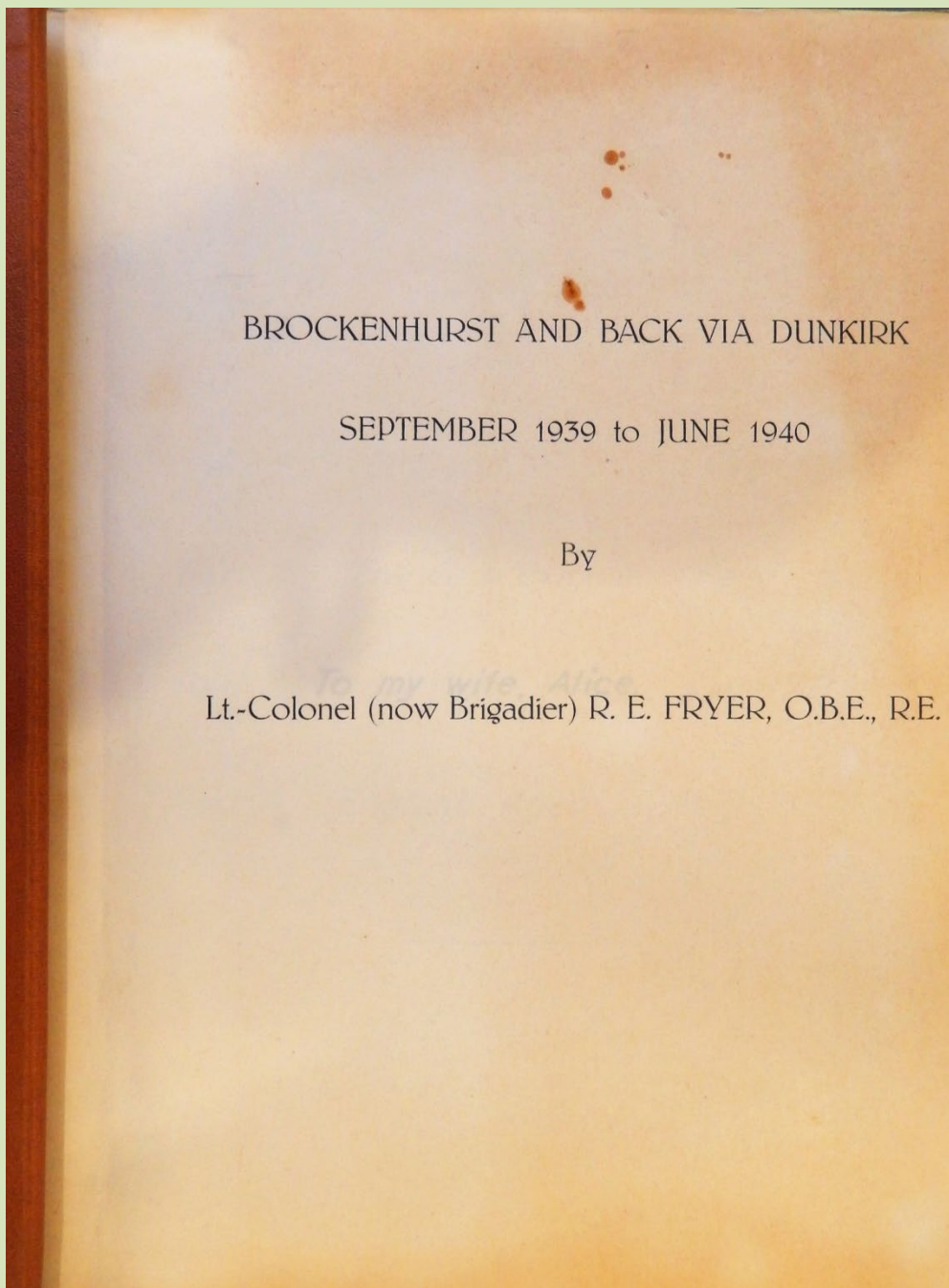




The Military Survey (Geo) Branch

Special Edition 2019
80th Anniversary of the start of WW2

2019 will see the 80th Anniversary of the start of World War II which ran from 1st September 1939 to 2nd September 1945. To mark this occasion we thought it appropriate to publish the personal record of the involvement of Brigadier Robert Eliot Fryer O.B.E., R.E. as recorded in his book titled – ‘*Brockenhurst and back via Dunkirk - September 1939 to June 1940*’



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PART 1

ENGLAND

Many things have happened since those warm summer days of 1939, some of them historic when the story of this Second World War comes to be written. But despite all that has changed, one thing has not altered in the least, and that is the sure fact that we are fighting for our life and our freedom.

In the last war many did not really know what they were fighting for, but in this war everyone knows very well, and for this reason the Nation is united as perhaps never before.

Soldiers are curious people, paid to fight but loving peace. In those August days 1939, anyone with eyes to see and a mind to think knew that peace was rapidly being overtaken by war. Yet how glorious were those few days of my leave, - away for a space from mobilization plans war establishments, schemes, paper and even preparations for some manoeuvres in Yorkshire.

What better place for such a rest than Dartmoor, with the heather coming out and the Darts bubbling and rushing along to their meeting at Dartmeet, thereafter gaining more sedate dignity in their onward course to the sea

Have you ever seen the sea from Peek Hill over Plymouth way? Have you ever wandered over miles of bog and moor to Cranmere Pool, or been to peaceful Widdecombe? Perhaps you may not be one of those who love, as I do, these glorious moors of Devonshire, but prefer maybe, the joys of Torquay or Plymouth. Whatever your tastes, of one thing I am quite certain. The sense of freedom on the Moor is immense. This is the Englishman's right, his freedom to live his own life as he wishes and to go about his daily work and his yearly leave in the way he prefers.

Time was moving on like the Dart but never shall I forget those few short days in August 1939. Their memory has helped very much since then and the little things one did are easily remembered. All the family bathing in the Dart in sight of the grim prison at Princetown seems a trivial event now among the events of war. But it is these trivial little events that make up the life of the free Englishman and bind him to his family. Family and freedom! How much they mean!

Perhaps the Germans don't understand this English characteristic; perhaps we don't understand the power of it ourselves. Many have laughed at family life but in war this thread is very strong in the fabric of our lives.

All too quickly the 10 days passed, and I came back to Southampton to prepare for war, which is the peacetime objective of the Regular Army. Southampton during the last week of peace showed no outward sign of the coming war, but inside the ancient building of the Ordnance Survey activity was intense. The Ordnance Survey makes maps for the Army and the RAF and many millions of them have been printed before and since the war began. Armies cannot move or fight without maps, neither can the RAF fly. In this country of England maps are so common and so good that we treat them rather like our daily newspaper. In places such as Libya this is not so.

On the last day of August I went home about 7 p.m. and my daughter, who I think sensed by then that something was happening over which nobody had control, implored me to have a last bathe. So into the car and away we went to Hordle Cliffs and a quick bathe off the beach. It was getting late and the sun was sinking over Bournemouth way and a clammy sea mist arrived which seemed quite appropriate to the mood of the moment.

Back to supper in our little house at Brockenhurst and then the telephone began. "Duty Officer speaking" – please would I go into Southampton at once. From then till about 2 or 3 in the morning telephone and telegram activity was intense. I remember one telegram marked "Absolute Government Priority." I had never seen such a marking before, nor had the orderly who delivered it, judging by his strained look. However it was not very important.

Without the help of an operator in the Southampton Telephone Exchange I would never have got through all those important calls that night. Recalling isolated Surveyors who were working all over England is quite a large job, but about 2 a.m. all necessary orders had been sent and we said goodnight.

The drive back to Brockenhurst through the Forest was one not easily forgotten. It was a fine night with mist in places, and my way led past the great graving dock where I had so often seen the Queen Mary and the Empress of Britain. Would it be bombed tomorrow? Or would they hit Totton Bridge? Was there even now someone trying to blow it up?

Just beyond Lyndhurst I saw some deer in the glare of the headlamps as yet not blacked out and memories of that Forest lovely since the days of Rufus rushed through my mind.

All was quiet at home but my darling wife was awake. She had been through war before and knew only too well what it meant.

Friday, September 1st at the office seemed almost restful. There was nothing more one could do. Men were coming in all day as the result of the wires I had sent out the night before. About 3 p.m. the final official wire came with the one laconic word "Mobilise". There was nothing more to do now but to go to our mobilisation stations. The Director General, General McLeod, a fine soldier and a splendid gentleman, collected us all in the very fine library of the Ordnance Survey and made a very nice little farewell speech.

Then home for the last time, and on such an occasion one's home assumes an importance difficult to describe. The garden, the house, the familiar furniture all very ordinary before, but now something quite special, because they may never be seen again. And with forced gaiety my packing was done and so to bed.

There are doubtless many moments in life when a husband and wife are very close together, but few such occasions can have been like Friday September 1st. We talked far into the night, making plans for the children's future, discussing money matters and hundreds of quite small details, and then going over the 18 years of life finding it mostly very good, until it must have been nearly daybreak.

Saturday September 2nd and I was off to my second war in my own car, making for Aldershot to join the 1st Corps who were mobilizing there. It was a pleasant journey on a hot day with just my wife and the dog. Aldershot was humming with activity and after reporting I was allotted a billet in, I thought, the Queens Hotel. I only knew one Queens Hotel and that was at Farnborough. There I arrived to find a beautifully made up young woman at the Reception desk who offered me a third share of a small room, which I decided not to accept. I knew an Army doctor friend of my Indian days was at Hale on the Farnham road so we went there and begged a bed and some tea. Both were generously given and I stayed there until we left for France a fortnight afterwards. Later in the evening I found that my billet was in the Queen Hotel, Aldershot and not the Queens Hotel, Farnborough! However I'm glad I found the doctor.

