeared that when some assault craft approached at the beaches of Sicily they went aground rather earlier than expected and someone thought there could be an answer to that.

The weather being warm and fine made this job very much appreciated. With our trailer behind carrying the big inflatable, pegs, tools and lining posts, off we went to a beach near Zerelda, just to the West of Algiers. There we set up three lines at right angles to the water line add parallel to each other. Two pegs were driven into the ground on each line about five metres apart so that lining up posts could be set up in the same place each time we visited the site. Then with a S300 level positioned to cover each line, the levelling staff would be taken along each line in turn to give a reading at every change of level, working from the inflatable as the water became deeper.

Wind speed (estimated) and direction would be recorded height of waves, if any, number of waves in a five-metre length. All the measurements were plotted on return to H.Q., thus giving the position of any underwater bank which might have formed and showing how it varied according to wind strength and direction. Our visits were decided by the wind variations.

Somewhere along the line someone must have taken copies of our work and devised a means of predicting the situation of the bank or banks by surface inspection as we heard no more about it.

While the weather was fine, we appreciated the job except for a short period when we were engulfed in vast swarms of locusts. These insects about four to five inches long were flying straight out from the shore over and into the sea where, no doubt, they were much appreciated by the fish. The females of the species were busy pushing their bodies down into the sand and laying their eggs.

While making the journey on one of our visits to the beach we came upon a dog quietly walking along the road but as we passed it, it turned out right angles and went right under our back wheels. It was as if the action were deliberate almost pre-considered. Of course, we stopped and after much deliberation decided we must put an end to the unfortunate animal's life as its back was broken and it would have a nil chance of survival. It so happens that all the company weapons had been handed in to the Armourers so we went about finding some nearby troops to help and came across some "Gunners" who loaned us a German Luger as all their weapons were also handed in.

We then had to find a nearby suitable spot and dig a grave and having done so to complete our act of mercy by lining up the gun with the dog's brain as best I could and pull the trigger. That animal knew exactly what I was about to do. It was all in his eyes as I held his chin in my hand. There was a very saddened group on the beach that day

The trailer had got to the stage of completion except for the frame and cover when someone had the brilliant idea that the Company should have a newspaper of its own. It was all a part of a project with "Programme A" to give some forms of relaxation and for some reason or other "muggins" got the job as Editor. A small committee was formed and the format of the paper decided whereupon the artists got to work and produced a front-page heading, i.e. "The Weekly Sturr". It was to be half-demi size and would be sold for one franc, the proceeds to go to the company funds. At first there were quite a few contributors but that number soon dropped off and "muggins", the Editor had to write and produce the paper himself. However, the American tabloid "Stars and Stripes" helps a great deal by supplying and allowing me to use some of their photos of screen stars as bathing-belles. Of course, the artists had to have a go at them first. Then, when a sports day was arranged between us and the 516 and 517 our sister companies, it just had to be a double-spread.

GET IT CUT! ALFRED FINNEY

Weekly Sturr

FINAL

REGISTERED WITH A.P.O. AS UNWANTED MATTER.

DISCOVERED STURRUM AD LIB 1944

BLACK OUT - AFTER THE 8'S

Vol.I No.1 MONDAY 28th FEB. 1944. ONE FRANC (No Credit)

518 DOES IT AGAIN !!!

516 - 518 FEUD DRAWING TO A CLOSE

ONLY ONE SPORT LEFT FOR 516 TO WIN - TENNIS

RUGGER RESULT 12 PTS - NIL.

FIRST HALF.

The smartest work of the entire game was by the 518 threes, forming an unbeatable combination, crystal clear in operation gaining it's goal every time in spite of wet grass underfoot.

The team, in spite of its inexperience worked extremely well although the pack did not seem to be able to get a purchase, being pushed back every time. Heavy pressure was constantly kept on the 516 end as several "almost tries" got to within 10 yards.

Lt. Stansfield made a brilliant take from Cpl. Newcombe as he fumbled a pass, we went through to touch down 10 yards off. No attempt was made for conversion - 3 pts. up.

The game was not really settled in three-quarters, but Wille left. Thomas made a few bonners to begin with,he made up very well later with some good shepherding and pleading. Major Bevis started the movement to open the game by kicking hard to the touches - Sor. Wallis, to the detriment of his shirt made some remarkably good efforts.

The ground was very bad as far as our pack was concerned - Pearson, as hooker, did not seem to be able to get his feet to the ball but certainly put loads of beef into all of his work. Cpl. Hill, backbone of the pack, had a good opportunity to show his talents as a crawler - anyway he gained quite a few yards with the ball in this manner.

SECOND HALF.

Thomas received a nasty crack that took him off the field this putting Parfitt over to the outside half and he, working round scrum, came out with good passes to Pte. Carmody with game it. Stansfield clear runs to touchdown. Thus once again it worked and we received a further 3 pts, - as conversion did not materialise. 6 pts. up.

Evans gave plenty of good attacking as well as some smart tackling - he moved the pack well up-field with a few punts into touch. Once again the three's move came off - working like clockwork, seemingly unstoppable, they went across-field leaving Lt. Stansfield a short run to try - attempt at conversion failed miserably - but there it is 9 pts. up.

On opening up from scrum the threes went into operation once more only this time the ball did not reach Lt. Stansfield, Cpt. Carmody dashed and went through himself just making try - smart work 12 pts. up.

The great work of the 518 pack deserves a lot of credit,for, though lighter, they gained the initiative and carried out some fine forward rushes, outstanding of these was Phil Beynon. The erratic work of the 516 threes, who were doing too much fly-kicking, would have proved very costly if it was not for the good covering by the full-back Lt. Carsome.

HEARD ON LEAVE

by Walter (he's always on Programme 'A')

It is reported from an official source that Wille, Lola and Wife, Antoinette Love, quite recently,changed their appartments.Addresses can be obtained from the Ed. on request.

From the same source comes the report that, not only does Wille Lola welcome her guests with a glass of vallop but also turns on the gramophone to accompany the fun and games, one particular staunch supporter of hers is reported to have enjoyed a very delightful session to the tune," Every Inch a Sailor". (Lola apparently has a bad memory for faces.!!!)

A certain member of our community was noticed by another to be smoking rather furiously, when asked wether he was doing so because of worry he replied - yes,he was - when that worry was finally divulged it appeared that our "friend" was worrying as to where his next smoke was coming from. Good old Lager Beer.

Someone back home wants to know who the officer inthis unit is, who, when censoring, signs himself "U.K.".

Also heard were these partinles;

---who,s you going this afternoon, Steve ?

---are using sauce for other purposes in the sergeants Mess ---

---latest line is, on a mat with the knees on the shoulders ---

--- Parf had his boots put outside again -

All proceeds of sales are allocated to Coy. Funds on behalf of welfare.

British latest multi-purpose 'plane.

The Hawker Typhoon, a fighter- dive bomber.

Paste;

Engine ... Napier Sabre	3240 H.P.
Length	31ft 11ins
Wing span	41 7
Tail	13 0
Wheel track	13 7
Armament	4. 20mm Hispano Cannon or 12..303 Brownings with 2. 250lb bombs or 2. 500lb "
Weight, fully loaded	12000lb
Wing area (main Plane)	279 sqft

Speed and range not released Pilots have reported that they can turn inside a F.W. 190.

Adverts and Notices ;

BOOKIES & BETTING , are the right firm — and get the right prices —

Mac, Slim & Son , 1 Top Row.

AFFAIR:

All the books and periodicals you are not wanting need not go into the Incinerator there are a lot of the boys in hospital who are far more "browsed off" than you.

Contact the Editor - give him the books and he will see that they are delivered to the right places.

LOST: Wisdom,as issued to P.M.s. suspected still in Coy. It is requested they are returned promptly to Sgt. Fraser.

LOST: tin-snips, "borrowed" from No 4 pet Printer -- will possessor please return them immediately.

LOST: a ring, size not determined yet— has a screw thread -- will finder please look after it kindly. Ta.

WELFARE:

Owing to technical difficulties no notice is published this week. Next week most definitely.

Introducing —— Doc. and Shorty! by SS

It was a bit startling when one “Programme A” day I was just too late to get a seat in the cab of the three-tonner which was to take us into Algiers. Consequently, I had to climb into the back - it was the usual - right foot onto the chassis, left hand up to grab the upper canopy tube and swing in.

This time it all went wrong - my left hand did not even get to above waist height - so I almost went flat on my back. I tried again but with the same result so, after consultation with other members of the party, was assisted, with much comment about old men, into the truck and away we went.

The next morning, I went to see “Doc”, our medical orderly, who examined me carefully and concluded that although he had insufficient experience, he thought there was considerable muscle wastage in my left shoulder.

An appointment was made for me to attend the hospital for examination where they too agreed about the muscle wastage and on being informed about the m/c incident at Beja, conducted some nerve tests and found there was such damage in that area. Another appointment was fixed for me to attend an assessment board on the same day for treatment. It was possible to show the board that the arm could move up and down quite easily given assistance from my other arm but was not able to do so on its own.

After the board I was taken to an operating theatre where a Major Consultant produced a four-inch needle on the end of a small syringe. Carefully he inserted this needle into the shoulder joint from the front and by alternative injecting a little cocaine from the syringe and then pushing the needle a little more got the big needle right in.

He then replaced the small syringe with a big one - I could almost swear it was half-pint size - and injected its contents “Novocaine” into the joint and after extracting the big needle moved the joint backwards and forwards “to make sure it was well lubricated” he said.

I had to admit I had no more pain from that shoulder but had to attend physiotherapy treatment twice a week And in the meantime was regraded from A1 to B1 (perm) But was later changed to B1(temp).

In relation to all this the O.C., (Major Harris) sent for me and asked if I wanted to stay on and would I be capable to meet anything asked of me. To that I answered that the therapy was already giving good results and I did not want to lose the section. At that time I had been without a Section Officer for several months and enjoyed that freedom but then he sent for me again a little later and asked if I would consider going for a Commission. That was somewhat breath taking so I requested some time to think about it. That was granted and I proceeded to give that matter a great deal of thought.

N0. 1 Topo was a good section, had done a remarkably good job wherever employed, and with little or no complaints even in bad physical conditions. Therefore, to leave such a section was something to be carefully thought about. Should I eventually get a Commission there was not much chance of getting another Topo Section no matter which theatre one served in, too many people appreciated the freedom of being on detachment.

I was not anxious to become someone’s dogsbody in a H.Q., so decided that a reasonable assessment of our probable future might give an answer.

The Army's progress through Sicily had been remarkably fast and although there appeared to be some delays in Italy, there was also good promise of better movement for the immediate future. Not only that, the new front in Europe was getting to be obvious.

It was being cast about that if anyone wanted a Commission urgently, all they had to do was to volunteer for the Far East but for me, with a dislike of jungles, that must not be. It therefore seemed to me that the war could only last a year at the most so it could mean that once I received my second pip the conflict would nearly be over and I would still be without a Topo Section and also would have to face a reduction in pay.

After consulting with my pal, John, I decided against the Commission, and that is where I made a bad mistake as it would be one and a half years before release from the army.

Chapter 10

[*no title*]

Time dragged as we filled in the time with what jobs could be found for us. The introduction of Programme A, when we were supposed to ensure our clothing was kept clean and repaired was in fact a day off and usually spent in Algiers although several adventurous members of the Company travelled deep south into the Sahara, while others enjoyed skiing on the snows of Chreia amongst the peaks of the Atlas mountains all with the official blessing.

Christmas had come and gone. 1943, had started off pleasantly until a drinking contest between the Officers' Mess and the senior N.C.O.'s Finished up with several members in a bad way.

The camp also enjoyed, during the darker nights, visits from the unpleasant characters from the Casbah in Algiers. To see a very large knife slicing down through the canvas of one's tent and equipment vanishing through the whole is inclined to disturb one's slumbers. At the time the weather was bad and the tents not quite watertight so, as the printers had been moved out of their marquees and into the main building, the topo sections moved their 170 lb tents into the marquees which also enabled them to set up traps for the unwanted visitors.

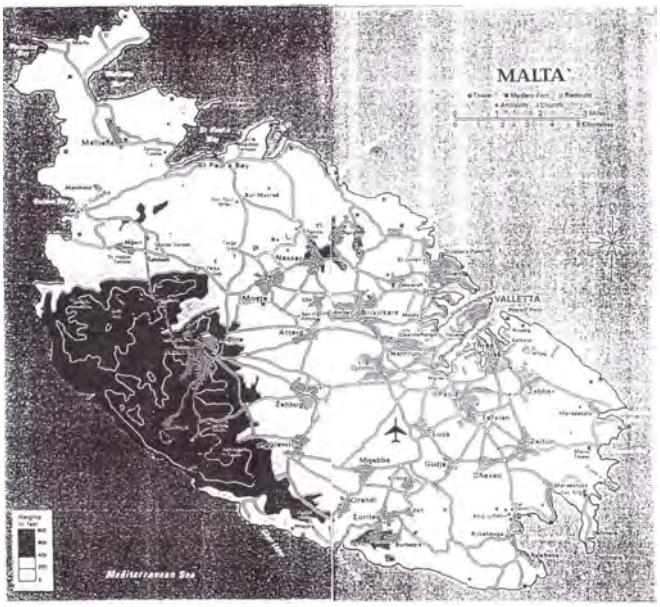
By arrangement with the South African authorities we were permitted to have a parcel of dried fruits to be sent home, just one parcel every so often. This was when we found that the cubical biscuit tin from a box of Compo (rations for 14 men per day) was ideal for sending fresh fruit home, providing it was not fully ripe, and carefully packed with the circular lid soldered back on.

It can hardly be said that we were enthusiastic with our workload. However hard our officers tried to give us some variation they had little choice in the matter so the section just had to sweat it out. Some members developed an exceptional ability at air photo identification and examination but even that did not leave them out of boredom.

The Weekly Sturr made its weekly arrival and evening lectures held by various officers on things like civil engineering, languages, and town planning institute, helped a lot plus the adventures of model boat builders utilising the large concrete water tank intended for farm irrigation purposes. We even had a steam propelled version. Once the weather improved, a certain amount of tennis was allowed followed by a dip in the concrete boating pond but there was always a fierce darts battle going on in the recreation room.

In the meantime, number one Topo had received and lost a succession of three officers. One of them was very acceptable and we were sorry when he suddenly upsticks and went - we presumed it was another posting and not our B.O. which might have caused the move. This, of course, was not helpful to our mental state so it can well be imagined the euphoria when we were informed of a attachment in the offing. It was fortunate I did not immediately dash off to find "Haggis" and acquaint him with this exciting information as that evening I was sent for and given the bare-bones of this heaven-sent arrangement.

The move was to be to Malta and Pantelleria. The major part of the section to Malta with half a drawing section and the other



part-section to Pantelleria. At first the mode of transport was not known But we could only consider a move under previous conditions so thought we would probably go by a road to Bizerta and tranship to Malta.

The next morning put an entirely different aspect on this new venture when we were informed that transport was to be he effected by air in a D.C.3 (Dakota) and we would not be taking our poor old cook. Furthermore, our technical and personal equipment was to be limited and everything else loaded and tide down in the section's vehicles ready for enshipment at some other time in the future.

The date and time of our departure was all fixed from Maison Blanche A\irfield and transport laid on. There was just time to put the last issue of "The Weekly Sturr" No. 13 to bed and leave the printers to arrange distribution and the collection of the money for Company funds.

Chapter 11

[*no title*]

There were many rude remarks made about those chaps of No. 1 Topo who were going off on a holiday , or something like one, on the day we left Madam Loup's for Maison Blanche airfield But that was a matter we could afford to ignore and to concentrate on this new adventure.

It seemed that the airfield had shut down by the time we got there around 11:00 a.m. And it took the efforts of the two officers and others to find some official to check our papers etc. and show us which of the many planes was the one flying to Malta.

Once that hurdle was crossed, we were anxious to get loaded and on our way so eventually, on the appointed hour, Algiers was left behind us in the dust of the take off. As with the "big boat" at Gourock" (Nov. 8 1942) on the Clyde this was another novelty for us to experience but these aircraft were built for the minimum and being much smaller, there was much less opportunity to investigate. There was little the lads could do except to pull the rubber plugs out of the plastic windows and push their fingers out into the airstream. Having exhausted that phenomenon the only job otherwise was to ensure the technical and personal equipment was secured to the satisfaction of the pilot.

However, the behaviour of our officers had to be observed and noted. They spread a few items of their bedding on the cabin floor and lay down with their heads towards the engine reminding me of my grandmother when travelling by train. However, it seemed to control sickness for I cannot remember anyone being ill.

I think the pilots were a little bit naughty because when they saw the prone ones immediately altered course and flew on a track that kept crossing the coastal fingers thus alternately rising and falling with the changes from land to sea etc.

Visibility was superb and we found we could just distinguish odd places we had been to near to near the coast until, at last, we crossed Cap Bon leaving land behind us. Obviously our American crew were pilots (we hoped) so when one of them came out of the cabin with a map in his hand asking (1) did we know where we were going? (2) could we show him how to get there, the lads did not fall for that one and Taffy Davis immediately produced a map and indicated to our chauffeur the route he had plotted.

Coming into land from the sea was quite something as, until the last minute, the approach had all the indications of a massive pile-up on the cliff edge. It was thus we had no aerial view of the island which came a little later as our aircraft slowed down from a bumpy landing and we had a glimpse through the small windows of a very dusty and battered landscape. The aspect did not improve with dismounting from the D.C. 3. This airfield (Halfar) on the southernmost tip of the island had received more than its share of Malta's bombing and it gave us warning of what we might yet see. Fortunately transport from the New Zealand Signals Section was there to take us "home" to our new home.

This was in some of the older brick barracks very convenient well-ventilated and central to the town of Valletta and the other "Five Cities Area". It was also sufficiently large enough to provide each section with working space, each having their own barrack room, and it was within walking distance of other barrack conveniences such as mess rooms and bath blocks.

Our journey across the island from the south to the north had given a better impression than the original one so we all decided we would enjoy this new job.

A meeting was arranged for that evening after everyone had a good meal and a settling-down period when we would be acquainted with the outcome of the job as expected of us. This expectation seemed a bit alarming but should not be really any more than usual.

A main factor was that transport would be limited but we considered walking on this island would be a pleasure, providing it was not too long a distance.

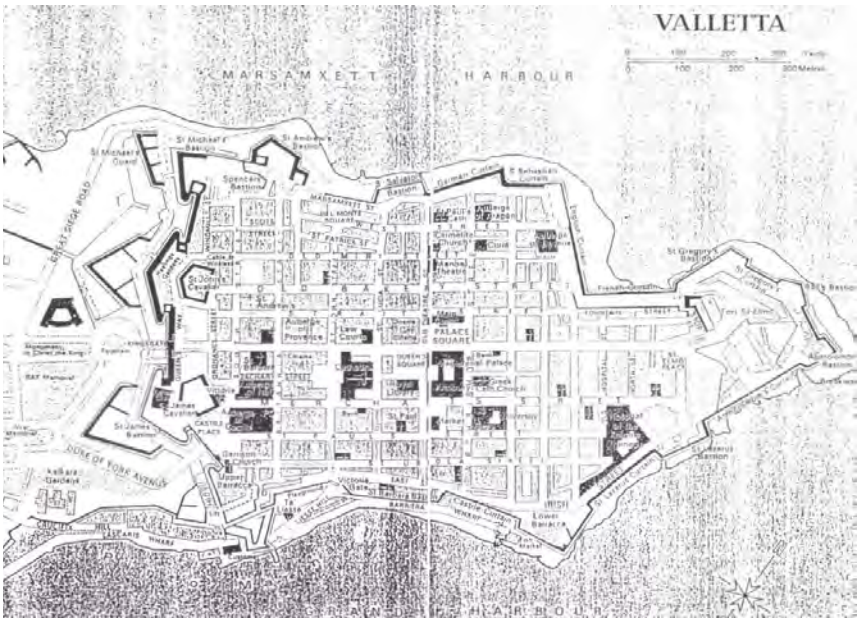
Having a list of coordinates and a map it was easy to begin a map assessment and it was obvious that so far as the triangulation of the five cities was concerned it could be contained in a complete polygonal figure with seven sides but the drawing section would be desperately needing help with trig points already buried under bomb damage, so we would need to cooperate with civilian contractors to find them. All these buildings were constructed of sandstone and much of the bombed material needed to be recovered as the original quarries were about exhausted. In fact, only the smallest pieces would be ground down for a reconstituted stone, where stone dust would be mixed with cement.

It gave us much to think of as we acquainted ourselves with the various messes. John and I found ours to be exceptional and promptly sampled the beer, much better than the stuff we used to get issued with and not only that it was almost unlimited in supply.

The next morning it was necessary to conform to island requirements, in other words, various lists all over the place but it did not seem the many bodies such as the Coy. Office, the Q.M. Store, were too concerned as long as they had a piece of paper except for the M.O. when all the "paybooks" had to reveal our state of health. The section must have been in a reasonable state as I was the only one hauled before his "nibs" and compelled to commence a series of inoculations over several weeks as my previous ones taken in 1935 had run out of date.

The Drawing Section occupied most of our time to begin with but the civilian employed labour was very helpful and knew more about requirements than we did so it a simple need to mark roughly on the mounds of bomb rubble the expected position of the trig. points and leave them to find those points. We seem to be slipping into a smooth-running working arrangement the prospects of the triangulation were good also civilian staff began to notify us as several Original Bench Marks began to appear with the bomb clearance so hurried records had to be made out.

Wherever we moved about the town the bomb damage round the dock area was more apparent than anywhere else. The buildings here were like sheer cliffs five and six storeys high above the quayside. One house on the South of the grand harbour had a four-inch naval gun barrel projecting horizontally from five storeys high obviously blown there by a bomb and looked as if to say "we are ready if you want any more".



Time off could only be available if the workload allowed. There was plenty to do add visits to Valletta were voted to be better than the Programme A's to Algiers. Moreover, by taking a boat ride over the harbour, very pleasant swimming could be enjoyed at Sliema. By sitting on a rocky outcrop one could look down on fish cavorting below but the dive down to join them always met with their rapid dispersal.

The days began to adopt a regular pattern and progress was very good so arrangements were made for occasional transport to be available for evening visits to places of interest such as the Great Dome of Mosta, Saint Paul's Bay and many others.

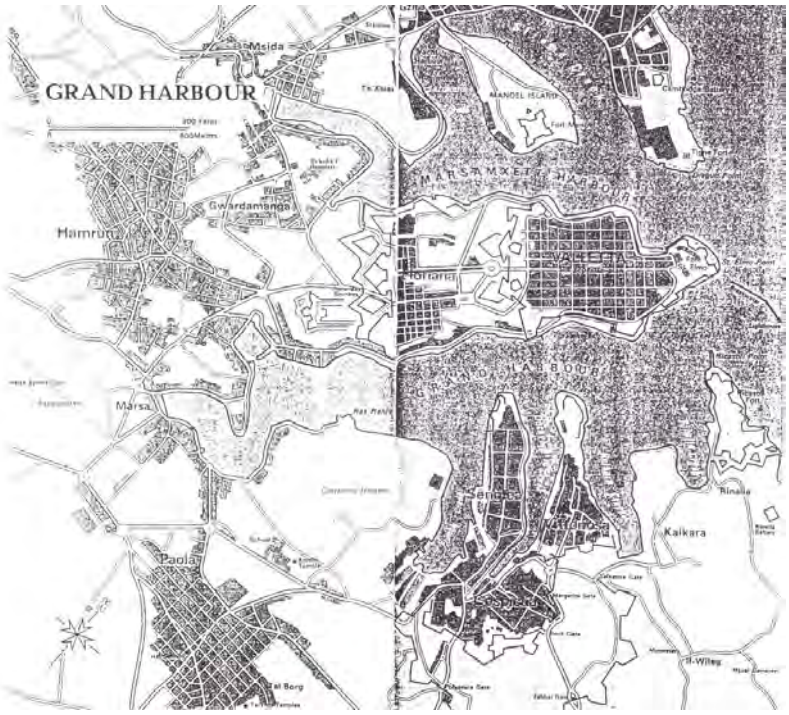
While enjoying these pleasant state of affairs John and I were walking to our Mess one day and amongst the military establishments came across some of our new-found friends of the New Zealand bomb disposal standing around a 15-cwt truck apparently listening to a radio on headsets and on enquiring were invited to listen in. After listening intently, I stated that all I could hear was a ticking sound to which one replied "that's alright then" and turned back a canvas sheet covering something in the back of the truck. There lay a rather nasty 1000 lb bomb of German origins and considering the length of time since the siege of Malta was lifted for it to be still here. After my hair returned to my scalp these lads narrated several tales of their job but I think they were aiming for a free pint or two in the mess. Later that day an ominous rumble was heard from the South and we heard later from our friends that they dropped that bomb over the cliffs near the airfield and it had detonated some bombs they had already dropped there before.

The senior mess organised a Sunday out to Saint Paul's Bay to include the Corporal's mess so I inquired if anything similar was available for the men and was glad to hear a "do" was being set up for them in a week's time. Not knowing the ropes we asked of the others and were informed that transport was laid on for such and such an hour and all we would need would be swimming gear and money for drinks but food would be supplied. One could hardly argue with that. There were a lot of nurses there but being strangers we could not butt in, and concentrated keeping our drinks cold by pushing them into the sand below water.