After tea a quick goodbye to the dearest wife God ever gave to man. No tears, just a kiss and she was away back to Brockenhurst and the children. The sense of loss and the extraordinary feeling of uncertainty in the air kept me awake far into the night. Ought we to black out, when would they bomb London, and many other questions were asked by all but couldn't be answered. On Sunday September 3rd war was officially declared and I heard Chamberlain make his historic speech. Now we were for it. What about France? When should we go overseas?

From September 4 – 18 the 1st Corps was mobilizing in and around Aldershot. It was a tremendous task efficiently carried out. As soon as I realised that the getting ready process would take some time I got my family to move nearby and I saw much of them in the evenings. Even tennis and some golf on the Command Course was possible.

Almost on the last day before going overseas we were very nearly shot by a poacher. While we were sitting in a lane two shots rang out, pellets splattered all around and a hen pheasant was seen to crash only a few yards off. My wife was furious, chiefly I think because her cubs had been so narrowly missed by a fool who said he was shooting a rabbit. As we later found and produced the body of the hen pheasant, the story of the rabbit rather fizzled out. The men concerned were most unpleasant chaps, although the pheasants made good eating!

Then came Monday 18th September, an early breakfast and my wife drove me to the troop train at Government Siding Aldershot. This siding she knew only too well from the last war having many times collected wounded from similar trains in her Women's Legion Ambulance. I never believe in waiting for trains to go to say goodbye, and once again Alice was off to join the children.

The journey to Southampton in a very comfortable train over very familiar country took a very short time. I was able to snatch a hurried lunch with my General at the Ordnance Survey and then to the troopship which slowly made its way out into Southampton water in the early afternoon. It was a slow journey but quite a pleasant one although the ship was crowded with men and stores. Thank heaven it was not rough as sea sickness from which I suffer can make life such a burden when there are men to look after and jobs to be done. We anchored off Portsmouth in the early evening, and stayed there till, I believe, 1 a.m. But after much yarning with old friends met on the boat and after a scratch meal of the bully and biscuit type, most of us looked for somewhere to sleep.

I found that being fairly senior I was given a cabin but many officers and men were sleeping on deck and I think they were better off as it turned out. The cabin I shared with another Colonel in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps was right up in the sharp end of the ship and was frightfully hot. When the ship did move in the middle of the night the hauling in of the anchor chain just outside the porthole made a terrific noise. Then came the swish swish of water and the movement up and down of the ship. As we lay in our bunks sweating it was impossible not to realise that, if we did strike a mine, we were in a poor place! However we didn't and somewhere around 6 a.m. next morning the 19th of September 1939 rumour went round that we had arrived. At what port nobody knew; for some time the popular bet was Cherbourg, and so it was.

PART 2

FRANCE and BELGIUM

I had crossed the channel so many times before in the last war and in peace that the seeming inefficiency of landing didn't surprise me in the least. First we went alongside the jetty, but that wasn't the French idea at all, so we went out into the harbour again and anchored. After hours of delay two tenders came alongside the ship, one on each side, and we duly disembarked into one of them. Naturally it was the wrong one so back again through our own ship to the other.

There was one heavy box which gave a lot of trouble and it appeared to be the Padres harmonium. Anyway it was damned heavy and not at all sacred by the time it reached shore.

About noon we eventually got alongside the jetty where we had been 6 hours before. I remember that jetty as it was wooden and quite rotten and when we went alongside rather heavily it just broke up and fell into the sea. This in the French transatlantic port of Cherbourg!

Everyone was now tired and hungry and it seemed rather rubbing it in to be dished out with tinned rations and at the same time told that they were only to be opened in dire emergency. However after further long delays all of us got some food, the men on the quay and the officers in a French restaurant.

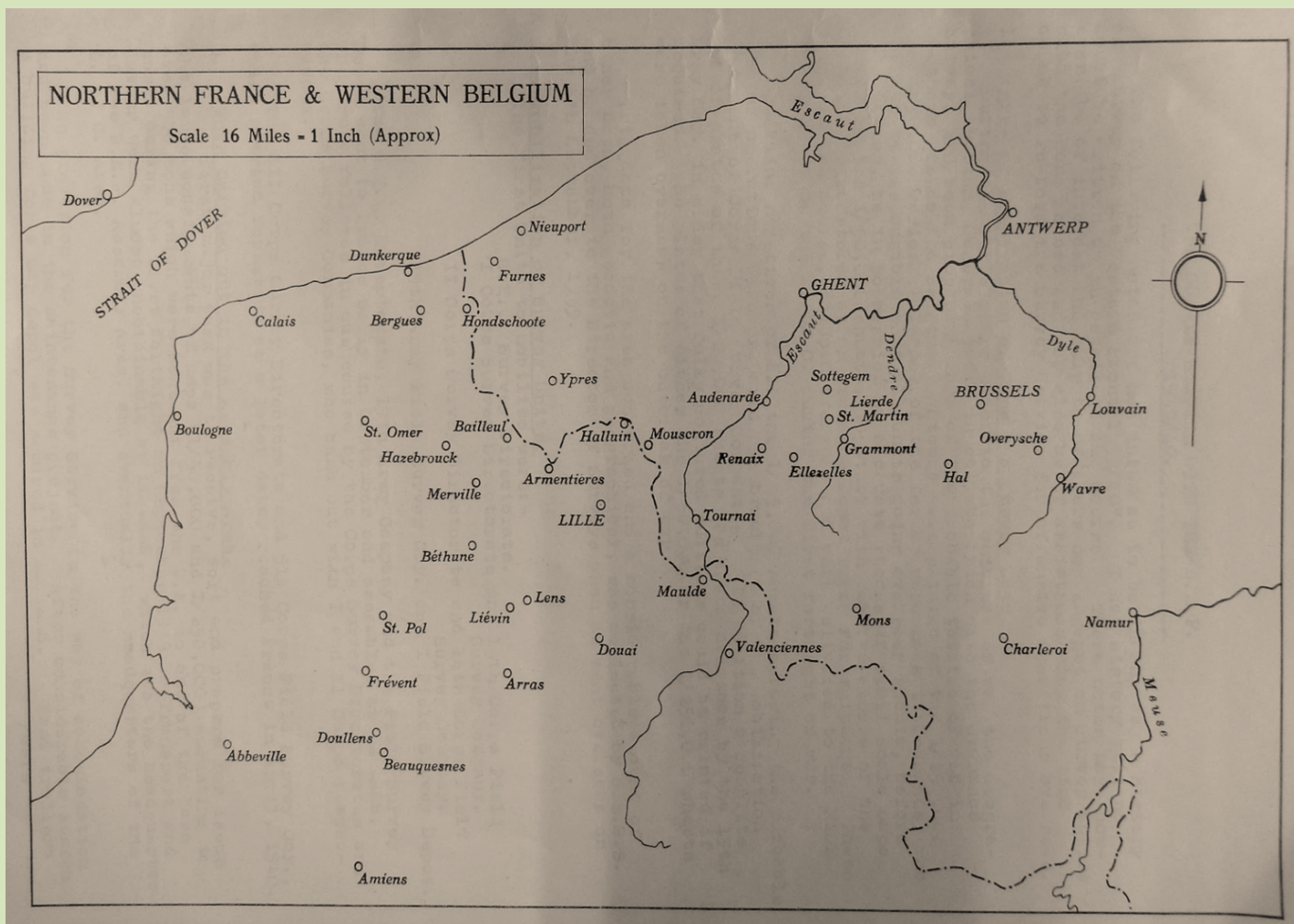
Then there was nothing to do till 8 p.m. when it was rumoured we should leave in a train for an unknown destination. So I wandered round the old French port, got some French money and sat in the sun watching the B.E.F. transport, guns etc., being unloaded by French stevedores. One could not help wondering why the Boche allowed all this to go on without attempting to interfere by bombing the quays.

The night journey was like many French night journeys of the last war. The same dirty dove coloured cushions, seemingly the same white head antimacassars, the same jangling of signal bells and the well-known blowing of horns.

It was also very cold. Shaving with hot water begged from the engine driver and getting any food was difficult. With frightful shunting's we came to rest in a large siding in the town Laval and here our spirits rose as there seemed to be some effort to provide a hot breakfast. Hot coffee and rolls in the local hotel did a lot to make us forget the discomforts of the boat and the train during the last two nights.

Laval is a large town in the Province of Normandy. The Barracks in which our officers were was large and white, dusty and filthy. It was also partially occupied by French troops and as there was a wind and a dust storm prevailing continually, life was very unpleasant. Laval was the centre of the assembly area for the 1st Corps. Here were collected the men and vehicles of all the various units that compose an Army corps. Some of the men had landed at one port and their vehicles at another and all had to be got ready to move as a fighting army with the least possible delay. The weather of late September was lovely but the nights were getting cold. The dust round the French barracks was very bad and most of us got bad throats.

Here it was that with something of a thrill I went to see my first French billet in my second world war. Just a French name had been given to me on a bit of paper but as it was given to me by a brother officer of my own Regiment, I had high hopes that the billet might be a good one. The house was tall, white and stood alone just outside the little village of Change about 4 miles from Laval. This village was chiefly notable for its huge cathedral-like church on which was the notice "Defense d'uriner sur la Cathedral". I much wanted to take that board and present it to Canterbury Cathedral as a souvenir!



My room was with a pleasant woman and her daughter who was having a baby and whose husband had already gone off to war. I spent several nights here and was made to feel at home and, as in the last war, I much regretted my inability to speak French fluently.

In a Corps there are many officers' Messes as we call them and I was the senior officer in "B" Mess. It thus fell to my lot to start this officers' Mess at Change. I was lucky in having a good cook and with the aid of various officers' batmen I unpacked all the crockery, bought the food and staged the first breakfast! It was quite a success except that the Mess Sergeant of "A" Mess (The General's) pinched the milk I had bought the night before from a nearby farm. Despite all the troubles I always enjoyed running this Mess which I did throughout my time with the B.E.F. Grouses there were in plenty after officers had been on leave. Wives always seem to think their husbands want feeding up or put notions into their heads that the food was rotten and gave their beloved one's indigestion. This was so sometimes but not often. Running a Mess in a sit down war was one thing but running it in a retreat was quite another as I found out later.