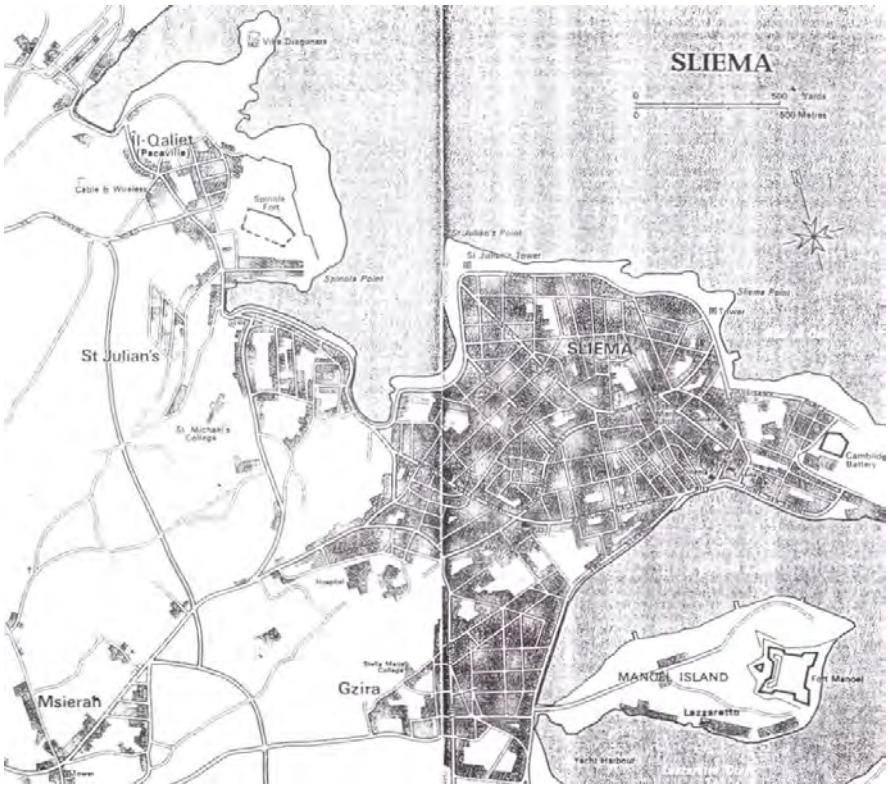
Between our barracks block and the road was a large, paved drill yard and to that place we were invited for an evening game of baseball by the N.Z. Contingent. Our excuse that we only played rounders did not appeal to them so baseball it had to be. Not being a fan of that sport I decided to stand to one side and watch. After several rounds someone foolishly suggested I should play. After much persuasion I agreed but pointed out I knew little about it so was shown how to stand with the bat and someone bowled. I took am and swung at the ball and made a perfect contact a very pleasant feeling but I was then horrified to see a fielder attempting to catch two objects hurtling through the air towards him at the same time. I had broken the bat and the spare piece was flying to the fielder. Nevertheless they insisted I make another attempt, so again I swung and again I hit and again I broke the bat. They then decided to leave me out on the next round.

It often occurred to us that while under active service conditions we had to put up with an extensive time loss due to the computers having to wait for the observers' sheets getting to them and often we wondered if it could be done with a radio connection. This matter was then taken up with the New Zealand Signals who promptly said "what kit would you need?"

After explaining our requirements, they suggested we play around with one home base set and one truck-mounted complete with their operators. Fortunately, the ventilators through our ceilings allowed the aerials direct access to the roof so it seemed we were in business.



Taffy Davis was nominated as the home base operator simply because he had a keen interest in radios and always seemed to make the things work. The initial trials were good, providing we found the most suitable voice for transmission. It had to be direct voice transmission as the usual morse code would be too cumbersome for the large number of figures transmitted.



We had obviously given the radios the best of conditions initially and that had proved to be satisfactory so now things had to be made difficult and the vertical inclines of the area proved most helpful and we actually began to get errors.

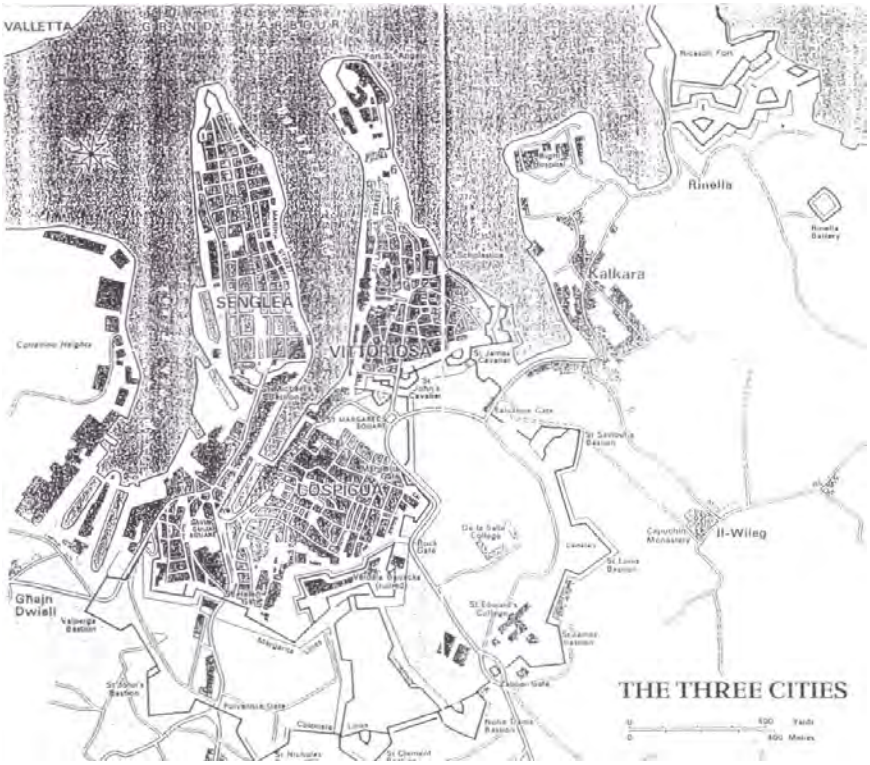
Everything was kept as simple as possible. To copy conditions sample readings were taken from prepared sheets and of the broadcast results compared with those at base. The general consensus being that, so far so good, but would we rely on it entirely? Until now we confined our test to the working area of the "Five Cities Plan" so much longer distances were needed but we had to conform to the requirements of the Signals Section but they obligingly permitted the short-term use of the equipment from a military area and suggested Halfar airfield sending our tests to the barrack block subject to no objections from the RAF and/or airfield offices. A limited permit was issued so we decided that, as so many people were involved, to complete the test in one day. The results were not as good as on the short distances but a great deal would always depend on the standard of equipment used.

At least it gave us a good insight on the possibilities and to hope for later tests. But we had to get back to our more mundane works.

The triangulation side of the job was now completed and all our efforts concentrated on levelling. In fact, the task was appearing to become monumental from the number of 1:2,400 traces being dished out by the Drawing Section for levelling but our "civilian assistants" were absolutely marvellous. There were never any objections should we need to extend working into the evening. From their appearance and attitude I always considered them to be of fishermen extraction and the midday snack would bear that out. Although some of them had the usual sandwich most had a loaf of bread, something like the French baguette, which would cut across the middle and the bread hollowed out each end and a dried fish pushed into it. At a meal time a sharp knife was produced and slices cut and seemingly digested with satisfaction. Our lads, of course, had to return to their mess for their meal.

We had found that the employed civilian labour gave us a spare technician so to speed production the plotting of contour lines was carried out in the immediate proximity of the levelling instrument which would permit the asking and answering of queries right away. Chasing contours was ruled as being time consuming so the point was immediately fixed and the contour interpolated.

Occasionally we had problems and it was on one time as John as I were returning from Valletta to our mass one evening an incident happened. The problem turned out to be the wrong identification of an original benchmark found in the bomb rubble but the incident was where the road issuing from Valletta met a small roundabout beside the ravine forming a part of the Napoleonic defences of the town.



We approached this place and moved round it anticlockwise. On the other side were some American troops following up close behind three Scottish soldiers. The smallest of these was wearing the large Tam O Shanter. He could only be about 5 feet 2 inches and one of the large Americans reached over and tipped his Tammy onto the floor. The wee laddie spun round and tried to reach the yank but was held back at arms-length. It was then that we realised that every soldier on the roundabout had stopped and turned to watch as if to say "heaven help that American if he goes wrong now".

Some of the Yanks held the Scot while the offender picked up the hat, very carefully cleaned it off, and offered it to the wee man. An apology must, fortunately, have been offered and accepted for the next thing cigarettes were burning and steps directed towards a nearby pub. That ravine is about twenty feet deep and we did expect that American to go that way.

It seemed however hard we tried to maintain progress we never succeeded. There were areas in the townships where the observers could not keep up their pace no matter how they made the effort, and as we were gradually moving into the towns from the more open places the delay became worse.

Although no final date had been given for our departure we had heard that the main body of the Company had arrived in Italy and we were expected to follow suit very soon. There was no alternative - the levelling must be speeded up -and as there were many buildings crossed by the contours interpolation did not have to be so exact.

Fortunately, the triangulation had been checked and although there were a few differences with the original values it was all left on record for future reference. Therefore, it need not occupy anymore of our time.

Eventually the moment came when all was done and the seniors busied themselves with that onerous task of making sure that was so, and it was. It was then we found that our next journey was to be by sea on a naval vessel to Naples where we would join up with our transport and become a Section again. John and I decided to cross over to Sliema on the last evening for a swim and there we could see a cruiser in the harbour with rather fast-looking lines and we both decided that it was not a British ship so we inquired of a local who told us it was the Italian Duc d'Aosta The fastest cruiser in the world.

It took a long time saying goodbye to the many friends we had made but unfortunately some of our local labour had been laid off the evening before so I could only say goodbye to those remaining and to hope my message would reach the others. Our friends from New Zealand again supplied the transport to take us to the Grand Harbour. You imagine our surprise to find we were to board the Duke d'Aosta but I must say the Italian crew were not very careful with our equipment but thumped it down on the deck.

Chapter 12

August 1944

Our rude haste to quit the Naples sea frontage was rather more than obvious. The voyage across from Malta was, for two main reasons, unfortunate. The section's technical equipment had been unceremoniously dumped on deck beside a narrow doorway which led to a very steep ladder into the bowels of the vessel. This was not the cause of concern, the stench coming up that ladder very much was. Our general verdict was that we would all stay out on deck for this trip and, being on deck, would have first class views of Etna in the early morning light as the "Duc d'Aosta", the Italian cruiser, the fastest in the world, steamed through the Straits of Messina, and Vesuvius smoking as we approached Naples. It so happened we would never have slept above or below decks. That ship's plating was so thin the whole ship vibrated with every turn of the screw.

The hopes that Naples would be better were never realised. As the hawsers made fast the overall harbour smell became obvious to us and the fact we were given little or no time to him bus with the kit was much appreciated.

This "embus" took us to a road along the top of a hill adjoining the town and there we were to wait for our own transport. At first no one objected until the lack of a breakfast was most felt, then a mug of tea and a sandwich for each one of us was produced. But as the day grew longer the sun passed the zenith and still no trucks.

However, a little later a truck arrived containing large pots of stew and tea but this time we found neatly regimented groups of small children dressed in a few rags, some six or so in each party, conveniently attaching themselves to a likely victim. You would have been lucky to get one spoonful of the hot stew, the six pairs of eyes would draw it from you and the elder or leader, being of an additional year or so, would gather the other five round her, They would set with the open mouth pointed religiously towards her to receive the food dispensed from your dixie but eyes would circulate to see what might be coming next. Every one of them must have had about six spoonfuls of hot stew each at which point your Dixie vanished so you would be inclined to say "that's my Dixie gone as well" when it suddenly appeared all shiny bright add a flushed smiling face saying, in sign language, shall I fetch your "pud" as well? So all we got from that meal was a mug of tea. It was not surprising that almost each of these little groups found themselves with a tablet of Palmolive soap had a packet of cigarettes while one little male soul who was dressed only in a thin ragged vest proudly found himself adorned with a pair of army socks, donated by one of the lads, held in place by a long piece of string over his shoulders.

When, at last our transport did arrive it was a case of checking everything to make sure all was correct. After all it was the first time our trucks had been separated from us and we felt that someone else had been "interfering with our goods and chattels." One thing we had to be certain about was that our "desert kettle" was still with us, and it was. The next check was for oil, petrol, water, and rations and so we set off on what could be called phase three of our journey and travelled towards the north.

We passed through Caserta and then into Capua but unfortunately insufficient time was given to explore that historical city and, remembering the considerable publicity given to the bombing of the Cassino Abbey, decided we should visit the town itself although it was not on our direct route.

All along the road from Capua wash extensive evidence of battling armies but even so the descent down into the Cassino valley was a frightening display of what warfare could do to such a small piece of countryside.

Our erstwhile enemies had blocked the river and flooded the whole valley - resulting in a variety of multipurpose vehicles bogged and abandoned all over the place. It was obvious that the whole area from hilltop to hilltop had been progressively subject to shellfire and had been extensively mined because, even though at least six months had elapsed, no one appeared to have even tried to venture off the road and the terrible sickly scent of death pervaded everywhere.

Among the remnants of the town some houses were being reconstructed and there were even a few shops and being Italy there would bound to be wine shops but still there was no time for us to venture. Our journey took us right into the town centre then onto a main road to the east heading for Pescara on the Adriatic coast and where we stayed that night in a partially wrecked building and we could not help but think it would have been much nicer to have stayed in one of the villages we came through in the mountains.

On the way, however, in the mountains we were held up, the Royal Engineers were backfilling where the road in a steep section, had been blown by the enemy and had been roughly filled in but was now to be properly finished. We were warned not to go near the verges because of mines which had been swept but it was not certain they were completely clear until a final check over had been done. We therefore settled down near an abandoned house to have a meal but, of course, the lads just had to do some investigating and in an outhouse found about six rough crates, about one metre by rough crates, about one metre by 250 millimetres each containing five blocks 250 millimetres diameter by 25 millimetres which looked as if they were covered in a pitch substance. Then one wise lad found that all the lids were slightly raised with small wooden wedges and it was realised that the wedges were preventing an electrical contact between two rough pieces of tin connected to a small battery, obviously these blocks must have been explosives of some sort. Hurriedly all the lids were raised and the batteries disconnected and notices made on pieces of wood and cardboard warning others of what these things were. Needless to say, the premises were vacated very rapidly in case there were other traps.

At this point I am very much amiss and not mentioning that our old dependable Bedford 15 cwt trucks were, at Mme Loups (Pt 3) changed over to 15cwt Chevrolet's to the delight of the drivers as they now had fully enclosed cabs with full front screens and ample storage space for their personal effects.

However to proceed, and continued northwards up the Adriatic coast to Osimo and joined with the company and ensconsed in a marvellous old building fit for a king. Here it was a case of regrouping ourselves and get ready for more work with the Artillery and the first job was to check some trig points to the north of Loretto a few miles South of Osimo. This proved to be a most difficult activity as the only trig point we could occupy was on a church roof and had to be offset from the trig itself, which was a small spire with bells in it. The pantiles made it awkward to set up the theodolite but even more so for us to move about but after much tying-down with string and such, having observers placed at three points round the instrument so that no one needed to move, we then got it done.

The next day Ancona occupied our attention with more trig points to check with several resections on tower buildings and as it turned out to be a really nice day we decided to go for a swim after work so went to the south end of the Bay.

While in the water I thought it might be a good idea to swim across the Bay to a jetty and started off. Unknown to me some of the lads followed so I had to tell them to go back. Most of them did so but two carried on. The swim itself was great but the arrival at the jetty was not. There was a heavy swell and the seaward side of the jetty was surrounded with huge blocks with ragged edges which made it difficult to land. Having got there I found the other two in trouble so wedged myself between two of the blocks to assist the others to land. Fortunately all went well but it was a long walk round the bay back to the truck.

Just as we left Osimo one day we heard an explosion in the village and were upset to find what had happened - it seemed that a young girl had been leading an ox through the village when the animal, which was walking on the verge, trod on a mine. It was badly injured and had to be put down but the girl had scarcely a mark on her but was killed.

A little later a move was made towards Fano, still on the Adriatic coast and one evening I was not feeling at all well so thought a walk before bedtime might help but no such luck. All I can remember about that night was being extremely sick. My vest received most of that and was a brilliant yellow.

The next happening was a long journey in the back of a truck finishing up on a stretcher in a hospital near Bari. I apparently had contracted malaria. It seemed that the medical authorities considered any person with malaria had not been taking his Mepacrine tablets so was consigned to a stretcher for the first four days and as that stretcher canvas stretched so you went further onto the tiled floor. I had to hold my lower jaw with two hands when the shakes came on me and so far as I can remember had nothing to consume for the four days except the dosages of Quinine after which the “nurses” gave us fruit juices. The last three of the eight days’ treatment were spent in a hospital and then were allowed out but these hospital beds were very much better than these stretchers. The only thing was we were always hungry so the three lads I had teamed up with paid a visit to the fishermen on the beach and after much haggling bought a fish. It was rather too big for us so we went to the cook house and got the cook to prepare and cook it for us in exchange for half of it. There were still plenty for us and with some bread and butter we enjoyed a good meal. At the end of my treatment the return to the Section was a long tedious journey but I was glad to be back.

My return was just in time to go inland with the Section to a place near Arezzo up in the central mountains. We had to find some ground stations on the hilltops which kept us quite busy. After checking the main at trig points for the "Gunners" we returned to the company which had settled down in a college building in Fano also on the Adriatic coast.

This was when I had a tremendous surprise. We had hardly got into camp and were still settling the Section down in its new quarters. I was sent for and told I would be going on leave immediately to Rome for ten days so get my kit packed and on the truck which was waiting for me. The Coy. Clerk was unable to pay me so would have to draw pay from the Company I would be staying with which proved to be the 516 Fd Svy Coy and I would be spending my leave with my old friend Chas Lucas if he could get time off.

With a great deal of haste and without a chance to wash let alone bath, my kit and I went aboard the truck and off we went starting about 4.0 p.m. Much to the Section's consternation

As we were approaching a place called Terni on the main road to Rome we thought of stopping and doing a brew-up when, standing in the middle of the road, was a girl flagging us down. Rather intrigued we stopped to find that a lift into Rome was required by four girls and on learning we were intending to make a brew, we were taken into the house and the brew put in hand. It was well after midnight by the time we set off so our arrival at the destination almost brought out the guard.

No. 1872373 Rank: SGT. Name: HUSSEY R.T.

DRUG	QUININE IN GRAINS			MEPACRINE IN TABLETS (0.1 gm)				
MED. UNIT	151 L.F.A	151 L.F.A	151 L.F.A	11 G.H.P	11 G.H.P	11 G.H.P	11 B.G.H.	11 B.G.H.
DATE DUE	25.9.	26.9	27.9	28.9	29.9	30.9	1.10	2.10
DOSE	1/0/0	1/0/0	1/0/0	4/4/4	4/4/4	3/3/3	3/3/3	

Cancel dose given by diagonal e.g. ☑

Indicate next dose due by arrow ☐

Last arrow on right represents next dose due.

TYPE OF MALARIA	CLIM	No. OF ATTACK	1

Notes

PAMAQUIN TABLETS (0.01 gm) — DATE — DATE — DATE

PSS/A/3033/200M/6-44

C.M.F. Form 67

MALARIA TREATMENT CARD

INSTRUCTIONS

One of these cards must be issued for each attack of Malaria.

It is to be used as a record of treatment and given to the Officer or Other Rank on discharge with instructions to produce it if re-admitted to a Medical Unit. The Soldier should keep it in his A.B. 64.

All doses must be cancelled when given. The arrows need only be used in Transit. If time permits, the first unit initiating treatment should fill in all the dates.

Each unit receiving cases with "Malaria—Treat in Transit" labels must check that the treatment prescribed has been given and cancelled on the card.

The Mepacrine Tablets given in transit can be divided into groups of 4 or 3 if more convenient than the standard division.

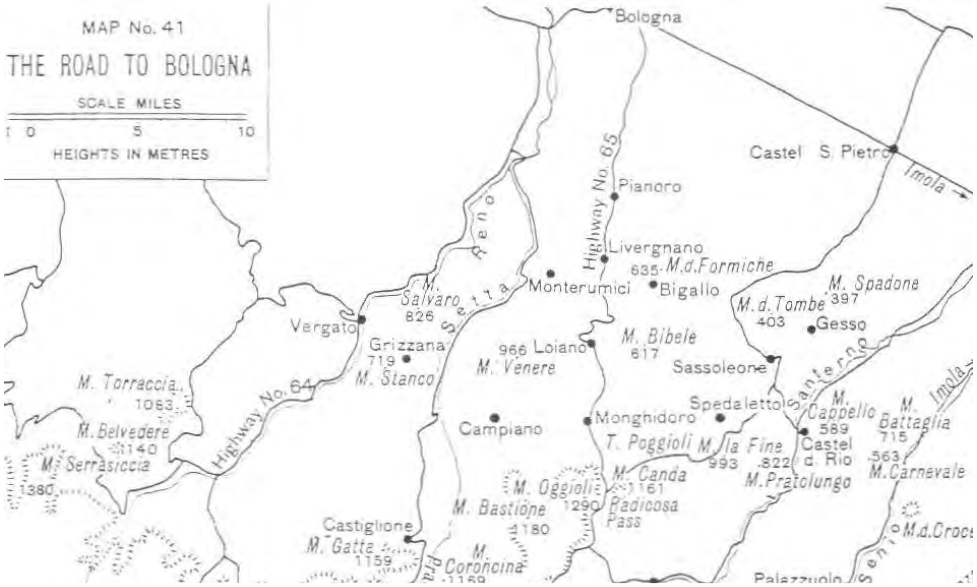
Signature of M.O. of Unit finally discharging patient .....

Date : 2/10/44

MEDICAL UNIT .....

11 Sqn Gen Hosp

Map of La Spezia area.



Fortunately, Chas did get several days leave so I was taken around all the usual sites including an audience with the Pope and various theatres where, at one little show were four girls where dancing on the stage and the top front of one girl's dress fell down revealing all. She dashed into the wings but back almost out once to a vigorous clapping by the audience. But lo and behold the dress again fell and again a dash to the wings but again a reappearance to a tremendous ovation. She was a great sport.

The 516 very obligingly issued me some pay so presents to send home were being bought which led to realise that it was a long time since my folks had received a photograph of me so a small studio was found who could help. No sooner was that sorted out when Charles and I were snapped by a street photographer in the via del Tritone. These snaps would be ready the next day and turned out to be very good and supplemented those from the studio. A visit to the Sistine Chapel was a must and also a show at the Theatro Reale. The N.A.A.F.I. off the Via Umberto was our usual rendezvous for lunch.

The leave in Rome rapidly became a memory as the Section settled down at the company H.Q. at Fano. There was a need to supplement the Drawing Section due to their preoccupation with the latest enemy defence line South of Bologna. This area was being attacked by the American forces, and it was with some surprise we were detached to go into that area at Castel Del Rio. Our first billet it was in a very pleasant looking farmhouse although it needed quite a bit of cleaning up but we were getting used to that necessity. Unfortunately, that did not turn out to be the real problem. Up at the head of the valley, the end nearest the enemy, was a 5.5 Battery which amused itself by firing at the enemy and they, quite rightly, returned the compliment, but that is where the 5.5 battery had the advantage in that it could not be reached by them owing to the steepness of the mountain so they, having been in our area previously, knew about the farm house so proceeded to plonk that instead. Strangely enough, I met up an officer of that 5.5 battery after the end of hostilities and he just had to have a laugh when he found out why we had been driven out of our billet.

However, we found a better place lower down the valley out of range of the nasties and again went about our clearing up procedure. There were quite a few explosive devices which had to be carefully carted to a collection point further back but one we disposed of ourselves. It was a bazooka rocket which we placed on a wall and pointed towards a cliff face. Our battery was connected and on the second attempt it went off in a cloud of smoke but did not explode on hitting the cliff.

One hilltop we had to occupy was the scene of a battle fought by the Americans and a lot of their dead were still up there. I was unable to visit that station as I had much to do on other hilltops but I am glad I missed it because those lads were rather upset and were not keen to make a return journey.

My return from leaf was about the end of November so the date for Castel Del Rio could only have been in the first weeks of December because we spent Christmas at the village where the company spent the winter of 1944/45. Verruchio was a place just South of the Marecchia River and north of the small principality of San Marino. Although the sergeants' mess was in the village we slept in an abandoned convert which also housed several families evacuated from Rimini. It meant a long walk in all weathers to reach our mess and the Section's workplace. Fortunately we did not need to interfere with the civilians nor they with us but it was to their advantage when we brought up one of the Company's 350-amp generators which also provided them with light.

The heating for the sergeant's bunk was derived from an electrical element normally used in a print trailer and was rather cumbersome. It did accomplish the intention but to our horror something else. We found we were overrun with fleas and had to bring in the medicals to clear the room and our possessions with a D.D.T. bomb. We were obliged to leave everything shut up in the room for twelve hours.