While we were assembling in Laval, G.H.Q. was at Le Mans (or Leemens as the troops called it). Here the decision was made for the B.E.F. to move up into a "concentration" area and to take over part of the fortified line in the Douai – Lille area.

This long march up – or rather drive up – was triumph for the B.E.F. It was done in perfect order with vehicles all spaced out with the expectation of hostile bombing which never came. The sort of feeling of tenseness is difficult to describe, the unknown is about to happen.

It was dark and cold when I left Laval driving the Ford "Prefect" myself in convoy. Convoy driving is tiring as you have continually to watch the man in front and try to keep 150 yards behind him. In a convoy you often seem to have only two speeds stop, and flat out to catch your mate in front.

Again the weather was very fine; we went through some lovely country and crossed the Seine at Vernon. Our first “stage” was in the charming town of Evreux where we spent a couple of nights. This place saw some fierce fighting 8 months later. Here I had a first class billet with a rich banker who was an ardent stamp collector. He showed me book after book and although I know nothing about stamps I’m sure that many of them were of the “priceless” description.

The daughter of the house aged 11 years spoke very good English and she and her Mother took me round the Cathedral, a very magnificent building. It was a place of pleasant memories and one I hope to visit again.

Then came another long drive, this time through country more familiar, and increasing in ugliness. The streets of Amiens seemed quite familiar and I had no difficulty in finding the Arras road. Our next area was Pas a small village beyond Doullens and just off the Arras “route nationale”. It was a rather forlorn village not recovered from the last war, with a large chateau much the worse for wear. Also it began to rain for the first time but this was only a mild prelude of what was to come.

My billet here was in an even smaller village called Henu up the hill about 2 miles from Pas. The house belonged to an old man and his wife who, despite their ages of 78, still did a bit of farming and had a cow and an aged horse in the barn. The room was small, it smelt damp and bed was even smaller and definitely was damp. In fact I’ve never slept in anything damper and even after the 4 or 5 days that I spent there I never really got it dry. And then there were the rats, hundreds of them, and their feet felt so cold on my face at night. There was the usual foul smelling midden outside the front door and no sanitary arrangement at all that I could find. And it rained – heavily.

For all that, I could not help liking this old couple. They had suffered much. As children of 8 or 9 they professed to remember the Germans in 1870. They saw them in 1914 and subsequently had war very close to them in Arras for 4 years and now no doubt they are having to put up with the Boche again. As I talked to them at night by the light of a flickering lamp they were calm and serene and quite fatalistic in their outlook. “C’est la Guerre” covered everything. The old lady had a marvellous garden and like me was very keen on it. When I left she gave me half a dozen of the best peaches I’ve ever tasted.

While in this area contact was made with the French divisions actually in the line on the Belgian – French Frontier. As maps officer of the Corps I went up on Sunday September 24 to meet my opposite number in the French Army.

It was a wet and foggy day and the drive through Arras and over the old 1914 – 1918 battlefields was gloomy in the extreme. I was in the battle of Arras on 9th April 1917 so the whole of the ground round Arras was familiar to me. I had not seen it since then but it was easy to remember and one almost expected a shell to come whistling into the huge station.

The road from Arras to Douai is almost straight and runs right through the old battlefields. You can see Monchy over on the right on the ridge and you pass through Gavrelle.

Cobbles do not begin till you almost enter Douai so it is possible to go very fast. We stopped in Douai and bought some cakes etc., for our lunch. It was Sunday, I think 24th September and as we were some of the first British officers of this war to be seen in Douai, a crowd of inquisitive French people soon collected.

Douai was a pleasant town and I spent 7½ months in it. Most of its finer buildings had not been destroyed in the last war, although the Germans had removed much of value, including the canvases out of the pictures in the Town Hall.

There was one curious direction sign in Douai which said “Nach Arras” with a large white arrow pointing towards Arras. I asked if the French really hated the Germans so much, why they had allowed this sign to remain up in their town for all to see for 20 years. The answer was “Oh we’ve painted it out many times but the weather always washes out our paint and leaves that of the Germans.” Rather typical of the French, I thought, and a good mark for the German white paint. The road out of Douai and thence to Orchies and Auchy is mostly cobbles and as it was rainy and foggy everything was very beastly. Cobbles in a Ford 10 are bad when the French put up a notice “Chaussee tres ondule” they are more than bad. Douai is also in the coalfield area so you see nothing much except huge “fosse” or slagheaps.

Nearing Auch we began to meet the French Army, mostly pretty scruffy looking, and apparently just aimlessly wandering about the roads. Of fortifications or Maginot line I saw nothing that day. On arrival at the French R.A. H.Q. which was situated in a modern and very sumptuous house, we found a large gathering of very smart French Gunner officers. They at once asked us over to their Mess and I had an excellent lunch with the usual bottle of red wine.

Afterwards I spent the afternoon taking over a large dossier – which the French love – containing all the technical Survey data for the existing French gun positions. Later the British R.A. Brigadier who spoke excellent French held a conference with his C.R.A's at which I and the French officers were all present. In honour of this first historic meeting of French and British officers in the so-called “front line” in the second world war, the French R.A. General insisted on opening a bottle of champagne and drinking to the health and success of the B.E.F.

It was a long drive back to Herm, mostly in the dark and fog but we had really done something, and very shortly afterwards detailed orders were issued for the B.E.F to make its move forward into the so called “line” and take over from the French. This order meant great activity for me as once the exact areas for Corps and Divisions were decided upon, the maps of these areas had to be procured and distributed.

This was a big job as our Army has already covered hundreds of miles since landing and had walked driven over many map sheets. The main depot was still at Le Mans. However everyone in the end had the maps they wanted.

As far as I can remember, the 1st Corps moved up to Douai (destined to be its H.Q. for close on 8 months) on October 2nd and I moved into my billet at 42, Rue d'Arras. This was an old house in a cobble-surfaced main road. The street was a curious mixture of houses as some were large and obviously well to do and others almost alongside were squalid in the extreme. The old lady who owned my house had had German officers billeted on her in the last war and told me many stories about them. She seemed only mildly pleased to see me and in showing me my room was most insistent about electric lights being turned out. In her demonstration she turned out the master switch of the whole house and nothing would induce the lights to come on again!

The passages were long and the furniture old, but so long as the coal lasted the house was warm, but not so the water. There was a bathroom in the house but I never heard of anyone using it. I always used the bath in the Mess once a week for my bath.

Besides the old lady there were several other people in the house. One was a very quiet and elusive woman who I think worked in a hospital. One night she much surprised me by producing a most dashing looking Cavalry Capitaine, home on leave as a husband. Then there was the old man about the house never without a cigarette. I quickly made friends with him by giving him odd packets of my “ration” of cigarettes. He often came and talked about his last war experiences in Salonika. His daughter, who seemed surprisingly young, did the rest of the work in the house. She was always most obliging and many were the kind acts she did when I was ill. Quickly she got to know of my love of flowers and in the spring, posies of violets, snowdrops and primroses were always appearing on my table.

Shortly after my arrival Madame left for Pau in the South of France, as the cold and wet of the Nord troubled her chest. She was still there in May. Before she left I managed to wheedle a latchkey from her. Previously she had always expected me to be in by 9.30 p.m.

Douai is a large town with many fine buildings and beautiful Belfroi, but it has the river Scarpe running right through the middle of it. The river always seemed to have an unpleasant smell, due mostly, I think, to the effluents from sugar beet factories flowing into it. A canalised Scarpe also ran round the north of the town and this was always crowded with barges.

For the first week or so “B” Mess was in a house in the middle of the town and near the river. In its heyday it had been a brothel and being in a rather sordid neighbourhood we sought better premises in a private house in Rue d'Esquechin. Here we stayed until May 1940. After the Sappers had made the heating work, we were very comfortable. The kitchen was good, the Mess rooms large with many bedrooms above for officers and batmen. And joy of joy there was a bathroom where the hot water actually functioned.

Usually our numbers were around about 20 but sometimes for lunch when visitors came in, we were many more. Rations were good, and cheap good wine was readily available, so we really had nothing to complain about. That does not mean there were no complaints, there were plenty. It was always difficult to get hold of a good cook. We had one but he was constantly going sick and he eventually left us altogether.

We entertained many distinguished officers in the Mess including the D.M.I., General Mason MacFarlane and his dog, General Paget who came out to visit us from the Staff College, and our own Corps Commander General Dill, later on Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

This last occasion was an anxious one for me as our cook went sick just beforehand. In desperation I borrowed the woman cook of an Excavator Coy whose OC was a friend of mine. She turned out an excellent dinner, even if the fish, when dressed up in batter coats, looked like whales! Anyone who has ever met and talked with General Dill cannot fail to be impressed with his charming manner and quick perception of everything that is being said and done. For all of us, officers and men, he always had a word, and when he left the 1st Corps to return to London as V.C.I.G.S., in April 1940 we all knew and felt that we were losing a great commander, and a great gentlemen.

The King visited the B E F in France for the first – and as it turned out - the only time, on 9th December 1939. The war, which had become known as the “phoney war” was in full swing and the weather was typical of the north of France – cold, dark and miserable. There can be few more dreary places than the Pas de Calais Department of France in winter.

The King arrived at 1st Corps H.Q. in Douai about 9.15 and was introduced to all Heads of Staff by Sir John Dill. As is usual on such occasions, everything happens so quickly that I was hardly aware that I had shaken hands with the King, before he had gone.

I returned to my office feeling that it had been a great honour to have met the King, but I wished I had noticed how he was looking and what he was wearing. While I was chatting with various officers who had come with the King, the Brigadier General Staff of the Corps came into the room and said to me in his quiet voice “The King wishes to speak to you.” I followed General Percival – afterwards captured while G.O.C Malaya – through to Staff rooms full of high ranking British and French officers, wondering, rather in a daze, what I had done wrong this time.