Morning parades were held in what was called the repro park, in other words where all the print trailers were positioned, which somewhat cramped the parade area. In a way this was helpful to me because one morning I found one of my men was drunk and could hardly stand up. The O.C. was already there so we had to organise the Section rapidly as a support group and keep him quiet and to hold him up. There was seldom a full inspection so we got away with it, but I had to find out why. It transpired that he had just received a letter from home which told him that his brand new wife of no more than a few months had gone off with an American Serviceman. There was little I could do except to see the O.C. and ask for special leave for him. I did not expect any luck as he had only just returned from leave. After about a week things changed as leave was being arranged for certain categories so he was allowed to go. I could only breathe a sigh of relief. I did not fancy this performance every day.

One day I happened to notice something in the village which led to another idea. Two men were sawing wood, it was a full tree trunk and was laid across supports which gave room below for the man there to handle that end of a large crosscut saw. Obviously they were carpenters and could do a job for me. I had managed to get my camera out from home listed on the parcel as a fruit cake and although film was scarce had taken a few shots. With the help of the Company photographer I had processed some film but had no enlarger so I approached the said carpenters and arranged for them to make me a wooden enlarger from my drawings. All I would need then was a lens.

Morning parades were held in what was called the repro park, in other words where all the print trailers were positioned, which somewhat cramped the parade area. In a way this was helpful to me because one morning I found one of my men was drunk and could hardly stand up. The O.C. was already there so we had to organise the Section rapidly as a support group and keep him quiet and to hold him up. There was seldom a full inspection so we got away with it, but I had to find out why. It transpired that he had just received a letter from home which told him that his brand new wife of no more than a few months had gone off with an American Serviceman. There was little I could do except to see the O.C. and ask for special leave for him. I did not expect any luck as he had only just returned from leave. After about a week things changed as leave was being arranged for certain categories so he was allowed to go. I could only breathe a sigh of relief. I did not fancy this performance every day.

One day I happened to notice something in the village which led to another idea. Two men were sawing wood, it was a full tree trunk and was laid across supports which gave room below for the man there to handle that end of a large crosscut saw. Obviously they were carpenters and could do a job for me. I had managed to get my camera out from home listed on the parcel as a fruit cake and although film was scarce had taken a few shots. With the help of the Company photographer I had processed some film but had no enlarger so I approached the said carpenters and arranged for them to make me a wooden enlarger from my drawings. All I would need then was a lens.

Chapter 13

1945

Many tears were shed by the villagers of the Verrucio as our trucks formed up in the town square ready to leave on this spring morning in 1945. The main body of the company would leave very much later and although we were very sorry to make our departure, we were also keen to get on with the job on hand.

From the winding road to San Arcangelo, we turned northwest on the main road to Bologna and found ourselves in a queue of vehicles becoming a part of the Army's push across the Po plain. However, not being a major attacking unit, we were promptly pushed on one side by the M.P.'s with instructions to wait. Here I have to make an apology as I have, so far, not mentioned the Section's Officer. This is because, for some reason, I just cannot remember him at all but he must have been there.

It was a bright blue-sky day and we heard that the U.S.A. Air-force was to bomb ahead of the British forces with a bomb-line of 800 metres. Apparently, the Poles were in line to attack towards Bologna so would be close up to the bomb line. We watched as the 24 B-17s came over us turned onto their target and dropped their loads. It seemed to us that some of the loads were falling short of the target and from the furore and rapid movement of vehicles something was amiss. It was said that some of the Poles had received some of what was intended for the enemy. There was a hurried regrouping and things went ahead. Our movement would be delayed until the way was clear and as far as can be remembered was the next day when we moved up to turn North off the main road near Imola and head towards Budrio. Things wewre moving extremely fast and we had difficulty in finding the Artillery Survey units. Never the less some resections were done so we justified our existence but then found our axis of advanced again changed to the north heading for the Po but had to mark time for a few days while the attack on Ravenna was completed and turned the enemy flank causing the opposition ahead to evaporate and allowed the engineers to get on with building a pontoon bridge across the River Po.

We had moved into an area with few houses, but we found an empty one which seemed suitable so proceeded to clear up when the very near sound of gunfire caused us to grab a gun and go looking. The Gurkhas were shooting chickens down out of the trees and were enjoying it. They apologised for disturbing us and went about the business of getting a large chicken meal ready.

It was then I notice that "Haggis", our cook, Appeared to be worried about something so I asked and was told apologetically, that he had a large piece of beef that he had swapped for some of our spare rations that had nothing in which to cook it, nor a means of cooking as we only had two burner pressure stoves. When encountering the Gurkhas, one of the lads had noticed a large brick column near the other houses about a metre and a half square and about 8 feet high with two metal doors forming two compartments in the top half. At the same time one lad suggested the meat should be cut in half and at the same time another pointed out it was too much for us to eat before going bad and we should give some to the locals.

The ladies were rather apprehensive on our approach but on seeing the meat and realising we wanted them to have it became very attentive.

They realised we had no means of cooking it so took us to this brick column and proceeded to light a fire of twigs in the top section while one lady took several lads in a truck to collect more twigs etc.

I then learned more about our cook when he produced a dust-bin-sized container nearly full of white flour. It was obvious he had no means of cooking bread, so the flour was shown to the ladies who nearly went mad on seeing so much but also realised our problem. Some of the ladies took the flour into one of the houses and began making a large amount of dough. They already had some yeast and instructed the lads to light a fire in the lower compartment of the cooker.

In this way we don't only have a nice piece of beef to eat but also some fresh bread. Of course, the ladies had to have a large portion of the flour that was left.

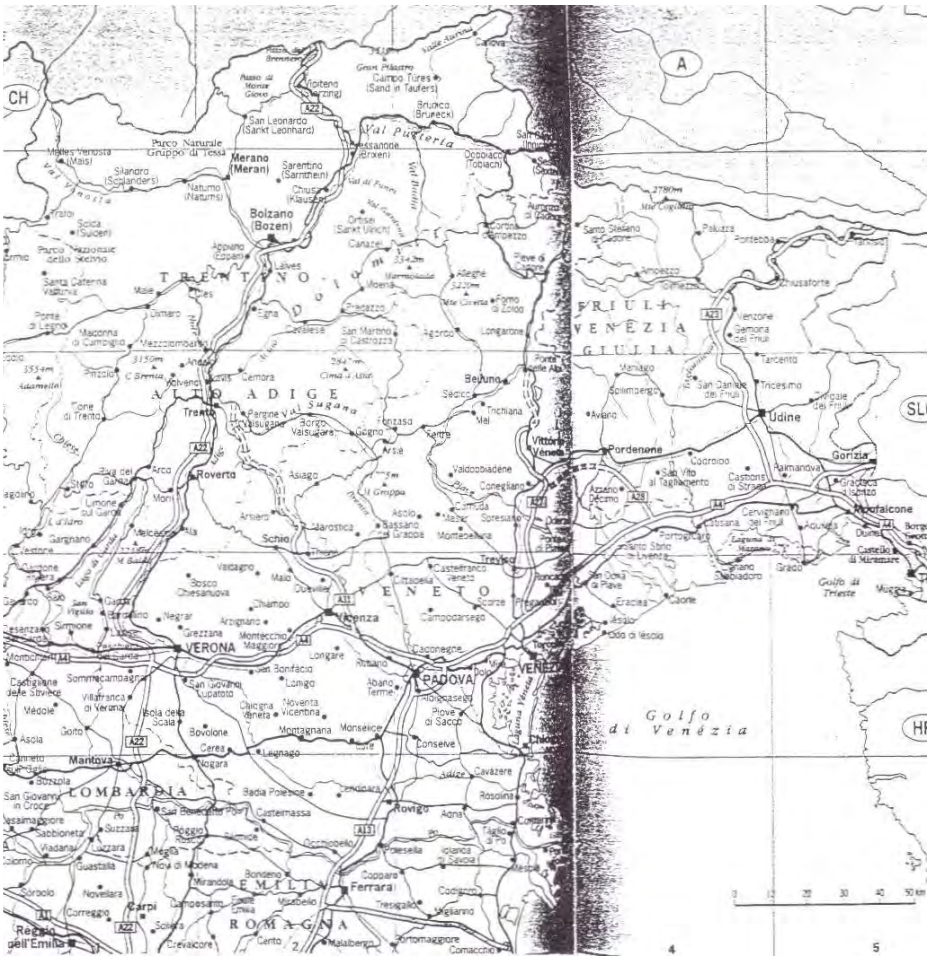
Just after this episode we had to move up and get in the queue to cross the River Po. It was a long pontoon bridge, so the MPs were spreading out the vehicles to even the load especially for big vehicles. Disaster struck us then. One of the Chevrolet trucks packed up. The driver had been having trouble with it for quite a while and it was drinking oil. There was obviously a little compression in the engine so we had to leave it there transferring the load into the three-tonner. The M.P's were getting impatient but made a note about the truck and agreed to arrange its collection to a vehicle park.

So we went on with some work to do as we crossed a Bailey bridge over the Brenta River thence to the Piave but here was a bit of mind-boggling effort going on. The Brenta bridge was being taken down and all traffic stopped to allow it to be taken across the Piave and then the Piave bridge was to be taken down and onto another river further north. We would be obliged to wait a few days while more engineers would replace these bridges.

Our leader found us a new billet which was quite a large as wider than deeper with an iron fence on a brick wall along the front with large, double, metal gates. We dashed in to investigate and found there were several small rooms on the ground floor and one large room upstairs but what took all of our attention was that this upper room was full of beds complete with mattresses and placed with the heads to the two long walls forming two rows with a space between the foot of the beds but not a lot of space between them. While cogitating on this peculiarity one of the drivers came up reporting there were several soldiers at the front gate asking if the place was open and were the women there? And then the penny dropped. It was a brothel. We then noticed that all the beds were the same and had painted metal head and foot boards. The foot boards were all badly scratched and had little paint left on them so it seemed that the German troops were not required to remove their boots.

I chose one of the downstairs rooms for myself after our leader had made his choice, as I had, on the lower floor. Most of the lads were glad of the comfort of a mattress and Haggis, the cook, was pleased with the kitchen.

Once the new bridges were in place we moved on and realised the R.A. had been similarly held up so found another billet clear of the bridges and got back to work. That evening the batman looked upset and informed me that while the Boss and he were in the Jeep with the boss driving entered a village and met, head on, a Mark 4 Tank. There was a super about turn so he still does not know if the tank was empty or full of crew.



It was obvious that the enemy was disappearing from in front of us and an order was given to go like mad as far as our petrol and other supplies would take us. That morning the boss went off to find out more about the situation and gave me a route to take the section on. Therefore, I lead in the 3-tonner and shortly after starting was on a straight bit of road which had a slight dip and a long rise with a line of trees on our right. Even as I noticed these facts a fighter aircraft turned over the far end of the road and lined up directly on us. I warned the driver and he prepared to make for the ditch. It was known that the enemy had hardly any aircraft but you could never tell and our twin Brens were not mounted on a truck.

It was a relief when the plane pulled away and as he went by the pilot (American) gave us the two-finger salute.

As the time went by we had to consider the petrol situation so decided that our limit would be by the time we reached a place called Casarsa. The Boss had not caught up with us so had to make arrangements for someone to be on the main road to stop him. All along the way small groups of the enemy were marching southwards to give themselves up as P.O.W's. They looked extremely tired but marched very well.

The "partegani" celebrated our arrival at Casersa by breaking down the fascisti commemorative slab over the fascist office. This was then followed by a distribution of flowers and wine and as our leader had just arrived was able to enjoy that. On finding that Haggis, our cook, had an Italian rifle but no ammunition they piled Haggis and several others into our Jeep and before anyone could say otherwise went roaring off to some other village saying the passengers could witness the execution of some fascisti. The local farmer allocated a large barn for our use so the petrol situation had to be assessed and the only thing we could do was to transfer as much petrol from other trucks as convenient, into one vehicle and to pile as many 4-gallon containers and send the driver with two helpers South to find a petrol point.

However, in the barn we found a Fiat saloon and by using some of our scant petrol got it going. The farmer made no objection, so it was decided to visit Trieste while waiting for the return of the truck. As many as possible squeezed into the car and we set off.

It was along a straight quiet road we got a real fright. After going past the farmland the first building enclosure housed a monster which gave us a heart-stopping shock. It was a neatly lined up Mark 3 tank, the one with the short-barelled 75-millimetre gun. It was as clean as for inspection so having gone tearing by we crept back and peered carefully round the wall but decided it was crewless. We had a good look inside and took out the articulated gun side but had to press on with our journey.

At Trieste we avoided the town and went up to the hill above the houses and found what was left of a radar station. The huts had been damaged, and one lone occupant lay there by a wash bench straight on his back as if to attention with a toothbrush in his hand but he was very dead. The huts provided us with some German portable radios, but all were damaged so Taffy Davis, our computer, with an uncanny feeling for radios, told us to get as many radios as possible into the car and he would try to get one good one out of it. I found a German Iron Cross medal which I have to this day.

On return to Casarsa, it was suggested by Geordie McBain that some of the lads might like to call on Primo Carnera. He had already found out where the old boxer lived apparently in a village in the foothills to the north of our present situation and as our petrol lorry had got back to us with a full load the leader gave his permission on the understanding we would be moving off early the next morning.

They found the old chap who was very pleased to see them but the gifts they took were not really suitable being cigarettes and he only smoked a pipe. Still, he could always exchange them.

So next day we moved on again and found another billet in an almost new wooden barn with an upper floor. Taffy, in the meantime, had almost got one German set working and we had been warned that on that day, the 2nd May, there would be an announcement about to the cessation of hostilities and were keen to hear it. However, Taffy was left with one problem - not one of his aerials would work on this set. He had found with the German sets a lead about two metres long and half an inch thick with a metal plug on each end. One end would fit nicely into a socket on the set but still no results until someone, jokingly suggested that the other end be stuck in the ground. Taffy in a fit of frustration did just that and the set immediately worked properly. We last heard the announcement and went up to the upper floor of the barn collecting all the drinks we had.

That amounted to two bottles of whiskey, two of June three sherry, half a dozen beer on several orange or lemon squash with some local Vino.

We sat there, absolutely sober and quiet, each one in his own thoughts and drank everything we had and did not show a sign of inebriation at all. We all felt deflated. We had come all this way, done so many things, lived and slept in so many different places and travelled such long distances and now it was all over.

They did not need us anymore - we were redundant.

The next morning, we felt a little better and set about rejoining the company at, I believe, Attimis but shortly after that I am sure the Company moved to Udine. We were there only a short time and then sent a detachment into Austria to St. Lambrecht, a monastery near Leoben. There we had to sort out a German map library or, as we describe it, a map depot.

On arrival there we were surprised to find two young ladies in control. They had apparently been employed by the Germans but we had no idea who would henceforth pay their wages. They were very cooperative and showed us all around the establishment, stressing the need to avoid upsetting the monks etc. Beside maps there were several four-drawer filing cabinets one housing a complete set of British "Lilliput" magazines but in the others a mass of pornographic photographs. One item of interest was an automatic rifle with an attachment which would permit it to fire round corners.

At this stage I think I should mention my bed, strange thing to do I know but it is something I did while we were at Fano but should have carried out probably a year or so earlier. I had found my bed, having been made-up and wrapped in a ground sheet and tied was string, always seemed to suffer when others went scratching about in the truck for their belongings. I therefore considered some form of more permanent wrapping and proceeded to take a bivouac tent to pieces with my trusty, not rusty, razor blade and, with a dimensioned sketch went to a local cobbler and he built it just as directed with a piece of printers' felt, one quarter of an inch thick, sewed into the bottom. The top panel was only fastened at the foot and ties were strategically situated along the sides so, having made my bed, put the top piece in place made the ties and rolled it up finally fixing with two leather German rifle slings. I never had any more trouble and moreover had a bed that was warm and convenient.

However, to proceed, at the map library the purpose was to complete a full list of all the maps there and they were nearly all Russian so had difficulty in establishing a map index sheet, but the usual R.E. common-sense prevailed. We did get into a little bit of trouble, all the rolls of maps were in 50s and we have been extracting one sheet of each roll to send via the Company to England so that some knowledge of Russia would be kept available. It was the Russians who complained as, apparently the roles were sent back to them.

The village had a large circular pond which was teeming with trout and we were given permission to take some. Unfortunately, we found they tasted rather muddy probably due to bottom feeding. Much to my surprise McBain suggested we go up in the hills and get some trout by "gudling". Not knowing the term, I was told to go along and help. This involved four lads, two each side of a mountain stream with one laying on his front with his arms well apart and in the water. Opposite would be one whose duties were to keep the first one aware of exactly where the trout was. Person No. 3 would be on the legs of No. 1 to stop him falling in. On an appropriate signal from No. 2 - one would gently tickle the belly of the trout and suddenly, with two hands, attempt to throw it out onto the far bank - deluging No. 2 at the same time. Although that stream was never more than two feet wide and a foot deep at any place we got nineteen trout all about half-pound in weight. Even more so, when cooked, tasted fresh and clean unlike the pond fish.

While at St. Lambrecht we were attached to the Lancers for rations and accommodation all being in the monastery. I did not have an officer i/c so had to sort things out for myself as on one day received an instruction to have a look at another map depot at Knittlefeld a few miles on towards Vienna.

This place was a hutted establishment that had damage to the roofs of both huts and rainwater had made a real mess of everything. I could see that, if we got the job, it would mean a lot of hard work before any progress could be made.

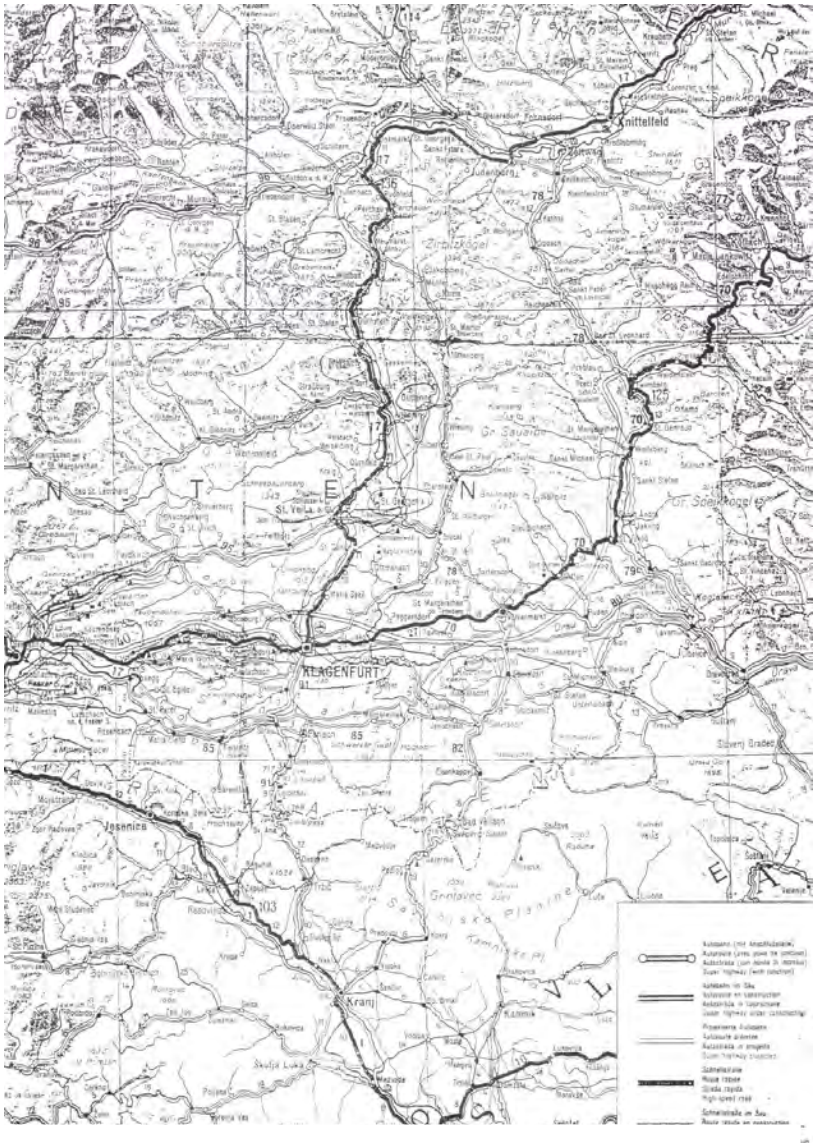
About a week later my fears became justified when who should step on our doorstep none other than Paddy O'Brian the Irishman complete with his section (Part One P.TP 8). My first comment after greeting him in an appropriate manner was, "what on earth are you doing here?" to which he replied "to take over from you of course." I then had to introduce him to the Lancers and they then said we shall have to have a party so when I pointed out that Paddy was Irish they said we've got just the thing. The thing was a case of 36 small bottles of Guiness and they would be glad to get rid of it as no one would drink it.

I must describe the room in which the Lancers held their parties or rather the chandelier in that room. It was of carved wood and from tip to tip must have been about fifteen feet and was very suitable for the room which was something like forty feet by twenty-five feet.

In due course, the party went well and got into full swing with Paddy entertaining the others with his Irish ways. However, I was obliged to leave for a while as I had my lads to see to and the next thing was one of the Lancers dashing down asking me to do something about Paddy. That puzzled me and I asked why. It seemed that Paddy, now well away with Guinness, was dancing with the R.S.M. and he was not keen on the experience.

On reaching the scene I considered it would be difficult to separate them, so I went in with a rugby tackle round the waist but the next minute I found myself being swung round and round by Paddy with my heels just missing the chandelier. What was so staggering was that Paddy could never be described as being massively built yet there I was weighing about fourteen stone being swung as if I only weighed eight stone. The R.S.M. was a good sport and bore Paddy no grudges and so our Section continued its travels. As I had expected we did have a lot of work to do at Knittlefeld and our main problem was trying to maintain the order the maps were placed in while rescuing much of it from the rain.

Once again, we were attached to the Lancers but this time the 16/17th and established in a fairly big hotel. They insisted that there should be an initiating ceremony to commemorate my joining the Sergeants' mess. This was the enactment of the charge of the Light Brigade where, in this case, the horses were represented by chairs ridden back to front. To my amazement my chair was placed out in front as the leader facing the opposing force of another row of chairs. Once the evening meal was over and a few drinks put away, the ceremony began, resulting in myself being overwhelmed in a mass of bodies and chairs. Fortunately, it was rated as a success so there would be no need for a re-enactment.



It was here I was introduced to the duvet which, then, appeared to be a gigantic pillow and caused me some concern over how I would sleep under it. I discovered I had to beat the edges down round me and everything was fine. There was a shock when I had to get up in the early hours due to drinking a drop or two the night before and putting my great coat round my shoulders ambled out to the loo. On my way back I vaguely realised my roommate was sitting on his bed and mumbled "good morning" then crawled into bed. On getting warm again my brain began to work and I could not help but realise that there were two people there and one was not my roommate nor a man.

Meanwhile, the Company had established a leave camp in a house on the side of a lake near Belluno having a staff to look after the lads and transport to take them wherever they wished to go. This resulted in me losing almost half the section for a week but it made little difference as the work at Knittelfeld was about finished. There was little we could do with the maps affected by rain.

Guttaring was the Company's new quarters so we moved back there after calling at St. Lambrecht to see how Paddy was getting on and found him about to move.

Chapter 14

[*no title*]

Although we knew several happenings were taking place at the Company, it was not until we arrived there and appreciated that many "old" faces were missing. With "Overland Leave" and "repatriation" all occurring at the same time such a situation would certainly arise. My old mate John Armytage had already left, being married and much older than the rest of us, so all that we could look forward to was this "Overland Leave" which was the transportation, by 3-ton lorries equipped with padded seats down each side of the vehicle, of the leave-takers to a Channel port and thence home.

The journey took two or three days' night stops in well-equipped stations and midday lunch breaks en-route. The American Sectors were entertaining, in that there seemed to be a lot of doughnuts and coffee available.

Those of are still waiting had to fill in time in mostly to suit ourselves as air photo work was no longer required and many made use of the six or seven horses the Company had acquired. One driver in particular appeared to be extremely good with the animals so all was left to him. However, the gallops up in the hills were pleasant and invigorating and would take at least an hour and a half of your spare time.

One enjoyable incident occurred on the "Overland Leave" was when the drivers would steer close in to fruitful apple trees on the side of the road and with the canopy's being folded back the canopy tubes would harvest the fruit for us and almost fill the interior.

As time went by the strength of the Company steadily reduced so various S.N.C.O's where obliged to take on duties which were foreign to their normal pattern, myself landing that of quartermaster. It was frustrating to plough through masses of forms with seemingly little success, loading very carefully so that at the depot at Graz unloading would be simple and the personnel would find everything in order. Unfortunately, they would have preferred me to have loaded it all on a tipper lorry and just slid it down onto the ground in front of them. One had to be careful at Graz as the depot was on one side of a river and the Russians on the other. Should you stray, you would likely be subject to much questioning by the Russians.

As Q.M. I was able to do some good because we found a lot of printing paper "Cut offs", strips about 6 inches wide and one or two feet long. These, with a lot of small bottles of coloured inks, pencils and rubbers, we took to the local school. There ……..