On arrival in the Corps Commanders room I was introduced to the King by Sir John Dill who said “The King wishes to speak about the Corps Christmas Card.” This card had been personally selected and passed by Sir John and no less than 145,000 had been printed by my 13 (Corps) Field Survey Coy R.E. A copy of this card signed by all the Staff Heads, had been presented to the King by Sir John, and the King had it in his hand when I arrived.

For several minutes I discussed with the King, the drawing of the card and how the winning design of L/Cpl (now Flight Lieut) Carmichael had been accepted; how I had had to buy paper and envelopes from Paris with money lent to me by officers of the French Mission, and finally how the card had been printed by the Royal Engineers, and distributed. The King expressed keen interest and showed considerable knowledge of technical details.

It was now getting on for 10 o'clock, when the King was due to leave Corps H.Q. for inspections and visits, and Sir John Dill came over and asked his Majesty if he wanted anything before leaving. The King said “I would like a cup of tea.” No one at Corps H.Q. had thought of this and Sir John looked round at his Staff without much hope.

Somehow I was quicker than usual in appreciating the situation and made an instantaneous plan. “Sir, I can get the King a cup of tea” I said, remembering that my clerks had a Primus stove and always made tea in the mornings (not then known as a “brew up”). Sir John said “Alright, but be quick.” I realised at once that speed was of the essence of this job as the King must not be delayed. I turned round quickly and, nearly knocking over a French General in my excitement, rushed through three offices filled with Staff to my clerks' room.

When I got there all of them were standing on chairs and looking out of windows waiting to see the King depart. Some of the clerks were Royal Corps of Signals, as we in the map section shared offices with them. I shouted “I say chaps, the King wants a cup of tea and he wants it damned quickly.” They looked at me from their perches at the windows as if I was “bats,” but once they realized I wasn't they “jumped to it” most nobly. Everyone rushed to do something and never has a Primus been pumped so hard or shot such flames up to high heaven.

The tea things were a poor collection. The cup was white with a flower pattern and made in Czechoslovakia, the tea pot was brown – without lid and with a cracked spout, the milk was condensed and in the bottom half of the tin: the sugar was French and rectangular and the tea was just ration. There was no tray and no spoon.



Just as the kettle began to sing the Primus began to splutter and feverish efforts were made to keep it going with matches and even paper. However I fear it gave out just before the water actually boiled, but what of it. Tea was made and in record time.

What those French Generals must have thought of me a comparatively junior staff officer carrying an extraordinary collection of tea things into the King of England, I cannot imagine, but I did not trouble to think then.

I put all the things down on the Corps Commander's table and he poured out the tea. I noticed it was pretty strong. Sir John (at left) then tipped up the milk tin and started pouring in much too much and I remember well saying "Be careful Sir, that's tinned milk." With the sugar in Sir John said "No spoon?" and I said "No Sir, what about a pencil?" but the reply was "Oh my ruler is much better."

Thus the brew was stirred and the King drank it with a look which seemed to say "This is pretty poor stuff, but at least it's hot." Sir John Dill must have noticed this too, because he said to the King "A regular soldier's cup of tea isn't it, Sir?" Well that was that and the King then left Corps H.Q. up to time.

There were two sequels. The first was that others had heard that the King wanted a cup of tea and officers began to arrive from all quarters of Corps H.Q. with beautiful cups of tea on real trays with spotless clothes on them – but all too late. The Head of Corps Intelligence Lt. Col. Robertson and I then sat down and enjoyed a much better cup of tea than I had given the King!

The second was that the clerks spent the rest of the morning arguing as to who should have the Kings Tea cup which they quickly realised was now historic. It is now only of minor interest to record that the real owner was on leave and took no part in the proceedings to dispose of his property. It was eventually decided to break the cup and give each clerk a bit to keep. This seemed a poor answer, so I persuaded them to draw lots and a Sergeant in the Signals won.

I met this same Sergeant in England after we returned from Dunkirk, and he told me the cup was now proudly displayed on his mantelpiece at home. There may it long remain, but I often wish it was on mine.

Another episode in my life which occurred early in our stay in Northern France I had almost forgotten until I was reminded of it quite recently by meeting the chief character in the gunner mess at Larkhill. He was quite well, I am glad to say.

His name was Major Pelham Burn, a Gunner who in 1939 was acting as a Liaison Officer between the RA and the RAF. Mutual business took us to the RAF Wing HQ which was some 40 miles away from Douai mostly across the old battlefields of the last war.

It was a lovely day and I remembered meeting our Padre – old fat Batemen – in Albert. Why I don't know. The other side of Albert on the Peronne Road, I, the "old sweat" started to reminisce about the last war, about Meaulte, and Fricourt, pointing out in the distance High Wood where I was wounded on 20th July 1916. All was peaceful and sunny and only vast graveyards reminded one of that war.

Business concluded, Wing Commander West VC, was most apologetic that he couldn't ask us to stay for lunch as he had so many officers in his mess already. We said we didn't mind in the least and could easily get something in the local estaminet.

We were now almost out of the RAF area and in a village near St Quentin where there appeared to be no British at all.

Pelham Burn was an excellent French scholar and it did not take us long to find a nice clean estaminet and to order a simple lunch with an omelette. The cellar also was inspected and a particularly dusty bottle was chosen.

While the meal was being cooked, Pelham Burn and I wandered up to the old church and looked all over it. It was about 1.30 p.m. and a pleasant autumn day.

Lunch was ready on our return and Pelham Burn had hardly sat down and had not, I think, eaten or drunk anything, when I noticed he was suddenly very quiet. "Are you feeling ill?" I said. "Yes, I've got a pain in my tummy." I thought perhaps it was just a passing spasm of wind and suggested that he should get up and walk about for a moment.

Within a few minutes Pelham Burn was completely doubled up and falling prostrate over a chair. I called Madame, a most pleasant woman, and between us we carried him into her room and put him on her bed. I am, unfortunately, no French scholar but we soon had hot water bottles going. I realized however that this was no ordinary pain and that I must get medical aid at once. This was no easy matter in a strange French village out of the British Zone. But luckily I saw an R.A.F. Sergeant passing in the road on a bike who said there was an M.O. with his squadron about 4 miles away. So he and my driver in my car went off as fast as they could.

It seemed ages before they returned with the R.A.F. M.O., although it was actually only 25-30 minutes later. Pelham Burn seemed easier by this time though he was very white indeed. After quite a short examination the doctor said he was sure Burn had peritonitis and it was urgent to get him into Hospital at once. Amiens was the nearest, at least 40 miles away, and at this time the British Hospitals had not got going.

The R.A.F., were magnificent and they produced an ambulance in a very short time. The drive was a long and difficult one as Burn was in great pain and we could go no speed. I followed behind in my car and eventually we found the Hospital in some back street in Amiens.

French hospitals always appal me at the best of times and this one seemed worse than most. First I had to interview God knows how many officials before I saw the head Doctor. My French is bad, and to make them understand that I had outside in an ambulance a British officer, who I thought was dying, was just about all I could do. In the end the R.A.F. carried Burn on a stretcher up to the Surgical Ward. It was frightfully hot I remember and the glass windows in the corridor all had steam on them. Small fry doctors and a sister arrived all looking very dirty in their would-be white coats. Everything looked dirty and inefficient after an English hospital.

All the preliminary examination was done in a corridor with all sorts of people looking on. Then the surgeon turned up, a cheerful looking man, but his coat too was dirty. He was smoking a cigarette as only a Frenchman can, with a long bit of half burnt paper sticking to his lower lip.

I couldn't understand half what was said but I gathered he was going to operate at once. Burn was then wheeled into what I suppose was the operating room and I never saw him again until I met him in the R.A. Mess in the summer of 1941.

I waited ages while the operation went on but it was getting dark and I had miles to go from Amiens to my H.Q. I could see figures flitting about through the glass partitions and I could smell ether and although sisters kept coming in and out I could gather nothing from them. So eventually I left, full of the most gloomy thoughts and quite sure that Burn would never get well in that place. But he did, and I was wrong, and perhaps maligned the skill of the French doctors and nurses.



Gracie Fields with an RAF orchestra, entertains in 1939

I wrote at once to Mrs Pelham Burn and told her all this story and I know that she is very grateful for all we did that day for her husband. She was allowed by the War Office to go to Amiens immediately as her husband was on the "dangerously ill" list and no doubt she, more than anyone, helped to nurse him back to health again. The R.A.F. doctor was right, he had a perforated peritonitis.

Civilian visitors also came to the Mess among them being Gracie Fields, Seymour Hicks, Claire Luce, Leslie Henson, Jack Buchanan, Arthur Askey and "Stinker" Murdoch and very many lesser lights from all the concert parties who so kindly came out to entertain the troops.

The visit of Gracie Fields was a memorable one. She was the first to give a concert, early in November I think, and that day I happened to be in Lens where she was giving a very big concert before coming on to Douai in the evening. I went behind the stage of the Apollo Theatre at Lens to arrange for the transport of her party to Douai as they were to have supper in our Mess.

I was told by Sir Seymour Hicks that Gracie was not fit and was already tired. I gave our address in Douai and Gracie went off with Monty Banks and her dresser in her large English car, and she was able to have a long rest before dinner and the evening performance.

I stayed behind to see the rest of the party off and had some fun and trouble over it. The transport was an ex-Green Line 32 seater bus; alright for the girls but not for the props which were in huge wicker baskets which would not go through the door.

An unknown Gunner subaltern most nobly came to the rescue and took those beastly baskets over to Douai, some 20 miles away, in his truck. Meanwhile Sir Seymour was getting impatient and ordered the bus driver to proceed but I had given definite orders that he was not to go without my orders, and he didn't. However all was well in the end and the whole party eventually got to Douai, although I got stopped in my car by a gendarme who said my lights were too bright, a curious complaint for no French civilian car seemed to bother about the blackout in the least. I had the privilege of sitting next Gracie Fields at dinner that night and it was a great pleasure.