[*Original page of the manuscript missing*]

As the numbers of troops in the Company decreased so activities had to go down. Programme "A" was continued in a modified form to cater for a variable demand and visits to other towns laid on but the holiday camp near Belluno had to be closed down due to lack of available staff. However, the "Overland leave" continued but on a much-reduced scale as the last of the company allowed to go were catered for.

It became difficult to arrange duties as discipline had to be maintained and guards continued although not as rigorously. The sentry "beat" was extended to cover more occupied premises and the sentry expected to be concerned with all of them. Cookhouse staff became quite a problem but it was surprising the number of volunteers to assist the cooks when the proposal was made to the Company.

As winter approached it became obvious that our problems would likewise increase as local sources indicated we could easily become snowed-in. We were fortunate in a way being allowed to borrow a machine from the local forestry authorities for shredding small timbers. Our Groomsman had anticipated that his horses may have trouble negotiating ice-covered roads so spare bodies were utilised in collecting small branches and shredding them up to establish a reasonable reserve of material to cover frosted areas. We were made aware of a peculiarity of the stream which ran through the village and out beside our hutted camp. It seemed that only the top water would freeze and the underwater continued to flow. Therefore, the first ice must not be broken as the water under would flow over the top and gradually build up considerable volumes of ice. We thought that if that happened we could blast it with primers and detonators but as it turned out that was far from practical.

Although films were brought in they never seemed to have the appeal of cinemas even though it was quite a long trip to the nearest ones at St. Viet and Klagenfurt. Of course, the dances at the hospital were well attended and, on occasions, some of the nurses were invited to the messes in the village. On one such time a driver, while taking the ladies back, ran into and killed a deer. Thus, there was venison on the menu for several days. However, a very sudden re disposition of the remnants of the Company happened at the end of November which cancelled all our concerns about winter. Our groom was heart-broken as all his charges had to be returned to a centre and he was not certain what would happen to them.

The rest of us were sent to a hunted camp at Villach and told we would be guarding a timber yard. Fortunately, only a few men were required each night so the duties were well spread out. No indication was originally given of our possible length or stay, which I thought unreasonable, and I made some inquiries. They were not keen to divulge this information as it could cause possible trouble but it appeared we were likely to move to the U.K. on the 30th December. This meant us being incarcerated at the camp for a whole month. I really did complain so authority was issued allowing all the lads to visit Villach any time they wanted to. All that we were obliged to do was to provide the few guards each evening. The arrangement, of course, had a drawback for each time Villach was visited we were inclined to spend money and I knew all of the lads had drawn out sufficient to get them home and demob but not a month in Villach so arrangements to oblige us financially were made at the office.

There were some very popular tunes being played by the local orchestra at the N.A.A.F.I. One being "Don't Fence Me In" and we had to bear with that and two others for three times a day for thirty days. Eventually we were end trained and the journey began and the train was very comfortable and warm until we reached Ulm. There the steam coach was taken off and we thought they might be attaching one from a different railway, at least that is what the wheel-tapper told us after sampling his can of home-made beer, I do have to say that this beer had a most peculiar taste- it was made from onions.

One day I happened to notice something in the village which led Our travelled northwards became very uncomfortable as no steam coach had been attached and ice was forming on the inside of the windows half an inch thick. The only way to keep the slightest modicum of warmth was to put a blanket over one's head and pull the greatcoat round under the arms and over the knees. Most thankfully we reached Calais but even here the reception was bad. We were dumped in the biggest Nissen Hut I had ever seen. It was crowded with four-storied bunks but the far ends could not be seen because of the misty fog which filled the place.

Dover was a wonderful sight as it appeared on the skyline and started off a whole line of memories. I could not help but wonder how John Kelsey would have felt about all these incidents had he been with us.

And so it all ended.

The following rough notes are not part of Mr Hussey's document.

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF 518 FIELD SURVEY COMPANY R.E.

1. INTRODUCTION.

It is believed that there are no detailed "official" unit histories for the Field Survey Companies raised in the second world war. It is now perhaps doubtful if any will be compiled. For some of the companies, brief anecdotal souvenir histories were produced towards the end of the war using the cartographic and photographic skills and mobile printing resources of the units.

Hopefully, the following notes on various sources of historical material will serve in lieu of a unit history until the compilation of one is addressed, if ever.

There are four obvious sources of historical material : -

a. Brigadier A.B. Clough's monograph "Maps and Survey", H.M.S.O., 1952.

b. References, mainly war diaries, held in the National Archives at Kew.

c. Anecdotal souvenir histories produced by the units.

d. Personal accounts or reminiscences and correspondence regarding the same.

Notes on a-d above are at paragraphs 2-5 below. Anyone wishing to add to these notes or to suggest improvements of corrections is invited to contact the Defence Surveyors' Association at www.defencesurveyors.org.uk -

Defence Surveyors' Association, c/o Royal School of Military Survey, Denison Barracks, Hermitage, Berks, RG18 9TP.

2. NOTES FROM "MAPS AND SURVEY" BY BRIGADIER A.B. CLOUGH, H.M.S.O., 1952.

For each theatre of war Brigadier Clough describes the historical background and the strategical and military considerations followed by the survey planning and an account of the phases of the campaign including the survey involvement. These are followed by sections on the maps and map production, triangulation and field surveys, aerial photography and survey and map supply and distribution. For anyone interest in military survey in general or survey unit histories in world war two "Maps and Survey" should be consulted. Notes towards unit histories have been extracted from "Maps and Survey" and these are shown below, sometimes in full, sometimes in brief.

Since these notes were made, "Maps and Survey" has been scanned by DSA and is now available on the DSA website. The notes below may still however provide an "at a glance" summary of the unit's involvement in world war two.

For 518 Field Survey Company R.E. the index in Brigadier Clough's "Maps and Survey" gives : -

Theatre	**Pages**
Home Forces	37, 39.
Torch	39, 263-266, 269, 270, 272-274, 278, 286.
Sicily	499
Italy	299, 301, 327, 330.

Home Forces.

At the beginning of January, 1941 there were nine Field Survey Companies under Home Forces control and they were located in the commands as shown below :-

Southern Command	No. 519 (just formed)
	No. 516 (with 5 Corps)
Eastern Command	No. 14 (ex B.E.F.)
	No. 1 Canadian (with Canadian Corps)
Northern Command	No. 13 (ex B.E.F.)
	No. 521 (just formed)
Western Command	No. 517
	No. 520 (just formed)
Southern Command	**No. 518 (just formed)**

(Clough page 37)

"Torch"

Survey Directorates were assembled for the Allied Planning Headquarters for Operation "Torch" and for the British First Army which was to take part. **518** Field Survey Company R.E. was mobilized for this operation and ceased to be under Home Forces control. By October, 1942, the Survey organization in Home Forces was as under : -

Director of Survey, with Survey Directorate at G.H.Q. (now Colonel A.B. Clough who replaced Colonel Fryer on his appointment to Middle East in January, 1942).

A small Directorate with each of the Home Commands and certain Corps.

Field Survey Companies Nos. 14, 516, 519, 520, 521, 523 (515 in Northern Ireland), 1 Canadian.

General Survey Sections Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Field Survey Depots Nos. 3, 4, 5, 7, 10 (No. 6 in Northern Ireland).

Air (Survey) Liaison Section No. 1.

(Clough page 39)

The British survey organisation during the early part of the campaign (The race for Tunis and Bizerta

8 Nov - end Dec 1942) was as under : -

(a) Survey Directorate A.F.H.Q.

……. **518** Field Survey Company R.E. and the main part of 12 Field Survey Depot R.E. also being forward in First Army area…….

(c) **518** Field Survey Company R.E. This unit was of the normal corps type, and was equipped with the newly supplied demy-size printing machines and ancillary equipment mounted in special lorries. One topographical section reached Algiers by second convoy on "D"+4, the remainder arriving by third convoy on "D"+14.

(Clough page 263)

518 Field Survey Company, which arrived at Algiers on 22nd November, detailed one topographical section to carry out surveys for the anti-aircraft defence of Algiers, moving on to Bone at the end of the month for similar work there. The other topographical section was at first employed assisting 12 Field Survey Depot to organize the map depot and sort out the map stocks. The drawing section at once began the revision of 1/50,000 maps of the Bizerta-Tunis area from whatever air photographs could be obtained. The reproduction sections began work on 2nd December, their first task being the printing of 1/200,000 maps of Tunisia. After installing their main map depot in Algiers, 12 Field Survey Depot established a forward depot, first of all at Bone, using sea transport, and then at Constantine. The transport of **518** Field Survey Company was used for a map convoy service between the main depot at Algiers and Constantine. On 23rd December **518** Field Survey Company left its location at Menerville and moved forward to Conde Smendou.

(Clough page 265)

516 Field Survey Company R.E. arrived from the United Kingdom at the beginning of February, and moved to Draa. One topographical section was assigned for duty with U.S. II Corps, as the topographical unit belonging to that corps, 62 Engineer Topographical Company, was not yet available. It there joined up with one topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company which, having having been moved from the map depot to Bone for anti-aircraft surveys, was also assigned to II Corps (U.S.). These two sections remained with the corps working in conjunction with the field observation battalion until 62 Engineer Topographical Company was ready to take over, towards the end of March. No. 1 topographical section of 516 Company moved up into 5 Corps area along the line Beja-Medjez el Bab. Meanwhile No. 2 topographical section 516 Company carried out surveys for anti-aircraft defences at Bougie until about the middle of March, when it was withdrawn for employment on air-photo revision The drawing and reproduction sections of the two field survey companies were employed on map revision, the preparation of special large scale battle maps, and the reproduction and printing of large numbers of maps for the fighting troops and for staff use.

(Clough page 266)

Colonel S.G. Hudson succeeded Colonel Wheeler as D.D. Survey First Army and had at his disposal the following survey units : -

518 Field Survey Company R.E., which had been with First Army from the start.

516 Field Survey Company R.E., which arrived from the United Kingdom on 1st February.

12 Field Survey Depot R.E. ,which had been available since shortly after "D"-day. This was of the standard type, with one officer, 18 other ranks and one lorry only.

(Clough page 269)

One of the principal tasks during this last phase was to establish a third-order control for artillery operations during the battle which opened on 7th April to clear the enemy positions in the mountainous area Sidi Nsir-Oued Zarga-Medjez-el-Bab, as a preliminary to the main final offensive. To enable this work to be done, the topographical sections of **518** Field Survey Company had been moved to Beja on 15th March to establish control on the North African grid before the end of the month. This was done in the area from Beja towards the north-east as far as possible along the road to Sidi Nisr, and also between Beja and Oued Zarga. One topographical was, for this operation, attached to each survey troop of 5 Survey Regiment R.A., and the co-operation between R.E. and R.A. surveys appears to have been admirable. The topographical sections carried the control forward to keep pace with the advancing battle in face of enemy opposition and other difficulties such as minefields.

The establishment of trig control in 19 (French) Corps area was effected by one topographical section of 516 Field Survey Company in conjunction with the Army Group R.A. On completion of this task on 9th April, this section moved into 5 Corps area to carry out preparatory surveys for the final offensive. This was completed by 21st April, when one section moved north to near Grenadier Hill and the other section went into reserve.

On the completion of the preliminary surveys along the First Army front, three topographical sections were attached to 5 Survey Regiment R.A. for work in the following areas : -

One section (**518** Field Survey Company) from Medjez el Bab towards Longstop Hill.

One section (**518** Field Survey Company) around Medjez el Bab and towards Grich el Oued.

One section (516 Field Survey Company) in the Grenadier Hill area.

As soon as sufficient ground had been gained by the attack begun on 22nd April, each section carried the triangulation forward, and sufficient points were established to control the great concentration of artillery used for the offensive of 5th-6th May. The advance after that date was so rapid that the topographical sections had practically no further calls made on them.

After the cessation of hostilities in Tunisia on 12th May all topographical sections were employed on anti-aircraft surveys at Bone, Bizerta and Tunis.

(Clough page 270)

518 Field Survey Company R.E. arrived on "D"+16, and provided the only source of military map printing with First Army until 516 Company landed in early February. One of the first tasks given to **518** Company was to revise the 1/200,000 and 1/50,000 maps of northern Tunisia, using the more up-to-date French maps and any air photographs that could be obtained. The size of the unit's printing machines being "demy", it was necessary to divide the 1/50,000 sheets in two parts, and print them back-to-back on both sides of the paper. The 1/200,000 sheets were also printed in pairs, back and front of the paper.

(Clough page 272)

Within First Army **518** Company was available from about "D"+16 and 516 Company from early February. To provide A.F.H.Q. with adequate map printing power 11 and 12 Map Reproduction Sections R.E. were sent out by the War Office, arriving towards the end of March.