Conversation was of the easiest and I formed the impression that here was a great woman doing great work for her country. Nothing that has happened since has altered my opinion. Gracie was a sick woman and she never spared herself. As an instance of her most indomitable pluck, after the concert at the Douai theatre that night she agreed to visit an overflow meeting at the recreation room of Corps H.Q. as a battery of Lancashire lads who had been unable to get tickets for the main concert were there awaiting her. The time was about 11.15, after two enormous concerts separated by a long car drive, and she had only recently recovered from a serious illness was still suffering from rheumatism.

I was not there, but a Gunner Major who was, told me that Gracie was in obvious pain going up the stairs and she came upon the assembled multitude in the room before she expected it. She pulled herself together and went amongst that crowd of eager soldiers with a smile and whoop of joy, waving her scarf. She sang old favourites for 15 minutes. I look upon that act as worthy of the highest praise.

I personally went to that concert in Douai in Gracie's own car and on her arm through the doors as I had not got a ticket. I stood the entire time in the wings and I shall never forget it. The other turns were good, very good, but there was only one that mattered as far as I was concerned. She sang as well as ever, ending with the immortal "Sally," and the applause was terrific. Later on Gracie came again to Douai after she had been to Capri for her health and sang her old favourite once more, but to me the thrill was not the same as it was on her first visit to the B.E.F. Her two autographs I still have as much prized souvenirs, and I'm sure my driver L/Cpl West values his too.

I simply will not believe all the tales that have since been spread about concerning this most gallant woman and her money matters. It is a great loss to England that she has not been here to sing to us for so long now. Her singing is a tonic rather in the same class as a speech from the Prime Minister. Wherever she is, may she come back one day to sing "Sally" to the troops once again?

Leslie Henson was also on grand form, especially in the Mess afterwards, where late in the evening he entertained us himself on the piano with one or two old but cracking good numbers.

Before the professionals arrived, we had many excellent concerts in our Corps recreation room organised from local talent and run by a comedian in the Educational Corps. The Corps Commander often attended these Saturday evening affairs and enjoyed them immensely, although he did not at all like the purely vulgar jokes which often get into local concerts if it is not stopped. In this Hall three or four French ladies used to assist nightly, selling tea, cigarettes etc., to the troops. During the whole of this time we were never bombed and later in London during the winter of 1940-41 and the "blitz", I missed the concert parties of the B.E.F. very much.

One of my Survey Companies was located near Douai at a village called Brebieres, and I constantly had to go out to it. The billet was an old farm with a pleasant house, a large courtyard and a huge barn.

There was also a garden which, the men had dug and got into excellent order. When the real war came in May, all sorts of things were coming up in this garden and no doubt the Germans must have enjoyed the green peas and lettuces we planted.

The winter of 1939-40 was very severe and by January ice was thick everywhere. We managed to get some quite good skating on the swimming bath at Corbehem although we only had 2 pairs of skates between us.

On November 11th the Company paraded with the French Old Comrades at the war memorial at Brebieres, and I, as the senior Officer, laid a wreath and the French Mayor read a short funeral oration. We all afterwards shook hands and there was much talk, very little of which I understood.

Brebieres and Douai were just outside the limits of the bitter fighting of the last war, but dotted about were various small British war cemeteries. These were all very well-tended and nearly all contained graves of those who fell in the final advance of 1918.

One Sunday I visited, with two others, the old Somme battlefields and tried to find the place where I was wounded in 1916 at High Wood on the Somme. I did actually find the wood, but in the rough undergrowth I could not find the concrete pill box near which I was actually hit. The whole Somme country is to me peopled with ghosts and even now is to be found tin hats, equipment, boots, etc., relics of those bloody days of 1916.

As the winter wore on and it got colder and colder the thoughts of everyone turned to the subject of leave which opened about the middle of December. I was due to go on 24th December and to cross the channel on Christmas Day. I believed I should at least arrive in time for a small bit of the turkey. But it was not to be.

I left Douai on the morning of 24th December by car with two soldiers who were also going on leave. It was cold, foggy and frosty and the roads were very slippery. I drove most of the way myself, via Arras, St-Pol and Montreuil and arrived safely in Boulogne about 2 p.m.

After some lunch at the Imperial Hotel, which was the HQ of the Boulogne Military Area, I went for a walk along by the sea. It was all very mournful as fog horns were going continuously and it didn't look very hopeful for crossing on the morrow. I had an early dinner at the Hotel Meurice with a Gunner officer, and then to bed.

I always find it difficult to sleep well when I am excited about events of the morrow and this night was no exception. I had an excellent bed and a good bath but neither induced much sleep.

The boat was due away at 7.25 a.m. and we were told to be on board soon after 6 a.m. It is a long walk from the town to the quay with all one's kit and a suitcase but everyone was up early and on their way. But from the first I felt we were going to be out of luck. All the fog horns were still going strong and visibility was bad.

As it gradually got light it was only possible to see 500 to 600 yards. When a slight breeze came, we all got excited and shouted "Look I can see the end of the jetty." Just about 8 a.m. when time was nearly up for catching the tide, the Senior Naval Officer with the Base Commandant went to the end of the pier and I believe it was decided to take a risk and let the ship go. However, at that moment a telephone message came through from Dover saying that conditions were too bad and we were ordered off the boat.

I've seldom spent a more miserable Christmas Day. Everything planned had fallen flat, - no meeting with one's family round the Christmas fireside and nothing to do all day except wander around Boulogne in the fog.

This time I went to the Folkestone Hotel which was a bit farther from the quay but less noisy, and after an early dinner I went straight to bed and slept much better this time. The dreary walk was not repeated next morning as a taxi appeared and we all made use of it.

This time the fog had cleared and we made a quick and uneventful crossing. All crossings of the sea are a bit of a trial to me as they are never really smooth, and I always wonder "shall I be sick." I wasn't, partly due to the fact that with a bit of wangling and cash I got a cabin.

England on Boxing Day 1939 looked very lovely. I'd done the journey from Dover to London so often before in the last war that the 21 years seemed just a little space of time. English breakfasts can be really grand, and this one was. Victoria always gave me a bit of thrill when viewed from a leave train and it did not disappoint me now. Wives and sweethearts were there as usual but the streets outside were deserted.

I just caught my train at Waterloo and arrived at Brockenhurst as it was getting dark about 4 p.m. There they were on the platform, Alice, Mary, Tony, all smiling and Gina our Golden Cocker Spaniel, wriggling her whole body as only Spaniels can. What a meeting it was and although only 4 months had passed since I said goodbye at Aldershot it seemed years longer.

There followed 9 days of complete bliss in our dear little house and in the glorious New Forest. There were walks, sliding on ponds, visits to cinemas, games, not forgetting four handed bezique and all the other delights of normal English family life.

Time just flew, and it seemed only 24 hours rather than 10 days later that I found myself back in my same bed in Douai. It was still cold, in fact very cold indeed, and often foggy. Life proceeded much as it had done before Christmas. The cold was intense and I even managed to get some more skating on the swimming bath of the factory near Brebieres. It was quite good fun and exercise and some of my Company Officers were experts.

All this time 'D' Plan for occupation of the Dyle position near Brussels in the event of a German invasion of Belgium was discussed at great length in all its aspects. There was some further discussion with the French concerning our Junction point near Wavre and in order to get the point settled, I with the aid of the Company made several models of the country in fretwork.

The tools for this were primitive and the vertical height interval was rather exaggerated, but it did give a very good picture of the relief of the ground. The basis was the 1/25,000 map. I hadn't done much fretwork since I was a boy, but General Dill seemed very pleased with the results and I know he showed the model to the French General.

So encouraged was I by these results that I thought I might get something even better by going to see the French Service Geographique in Paris, as I knew from peacetime days that they had a process for making relief maps. Accordingly I obtained leave to go to Paris and went by train with de Comminges, one of the French Missions Officers, who lived in my Mess.

The journey was uneventful but on the way de Comminges disappeared for a long time and he told me later that he had sold a gas cooker to a lady he had met on the train! Back to his old peace-time job in fact.

Mme de Comminges met us at the Gare du Nord in Paris in her car and I was delighted to find she spoke English and was in fact American. We went to W.H. Smiths to try and get tea but it was full and so we went to a nearby French shop. Then we visited their flat which was not in regular use but was obviously very nice. After an excellent dinner at Prunier's I slept very well in one of the children's beds with never a thought of an air raid alarm.

Next day my visit in the morning to the Service Geographique was very successful. I was shown the entire process and the French promised to make me six relief models of the 1/50,000 map around Wavre, showing the Dyle and our junction with the French. This they did and they were used by both Sir John Dill and Lord Gort when making their final 'D' plan.

In the afternoon after some shopping and a tour round the Bois de Boulogne, we went out to the country home of de Comminges' mother-in-law, about 25 miles from Paris, called Chateau Beaubourg. We arrived about 6 p.m. in the dark and the welcome of de Comminges by his children was good to see.

The chateau was enormous and kept up as in the days of old as far as I could see. I remember there were many other people staying in the house besides the de Comminges family and about 15 or 16 of us sat down to dinner. As I walked from the drawing room to the dining room down a long passage on the arm of my hostess with several men servants waiting us in the dining room, I felt as if I had stepped back many years in time. It all seemed so unreal after Douai and the proximity of war. Only 4 months later this lovely place was overrun by the enemy and who knows what has happened to that charming family and the wonderful chateau! All I do know is the de Comminges himself escaped and is now a Tank Corps officer in our Army.

That night was cold and windy and next morning I was amazed to see that about 2½ ft. of snow had fallen. As we had to catch the midday train from Paris back to Douai we had some adventures in the car getting back to Paris, but we ploughed through everything successfully.