When Eighth Army entered Tunisia, and thereafter came under the control of 18 Army Group and A.F.H.Q., it brought with it 46 South African Field Survey Company and 517 Field Survey Company R.E., both of which had mobile reproduction sections of the normal type.

(Clough page 273)

Operational mapping tasks undertaken by 516 and 518 Field Survey Companies R.E.

…… These 1/25,000 maps of Tunisia were produced by First Army survey units. There was no existing French series on this large scale, and as no survey photography could be obtained which would be suitable for new large scale mapping, it was necessary to utilize, as basic material, the French 1/50,000 series which was of good quality. The detail was enlarged photographically and revision was incorporated from air photographs taken for intelligence purposes. The scale of these photos varied from 1/12,000 to 1/50,000, and there were varying tilts and overlaps, and large gaps in the coverage. A small party of topographic draughtsmen was attached to the Army Photo Centre to collect revision information from its library set of photographs.

Over 80 of these 1/25,000 sheets were produced and they were overprinted to show enemy defences. They were published in two stages. A first edition was issued somewhat in advance of the battle, bearing such intelligence information as was then available. A second edition was then usually produced immediately before the operation, containing the most up-to-date information. In some cases third and fourth editions were produced, but these were exceptional, as time was rarely available.

The General Staff (Intelligence) at Army H.Q. accepted responsibility for all overprint information whatever the source, and no attempt was made to short-circuit the normal channels by going to corps or divisions for information.

Survey, however, accepted responsibility for the positioning of the information on the maps, and for this purpose, a small R.E. survey detachment was attached to the Photo Centre, where it had access to the latest photos.

The reproduction sections of both **516 and 518 Field Survey Companies** were kept busy at full stretch on the production and printing of these 1/25,000 maps right up to the cessation of hostilities though, towards the end, the campaign was going so fast that it outran the need for maps on that large scale. Their other main task was the reprinting of the 1/200,000 and 1/50,000 series of Tunisia for stock.

When at full pressure each unit was turning out 1,000,000 or more impressions each month.

For the heavy artillery concentration in the Medjerda Valley before the final thrust it was decided to produce a "barrage overprint". An officer and a draughtsman from the Army Survey Directorate went to H.Q. 9 Corps R.A. in the evening, the draughtsman drew the overprint trace on the spot, and it was flown down to 516 Company, located further back. The required number of copies were run off on previously printed base maps and flown forward to the artillery.

(Clough pages 273-274)

Field surveys by British units for II (U.S.) Corps.

One topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company started work in the forward area on 17th February, but had to move back to the hills north-west of Feriana-Kasserine almost at once as a result of aggressive enemy action. They then supplied position and azimuth for artillery units in the area Bou Chebka-Dernaia-Bekhara Pass.

As testified by the American artillery commander, both sections of **518** Field Survey Company did most meritorious work.

(Clough page 278)

Map depot activities with First Army.

It was bolstered up at first by employing a topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company R.E. to help with the work of sorting out the bulk stocks and organizing the map depot.

(Clough page 286)

Sicily

The Survey organization, apart from that in Cairo, was as follows : -

A.F.H.Q. Survey Directorate (Brigadier R. Ll. Brown).
649 Engineer Topographical Battalion (U.S.).
516 and **518** Field Survey Companies R.E.
etc.

(Clough page 499)

Italy

The survey units under direct A.F.H.Q. control at the beginning of the campaign in Italy were as under : -

British

516 and **518** Field Survey Companies R.E. (late of First Army).
11 and 12 Map Reproduction Sections R.E.
2 Air Survey Liaison Section R.E.
10 Field Survey (Stores) Depot R.E.
7, 12 and 26 Field Survey (Map) Depots R.E.

U.S.

649 Engineer Topographical Battalion (Army).
Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Eastern Base Section Map Depots.
2611 and 2697 Engineer Map Depot Detachments.

(Clough page 299)

514 Field Survey Company, after nine months of strenuous and efficient service with Eighth Army, was withdrawn, being replaced by **518** Field Survey Company from A.F.H.Q., one of the two original units with First Army during operation "Torch".

Together with 49 Survey Company (S.A.E.C.), 7 General Survey Section, and 29 Field Survey Depot, 518 Company remained with Eighth Army till the end of the war.

(Clough page 301)

The final stage.

Up to the crossing of the R. Po on 26th April, the topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company was able to keep the R.A. survey units supplied with trig information well forward in the battle zone. From then on, however, the retreat turned into a rout, and movement was so rapid that field survey control could not keep pace with it. The need for survey, however, fell away with the collapse of resistance, so both topographical sections were withdrawn and put on to other work.

(Clough page 327)

The opening of the Italian campaign (September 1943),

Officers from A.F.H.Q. had helped to map up the troop ships leaving the ports of Bougie and Philippeville for Salerno, and a topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company R.E. did the same at Bizerta and then rejoined its unit at A.F.H.Q.

(Clough page 330)

3. NOTES FROM REFERENCES, MAINLY WAR DIARIES, IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, KEW.

The following notes are based on hasty examinations to assess the amount of material and possible copying requirements. In them, WD = War Diary, ms = manuscript. P or p = pages. Seen dates simply indicate the document was "in place" on that date.

518 Fd Svy Company War Diaries Home Forces Sep 1940 - Dec 1941.

Sep-Oct 40. 3p ms WD + 3p trg programme. Formation authorised 18 Sep 1940.
O.C. is Maj L. Harris. Formed up at Eastfield Camp.
Nov 40 4p ms WD. At Dalmeny. Several pages trg programme.
Dec 40 3p WD, 2p training programe.
Jan 41 2p WD.
Feb 41 4p WD.
Mar 41 2p WD + 3p training programme.
Apr 41 2p WD.
May 41 3p WD.
Jun 41 2p WD.
Jul 41 3p WD.
Aug 41 3p WD.
Sep 41 3p WD Dalmeny. Work at Oban.
Oct 41 3p WD.
Nov 41 4p WD.
Dec 41 3p WD Still at Dalmeny.
PRO WO 166/3783 Seen 12-12-08

518 Fd Svy Company War Diary Jan 1942 - Oct 1942.

Manuscript pencil war diaries, 1-2 pages per month. No returns included.
O.C. Maj L.J. Harris. Lts Sykes, P.A. Mann, Kelsey, O'Brien
Jan 42 Dalmeny.
14 Jan 2 Topo Sec to Glasgow to complete AA sites.
27 Jan 4 & 5 Repro Secs start test repro job for GSGS.
31 Jan Coy employed on AA sites, printing and preparation of loads for vehicles.
6 Jul. Lt Kelsey attends Street Fighting course!
19 Aug. Main party moves to Victoria Park Camp.
Sep. At Peebles.
Nothing of real note.
PRO WO 166/8211 Seen 21-3-09

518 Fd Svy Company War Diary - British North Africa Forces - 1 Nov 1942 to 30 Jun 1943.

Nov 42 O.C. is Maj L.J. Harris RE. Capt A.P. Hubner, Lts D. Heald, J. Kelsey, P.A. Mann and C.A.E. O'Brien. At Peebles initially. Company arrives at Algiers 22 Nov 1942.
Dec 42. At Menerville. WD is legible ms pencil, quite good for tech work done.
Jan 43. 6 pages. **Feb 43.** 6 pages. **Mar 43.** 5 pages.
Apr 43. 5 pages plus typescript Weekly Progress Reports giving brief details of work of Topo, Drawing and Repro sections. Incl list of sheets and impressions, about 10 pages.
May 43. 4 ms pages + 8 pages weekly reports typescript.
Jun 43. 2 ms pages plus 7 pages weekly reports.
PRO WO 175/668 Seen 12-12-08

518 Fd Svy Company War Diary Jul-Dec 1943 - BNAF, North Africa.

Jul 43 3p ms pencil. **Aug 43** 4p ms.
Sep 43 4p ms + 19p typescript weekly reports. Coy at Tunis. Revision of Italy 25,000.

Report on Mapping-Up Op Avalanche 5p. Photo'd 4-10-14.

Oct 43 3p ms + 11p weekly reports typescript. **Nov 43** 3pms + 8p typescript weekly tech reports.
Dec 43 3p ms + 7p tech reports. Air revision of Italy. Trig Lists. Conversion of 1650 points from geographicals to Lambert Zone III (Sud) Grid.
PRO WO 169/10699 Seen 12-12-08

518 Coy Italy War Diary - CMF - Italy - Jan 1944 - Dec 1944. This file is 8 cms thick!

Jan 1944 Ferme Antoine, Algeria. O.C. is Maj C.A.E. O'Brien R.E.
This file is similar to WO 170/5230 below with 2-3 page ms war diary proformae and several-page Monthly Reports, followed by the usual Army Returns of Strengths etc.
Aug 1944 At Afragola Staging Camp. No maps or photos included.
PRO WO 170/1702 Seen briefly 12-12-08

518 Coy Italy War Diary - CMF - Italy - Jan-Nov 1945. This file is 8 cms thick!

Jan 45 O.C. Maj A.J.D. Halliday. WD 2p ms pencil. Typescript monthly report 2p. Daily typescript Progress Reports on printed proformae.
Halliday relinquishes command on 15-2-45. Capt O'Brien assumes command.
Remaining months follow the same pattern.
By 10 Aug 1945 Company is at Gutaring (Austria?) having moved there from Colleredo.
Unit at Gutaring at end of the war diary period.
The July 1945 war diary contains a group photo of the Company.
WO 170/5230 This file is 5 ins thick due to "returns". Seen 12-12-08

Monthly Reports from Survey Branch , H.Q. British Troops Austria Aug 1945 - Jun 1946.

This thin file of monthly typescript reports, each about 4 pages, includes brief details of the activities of 19 Fd Svy Coy RE, 518 Fd Svy Coy RE, 29 Army Fd Svy Depot, and 7 Gen Fd Svy Section RE., and includes details of officer posts. Reports are signed initially by Col Sanceau, later by Col Bagot. File includes : -

"The Demilitarisation of the Austrian Cartographical Institute and the Control of Austrian Survey". By N.A. Taylor.

518 Coy will be disbanded on 30 Nov 1945. Disbandment completed by 28 Nov. Technical vehicles being retained in Austria. Final monthly report Jun 1946 - Svy Branch will close doors on 6 Jul 1946, ending the part played by "Survey" from Alamein to Austria.
Remainder of 19 Coy disbanded in Vienna on 28 June.
WO 402/369 Seen briefly 12-12-08

Malta Survey May 1944. – May 1945.

Detailed Svy file on task by 518 Corps Fd Svy Coy for re-construction civil planning etc.
Includes Progress Reports, Indexes. Capt O'Brien. Report dated 22 Aug 44.
Useful file if description of task ever undertaken.
WO 201/2708 Seen 1-9-12

4. NOTES FROM SOUVENIR BROCHURES.

"Goodbye to all this."
A souvenir booklet, Published and printed by 518 Corps Field Survey Company R.E.
Mike Nolan and Alan Gordon have copies of this publication.
This has been scanned. Less the two folded maps at the end of the doc.

5. NOTES FROM PERSONAL ACCOUNTS.

"Some Wartime Memories of a Member of R.E. Survey by Richard Hussey".

A word-processed transcript of the late Richard Hussey's typescript has been commenced below. **Mike Nolan also holds some negatives and prints from Mr. Hussey which might be incorporated in this brief history, including a Cirkut Camera panoramic photo of the whole Company in North Africa, 60 x 13 cms.**

518 Field Survey Company RE at Maxula Rades, Tunisia, May 1943.

Top Row.

1. Cpl F.H. Denley
2. Spr G. Pugh Dvr.
3. "X" Dvr.
4. Dvr.
5. Spr J.A. Mcbain.
6. Spr C. Toddie.
7. Spr Evans
8. Daniels
9. Spr T. Davies.
10. Dvr S.A. Northover.
11. Spr H. Simpson.
12. Spr A.S. Birkett.
13. Dvr H.B. Spoors.

13. Dvr A. Holt, Btmn.
    All above of No. 1 Topo Section.

15. "X"
16. "X"
17. Spr A.M. Kinnell.
18. Spr R.J. Spratley.
19. "X"
20. "X"
21. "X"
22. "X"
23. Dvr L.C. Griffin.
24. Spr R.M. Hollis.
25. "X"
26. "X"
27. "X"
28. "X"
29. Dvr C.A. Chadwick.
30. Spr G.L. Clipsham.
31. Spr Pearson.
32. Seedhouse
33. Spr G. Chambers.
34. Dvr A.A. Short.
35. LCpl Turner.
36. "X"
37. Spr J.L. Leedham.
38. "X"
39. "X"
40. Cpl Thompson