Douai was equally snowy but we got back to the Mess to find out friends full of questions about the trip and very grateful for the presents in the way of food which we had brought back for the Mess. It was a memorable trip and one which will probably never be repeated. Most French Chateaux I saw in the last war and in this have been in the last stages of decay, but here was one in all its glory and full of warmth and joy and all the lovely things one had read about in books.

The winter of 1939-1940 was long and cold and at times very foggy. It was remarkable also for some extraordinary ice phenomena as when it rained hard and froze on the trees at the same time. Boughs became weighed down with the ice that formed on them and quite large branches actually broke off. At times it was almost impossible to walk in the streets, especially on the pave, and several nights when leaving the office for the Mess we had to man-handle ourselves along walls of houses in order to remain upright.

Most of the time in the office was spent over discussion of the 'D' or Dyle plan and the 'E' or Escault plan. I attended numerous conferences at Corps HQ usually presided over by General Dill, the Corps Commander, but once, I remember, by Lord Gort. Our three Divisional Commanders were all Guardsmen, Generals Loyd, Alexander and Thorne, which was rather unique.

There were numerous details of these plans to be discussed and much liaison to be done with the French Army who were to be on our right on the Dyle. I went over one day with Brigadier Davidson our C.C.R.A. and had a most formal but excellent lunch with the staff Officers of the 3rd French Corps. Speeches were made, health's drunk and a very snappy menu card was produced. The French always loved these cards which usually portrayed a particularly naked girl. The cards were printed by the Survey Section of the Corps and after lunch, being a Surveyor, I was shown all over the French Survey Department with the Corps.

The French printing equipment was not nearly as good as ours, but they were very keen and had several novel ways of dealing with air photos. Later one of their N.C.O's came over to us and demonstrated one of these instruments, the Chambre de Clair, and we are using it today in our Army. As a result of my visit to Paris in January 1940 the French Service Geographique eventually produced relief models of the Dyle area which were very effective and did not give such a large vertical scale distortion as those made earlier by me in fretwork.

In April I was lucky enough to get another leave home to Brockenhurst and the weather was for the most part very nice. The leave was rather spoilt by the uncertainty caused by the Norway situation. I knew that certain officers had been recalled and I wondered if my turn would come. However it didn't and I was able to enjoy more glorious days in and around the New Forest. All the simple little pleasures of life again seemed so dear. In normal everyday civil life one just enjoys a round of golf at the weekend. But on leave the sort of glow you get playing say on a Tuesday with the course almost to yourself, is just grand. And the visits to the cinemas after months of French pictures (and very few of those) were also a great pleasure.

I remember well the morning I left Dover on my return. It was fine with a lovely sunrise and the spitfires which circled round our ship, looked almost like fairy aeroplanes as the sun, invisible to us on the ship glinted on them in the sky.

On arrival at Boulogne I found a car from the Corps to meet me and I travelled with Major Paris, our Chief Intelligence Officer. We discussed the Norway affair for a long time and he told me a good deal about Belgium and Brussels in particular, as he had been Military Attaché there before the war. We had some sandwiches on the way and reached Corps H.Q. in time for tea. As spring went on its way the weather got better and warmer and soon we were able, after lunch, to sit outside the Mess and bask in the sun. There was however a feeling of curious tension in the air. We all knew I think that this sort of "phoney" war could not go on much longer.

About the end of April or the beginning of May a Topo Section of the 13 Survey Company under Captain Cameron went south to join the 51st Division who were holding a portion of the Maginot Line on the Saar. I saw them the off from Brebieres and made a little speech as they were really the first survey chaps in this war who were actually going into the firing line. I myself with Brigadier Clough, my Director, had arranged to go South on, I think, the 10th or 12th May, but it was destined not to be.

I had a great friend in the C.R.E. of the 48 Division, Lt Colonel Moore, who was stationed at a place called Henin Lietard, a mining town of no beauty about 10 miles away to the North. I was often over that way on my journeys to see 2nd Corps and later 3rd Corps at Bethune. On the evening of May 9th, the night before the blitz, I met Moore at a little golf course I had discovered on the Douai-Henin Lietard road.

This course of 9 holes was to me a great haven of rest and beauty. It was owned, I think, by the Belgian Consul in Douai and he allowed British Officers to play. In return we assisted him with labour to cut the grass. This course reminded one very much of home and when playing there one quite forgot the awful ugliness of the Nord Department of France. The course was secluded in trees and on it clumps of lilac and other bushes now in full flower. As for clubs, I had brought out a couple of irons and some balls when I returned from my last leave. Moore and I played a round that evening of 9th May and I don't think either of us thought at all of the morrow.

In the Mess it was much as usual with no further rumours. After dinner I sat talking to Lt Colonel Jack Winterton and he told me he had been offered a good job as instructor at the Staff College at Minley. I remember saying "I wonder if you will ever get there." We walked home down the Rue d'Arras together and all seemed quite as usual. I had often told Jack Winterton that I thought the first we should know about this was would be the crashing of bombs on Douai in the very early hours of the morning, and my not very difficult guess was to prove correct within a few short hours.



42 Rue d'Arras Douai Hauts-de-France

PART 3

MAY 10th 1940

I think it must have been somewhere about 4 a.m. that I woke up and heard the drone of aeroplanes, the air raid siren, and people running in the street. My bed was comfortable, I had lain in it every night for about 7 months and although I knew in a sleepy sort of way that the real war had started, I felt that just a few minutes longer in bed would not matter. Very shortly afterwards I heard the unmistakable whine of falling bombs. About this I had no doubt. I'd heard it in the last war and though that was 22 years ago I knew I was hearing it again. In fact those first bombs got me out of bed quick enough and downstairs, where I met the maid and her old father. They were shivering in the back parlour more from the cold of dawn than fright. Scared people in the streets were making for the shelters there were and I heard them saying in French "The Germans have gone into Belgium."

Then our Bofors guns opened up with their characteristic plonk-plonk-plonk-plonk-plonk of the 5 shells in the magazine. I went outside in the garden to see what was going on and looking up into the clear dawn sky I saw 5 or 6 German aeroplanes which looked quite black streaking Eastwards having dropped their bombs. They were at least 7,000 to 10,000 ft. high so it was useless for the Bofors guns to fire at them but I suppose the temptation to open up was irresistible after months of waiting. You can trace a Bofors shell all the way and these shells were bursting thousands of feet too low. Nothing more happened. Coffee was made in my billet and there was much chattering in the street. My batman came very early and I told him to pack everything we had as I knew that the war was on.

After a hurried breakfast I went up to the office for orders. I also told "B" Mess, of which I was P.M.C., to pack everything up, giving officer's haversack rations were possible.

On arrival at Corps H.Q. I found that Plan "D" which we had discussed for so many months had been put into operation already and that the 12th Lancers, the first troops to move, were probably already on their way over the Belgian frontier.

I had a troublesome telephone call with Brassard (G.H.Q. at Arras) who, at this last moment, tried to pinch one of my printing trailers off me for the use of 3rd Corps. I refused to part with it to Lt Colonel Wheeler and it was not till many days later at Armentieres that I finally did so.

The Corps Commander, General Barker, was walking up and down outside in the street, quite calm, and I had a long talk with him although it was almost the first time we had met.

Our orders were to move to Roost Warendin, a small village only about 5 miles to the N.W. of Douai. We made this move because it was thought that Corps H.Q. which had been in the school at Cuinchy for 8 months was bound to be bombed. Actually it never was, so all the rumours of what Lord Haw Haw had said were, as so often before, all poppycock. The move was completed quite early and I got a Mess of sorts going in a small estaminet and found myself a billet.

It was a lovely day and quite hot. There was much German air activity and sirens going all the time. The French also rang church bells which in the distance sounded most mournful. Troops were on the move and many of them were lying about in the sun at Roost Warendin as there was some hitch or other. Rumours of bombing round about came in, but of the major battle in Belgium I heard nothing. I again saw the Corps Commander walking up and down outside his H.Q. Chateau and I heard the B.G.S cursing some officers who had driven their cars up to the door instead of leaving them hidden under the trees.

There was a good deal of air activity at night but no bombs near us, in fact I was much more worried by snoring and coughing. There was one man who woke about 4 a.m. and coughed incessantly, probably because he smoked too much.

May 11th was another lovely warm summer day and after breakfast I got permission to go off in my car into Belgium as I wished to attend C.C.R.A's Conference at 6 p.m. that evening which I knew was being held just outside Brussels.

I went through Orchies where we were held up at the level crossing a fearful long time, Tournai, a lovely old town and at that time untouched and thence to Lessines. About 4 or 5 miles out of Tournai on a wooded hill we stopped for lunch and it was impossible to believe that there was a war on. It was quite quiet and the wood was full of bluebells. From Lessines we turned N.W. to Grammont where I thought the new Corps H.Q. was to be. After much trouble we found that because of some bombing round Grammont Corps H.Q. was to be located a bit further on at a miserable little village called Moerbeke on the Enghien road. Again H.Q. was in a school and one only very recently vacated. Even the flowers were still quite fresh on the children's desks. Originally the 13 Coy were to have been located in Moerbeke but owing to the change of plans of Corps H.Q. I had to get a message back to them to go to Grammont. This they did and got fixed up in a first class place, the local R.C. College.

After seeing Brigadier Halstead about 4 p.m. and snatching a cup of tea I rushed on for my meeting in Brussels going via Enghien, Hal and the southern outskirts of Brussels to the Foret do Soignes. I'm sorry to say I got lost in this forest. I had been there before in 1919 when I was in Namur just after the Armistice and I had had picnics there. However I did eventually find my rendezvous and was just in time for the meeting at 6.30 p.m.

Just after I arrived and had parked my car the Boche dropped a large bomb not very far off, and I remembered meeting Major Gordon of the Signals who for so long had been in the same office with me in Douai and together we took shelter – under a tree.

The Chateau in which this first meeting was held was a beautiful one set in this great forest E of Brussels. While we talked about siting guns and shooting Germans on the Dyle position which ran from Wavre to Louvain the Belgian servants were moving about, hurriedly packing up all that was valuable. The apparent owner, a tall grey haired woman, moved silently and gravely about. After the meeting Brigadier Davidson spoke some words of comfort to her in French and she replied "I am English, not Belgium." I wonder what happened to her a few days later.

Leaving about 7 p.m., I went back to Moerbeke as fast as I could. It was not fast as British troops were now moving up and near Droogenbosch, South of Brussels; I passed the 1st Survey Regt., R.A. with whom was moving part of my 13th Survey Coy R.E.

It was almost dark when I did get back and Moerbeke hadn't thought much about war or black outs. I managed to get some food in a café and I was cheered to hear the rest of the 13th Coy had made a safe journey to Grammont.

Eventually I got to bed in a room in a completely un-blacked out house. To get to this room I had to go through the bedroom of M. & Mme and their child who by this time were all in bed.

Very early next day, the 12th, there were sounds of aeroplanes, bombing and M.G. fire and I was up early to breakfast. Corps H.Q. were ordered to move up to a suburb of Brussels called Groselenberg and I moved on ahead as I had a lot to do. I wanted first to locate the topographical sections of the 13th Company who I knew were somewhere in the Overysse region, about 10 miles N.E. of Brussels.

(Note: Up to this point this diary was all written in England mostly in London during the period September 1940 to December 1941 and much of it during the bombing when sleep was impossible. From here onwards the diary was written in Egypt, i.e. from May 1942 onwards)

The run from Moerbeke to Brussels was uneventful. The roads were crowded with troops moving up. The weather was again lovely and there was no bombing near me. I remember being stopped at a level crossing near Brussels and a very fine train de lux went by. It was full of gay civilians. Only a few days later I passed that same crossing and almost the last trains were pulling out of Brussels and the road was jammed with refugees.

Of all the things of this period that will for ever be impressed on my mind is the sight of these refugees. The weather was hot, very hot at times, and its effect on these poor people was terrible.

Every form of transport was used from better class cars to the car that looked as if it had been used as a hen house since the last war. Every form of farm cart was pressed into service.

On my way out of Brussels on this May morning I went down the main Louvain road to find my Surveyors. Even on the 12th May the Belgian Army had begun to stream back from the battle along with all the other refugees. Soldiers were on bicycles with no rifles, and I actually saw two Belgium soldiers lying on the front mudguards of a motor car. Officers were in cars with what appeared to be their wives and all were going the wrong way, i.e. towards Brussels. They may have had duties in Brussels, I don't know. I am quite certain however that they had a bad psychological effect on us and as I had seen the same in 1918 I now feared the worst.

I found my Surveyors and also those of the Gunners. Both I and the Gunners had some of our best surveyors and officers away on the Saar front when this battle in Belgium started. My chaps eventually arrived after a forced march right across France along, as it turned out later, the line of advance of the Germans. I was very glad to see Cameron and his lads and I was full of praise for their magnificent effort to re-join us.

The R.A. Survey party never turned up. Actually they never left the Saar owing to some misunderstanding and they fought out the battle later on down South. Lt Colonel Beckett (Joe) of the R.A. Survey Regt. was not downhearted about anything. I found both R.E. and R.A. working together with no sign of the Hun so far, and no bombing very near us. The Survey work we did jointly on the Dyle position all went according to the plan we had worked out many months before back at Douai.

All the guns were surveyed in, which means that without any previous registration, these guns could put down their fire wherever they wanted. This they did a few days later and killed a great number of Boche. I went up every day to see the Survey work and to encourage and help the men wherever possible. By the 15th May it was clear that all was not going well with the Belgians or the French, but I don't think any of us thought that we could not hold the enemy on the Dyle.

On the 12th, after I had seen my Sappers, I returned to our new Corps H.Q. at Groselenberg. It was a large house with pleasant grounds but it seemed far too big, white and obvious. A Corps H.Q. is a large concern and there are constant comings and goings and it is difficult to hide transport unless it is done very well. A party of Belgian civilians with long spades were actually digging a cable trench as we moved in. They were, I suppose, P.T.T. men and were arranged I expect by my Signal friends of Douai days, but I often wonder if they were above reproach in the security line.

My next job was actually to help Signals. They wanted a large scale map with street names for their D.R.'s who were getting lost in Brussels. I had prepared such a map in Douai but it was useless. A map of this sort must be very accurate and show every name and every street however small. Ours unfortunately did not.

I knew however that the Belgians had the sort of map I wanted and got the name of a shop in Brussels where it was thought these could be bought. I can't now remember who gave me the name, but it was probably the Belgian Liaison Officer or one of our French mission officers.

Brussels on the 12th May had not yet really realized what was coming to it. Large and expensive cars were dashing about, shops were open, trams were running, and but for the occasional "whump" of a large bomb falling on Brussels Airport, there was nothing much to remind one of war.

I took a French mission officer with me in my car and after asking our way several times we found ourselves in what seemed a rather low quarter of Brussels. The address as given to me could not be found and when we got back to the car quite a large and excite crowd had collected round my driver. I am sure we were the first British troops they had seen in this war. I walked along a narrow street, up a hill and near a large building of the office description we met a priest.

We asked him if he could tell us the whereabouts of the shop where we could buy a large scale map of Brussels. The place turned out to be Bureau de marriage and for some reason I have never been able to understand, these priests had the very maps we wanted in a large drawer.

I only had 300 francs French with me and after a lengthy calculation the Belgians decided that I could have just 22 of their maps and no more. I wanted a hundred at least, but they made no gesture to give them to me although they knew full well I wanted them for the British Army who had come to help save their country. I obtained a receipt which I kept in my pocket book, and months later in England I extracted the English equivalent of 300 francs French from a very suspicious British pay master. However I had got some maps and I lost no time (but I did my way) in getting back to Corps H.Q. and dishing out these 1/15,000 maps to Signals.

As I was P.M.C. of "B" Mess I thought I had better find out where it was as I knew that everyone would be dead tired when they eventually turned up for a meal. The Mess was not far from Corps H.Q. up a fashionable road and in a modern house. The Mess servants who were now getting used to this moving business were already well settled in and thoroughly pleased with their new quarters. My billet was almost next door. It was a very modern, very well furnished house owned by a woman who lived with one maid. She showed me a most sumptuous double bedded room with bathroom attached and gave me a key of the front door which I have still got.

I had many adventurous journeys getting back to this house at night. I remembered one night in particular when in company with Major Rawlins R.A. we walked most cautiously with our revolvers ready. There was quite brisk shooting going on round about but whether from fifth columnists or windy British sentries I never found out. This went on every night while we were in Brussels and rather tended to get worse as time went on. Air raid alarms were almost continuous and frequently the "All Clear" went to the crashing of large bombs on Brussels Aerodrome. Eventually the sirens gave it up altogether.

Dinner the first night in Brussels was an extraordinary affair. The Mess wasn't ready so we went to a café round the corner. This was full of well-dressed and over fed Belgians, having perfectly ordinary restaurant dinner. I remember a particularly fat and over fed woman complete with Peke, sitting next to me and apparently oblivious that even then the Germans were nearly at the gates. I'm not sure if they cared whether the Germans came or not. They took little notice of us and expressed no joy at seeing us at all. In fact the whole atmosphere of this café rather said "really all these British officers are rather a nuisance pinching all our favourite places and making the food run short."

It was in this café that I spoke to our Chief Intelligence officer who not long before had given us a lecture about the Belgian Army and what we might expect from them. The I.O. frankly admitted he was completely wrong in what he had told us and that he had been up to the British Embassy and seen the Belgian King who was almost in tears at what was happening.

This period in Brussels from the morning of the 12th to the morning of the 17th May 1940 was for me one of intense activity. Demands for maps came in from all sorts of units; and visits to my own men still working up on the River Dyle and in the Overysse area, filled up all my time. When the Germans did arrive on the Dyle all the guns were surveyed in and many target areas on the far bank had been accurately fixed also. As a result our shooting was excellent, and there is no doubt a very large number of Huns, were killed. It is known that a very successful shoot was carried out on a wood where Boche tanks had been seen to collect.

If only we had not been forced by the position on our flanks to leave this position, the British Army would. I am sure, have given a wonderful account of itself. As it was the right flank was completely insecure and our 48th Division had a difficult task over by Waterloo.

The tracks and paths in the Forest de Soignies were completely wrong on our maps and many troops got lost. We did manage to make a revision of all these tracks but it was impossible to get it out to the troops in time.

On the evening of the 16th I went to have my hair cut in a little shop in Brussels near the office. The barber could speak some English and I remember telling him he would be cutting a German's hair tomorrow. He protested vigorously but I don't think he really minded. Belgian guns of ancient vintage and horse drawn at that were clattering past all the time I was in the shop and all going the wrong way. I knew the game was up and on the morrow we moved.

That night I found my billet empty, the owner had fled, I believe to Ostend, and I slept or rather dozed in that lovely house with all the contents completely at my disposal. Not even the valuable silver had been put away. In the morning I left everything just as it was, locked the front door and as I have already said, I still have the key.

Next day, May 17th, Corps H.Q. moved and it took some time to get clear of Brussels. The Sappers were at work blowing up all the big bridges over the Senne canal and there were still thousands of refugees on the move.

My first task was to find my Surveyors as I knew they had moved the day before to some obscure village with the 1st Survey Regt R.A. This proved a most difficult job but in the end I found them and they were all asleep in an orchard completely whacked. I woke up Cameron to give him fresh instructions which actually he never had time to carry out. After a talk with the Gunners I thought it time to try and find my own H.Q. which I eventually did in an old and ramshackle chateau at Vlesenbeck some distance west of Brussels. There we rigged up a Mess in a new cottage and I got some food. There was a pond at this chateau, now overgrown with weeds, but it had once been very nice, and one of our corps chaps was actually fishing presumably with a pin.

I got to bed in my valise under some stairs and I remember waking up in the middle of the night and hearing a noise of tramping feet. In my drowsy state I thought this was funny, but went to sleep until roughly awakened by a Captain. He said Corps had received urgent orders to move to Flobecq and in fact most people had already gone. From his manner I gathered he thought it was quite time I moved also.

It was two in the morning of May 18th, there was a bit of "wind" about, and finding one's car, packing and finding the route, was all most difficult, in fact this night march was the most difficult one I have ever done in my life. I had my driver, my batman, an R.E. Captain and myself in my 4 seater Ford 8. I knew I had some 25 miles to do to our new rendezvous over most difficult roads known to be congested with refugees. Within five minutes of leaving corps H.Q. we were lost. I had to get out of the car and listen to the sound of the guns and watch the flashes to make quite sure we weren't going back towards Brussels.

This journey would have been a difficult one in peace time. The roads were of a country type and our maps were completely wrong. The sign posts were in Flemish when there were any, and there was no one to ask who knew anything.

Having turned round we got back to a point which we could recognise on the map and started again. This time we were considerably more successful. One man read the map with a torch in the car, another watched the road on the left another on the right and reported every road or landmark like a church that we passed. Even so by some mischance I got onto the main Brussels – Ninove road. This I think was entirely due to the bad maps. Some of the country roads on the map had been made into two and three way concrete roads. The result was that when one came to them suddenly the tendency was to mistrust one's map reading and say "oh this must be the main road." It very often was not and a right turn was made when it ought to have been left.

The Brussels – Ninove road was completely blocked solid with tree lines of Belgian traffic all trying to move west. I left my car and walked to the head of the block about ½ a mile ahead. Here I found our guns trying to move east but also blocked. Fortunately there was a cross road of the country type available and with the help of a Serjeant, I believe a Gunner; I started to sort out this tangle.

Most of the Belgian traffic seemed composed of steam engines towing two or three large caravans but mixed up with them were ancient cars and the smartest limousines. It was beginning to show light in the east and everyone knew that if the G.A.F. caught that traffic jam, to say the least of it, life would be unpleasant.

I felt rather like a London Bobby standing in the middle of that road shouting “Stop” in every language I knew, but mostly loudly in English. The Sergeant did the same and gradually we began to sort out the mess. The difficulty was to stop some slightly panicky Belgium from nipping into a gap that appeared and making a fourth line of traffic.

I believe it took over half an hour to get that stuff on the move again but we did it. The Sergeant went East with his guns and I stood in the road until my car came up from the rear of the convoy. I got in it and at the first available opportunity we turned left off the Ninove road which of course we should never have been on.

Here we met further trouble in the shape of a British convoy but fortunately they were halted and we got past. Dawn was now breaking for the usual lovely day and we reached Flobecq by 7 a.m. It was quite a big town with a largish square and with the main road to the west running down-hill. Many other cars of Corps H.Q. had arrived before us and all agreed it had been a bad night march. Someone got into an estaminet and managed to get them to give us coffee and some excellent ginger biscuits which put new life into a pretty tired crowd of officers.

After some delay an office was allotted to me in what appeared to be a modern children’s hospital as there were large numbers of new beds and cots lying about.

“B” Mess were given a very lovely chateau which belonged to the Flobeoq Burgomaster who, like so many Belgian officials, appeared to have fled and left his town to get on as best it could without him. The house was large with spacious grounds and gardens. It did not take long for the Mess Staff to move in and for me to allot the rooms to individual officers. All the rooms had been recently slept in and had been left exactly as they were when the former occupants leapt out of bed.

In the main room I remember finding a valuable camera on a small table which I hid having some sort of feeling that it was a pity to let the Germans get it. No doubt they found it later. In the garden was a fat roan spaniel in his kennel so I let him out.

The only occupants I could find were a young Belgian and his wife and a baby. The wife was crying and had a pitiful tale to tell. The whole family had walked most of the way from Brussels in their feverish rush to avoid the Boche and her husband had been knocked down by a car and his ankle injured so badly that he could no longer walk. I inspected the wound and I could see that it was pretty serious. In my halting French I advised them to stay put. What else could one advise? It was impossible for the British to take them and the Belgians certainly wouldn’t.

Flobecq lies on the main road from Lessines to Ronse and thence westwards and it was crowded with every form of refugee traffic. Having little to do at this moment I was able to watch this never ending stream of humanity feverishly trying to get away somewhere, anywhere, from the fast oncoming enemy. Again it was a perfect May day and hot, and some of the refugees were already feeling the strain. I saw one farm cart pulled by a very fine 4 horse team looking very like Suffolk punches and towing a broken down ancient Ford motor car. There were 17 people mostly aged women sitting on the kit on top of the farm cart and there were at least 6 in the car on top of which was a mattress. Beside the horses were four men apparently in their Sunday suits. Mixed up with this stream were British units of our Corps coming back and some others going forward as well?

The garden of the office building in the Childs hospital was very nicely kept and all the spring things were just coming up. The wisteria on the house was in full flower and smelt lovely and sitting in the sun it was very difficult to think of war.

The mess rapidly got to work in the Burgomasters House and served an excellent lunch from a modern kitchen. Upstairs some officers had found the long bath and had seized the chance of using it. Someone pinched my sponge but as I had a shrewd suspicion who it was and proved to be right, I got my sponge back later in the retreat.

This day was a long and anxious one. There was not much news and it was difficult to find out from anyone what was really happening, where we were likely to fight and therefore require maps next. Officers came into meals at all hours. Strange and tired officers slept all over the settees in the Mess. Eventually we went to bed but not to sleep much. After the experience of the night before in Vlesenbeck and because the situation was so uncertain, the air of anxiety was great. Added to this, the Belgium couple I have already mentioned cried most of the night and so did their baby. However nothing happened.

Early next day, 19th May, we got orders to move right back towards the Belgian Frontier almost to our starting point to a place called Cappelle. We had previously reconnoitred this place as in alternative Corps H.Q. when we were in Douai and it was probably for that reason that it was decided to go there now. The weather, still lovely, was very different from biting frost and heavy snowstorms which we experienced on our first visit to this place. By now it was obvious that our next line of resistance must be the R Escault which runs through Tournai. The Surveyors, both mine and the R.A. had already gone back behind the river to do the necessary work and I decided to visit then on my way from Flobecq. I also decided to visit Mt. St. Aubert, a very prominent viewpoint on the enemy side of the Escault, which overlooked the magnificent and ancient town of Tournai.

It is over 50 miles from Flobecq to Capelle and I cannot now remember exactly how I went, but I think it was through the largish town of Frasnes on route N.60 to a point just short of Tournai where I turned off to the right. I was proceeding alone in my own car which made things easier, but at first the congestion on the roads from refugees was very bad although traffic was on the move and controlled by British "redcaps" in the towns. If refugee cars ran out of petrol or broke down they were simply pushed off the roads into the nearest field. There were many such to be seen and in some cases the occupants were too old or too tired to continue and were just lying around their vehicle too paralysed to act.

I saw no actual bombing on this road this day, in fact I personally never saw a civilian killed by bombs or M.Gs on the roads during the retreat. I did see some killed later on but they were not refugees fleeing down a main road but were in a town in a front line position.

Mont St. Aubert is a most dominant feature in an otherwise flattish countryside and is 400 feet high. On the top there is a church and also a large restaurant with a veranda which looks out over Tournai, a town of 36,000 people. This hill was evidently a place where the people of Tournai came for a quiet beer and a sun bathe.

There was no-one else about except two rather elderly Gunner officers and the oldest male inhabitant. There was a magnificent view all round, but for all that a sad one, as Tournai had already been seriously bombed and was now burning. I had a talk with the Gunners and they agreed that whoever held this height as an O.P. had complete observation over the R. Escault position. The oldest inhabitant showed a marked inclination to listen to our conversation but it maybe that he was merely deaf and was trying to edge near enough to hear us.

Surveyors had already been to this point and had completed all their necessary observations.

The Madame of the Restaurant was obviously worried and kept asking me if I thought the Boche were coming but I don't think I convinced her that they were. The place was ready to receive customers, waiters were about and we three ordered ham sandwiches and a bottle of beer which we had sitting on the veranda in the sun. Tournai shimmered and slowly burnt in the heat haze at our feet, although it was not then being actually bombed.

On leaving Mon St. Aubert I was determined to visit a bridge at a little place called Pont a'Chin which is on the Escault about 3 miles N.W. of Tournai. This bridge had already figured in plans before ever we went forward into Belgium as the Escault has few bridges around Tournai and communications in both Plan D (Dyle) and Plan E (Escault) were vital. On the British 1/50,000 map this alleged bridge at Pont a'Chin was shown as a "Ferry" but on a French 1/50,000 map of the same area the "bridge" was shown as a bridge.

I remember well Sir John Dill, the 1st Corps commander, coming to me and saying "Which is right?" It was impossible to give an answer although I thought that the French map was more recent it was probably correct. The French map proved correct and there was a new and narrow concrete bridge over the Escault at Pont a'Chin. It was being heavily used by retreating refugees when I crossed it and as it was so narrow, careful traffic control was necessary.

From there I went on to Froidmont where I knew the H.Q. of my Surveyors to be, and without much difficulty I found Major Cameron in a pleasant house computing. He was, alas, having some trouble with his computations. All this work is necessary so that the guns when they arrive can go into action and actually fire on an unseen target and, what is more, hit it. It is called "predicted" shooting, i.e. if you know the accurate surveyed position of your gun and also of your target then you can shoot and hit.

My chaps were working in a difficult area from the survey point of view as it meant working over the frontier from Belgium back into France, and the values of the fixed points in the two countries were not always in sympathy despite strenuous efforts beforehand to make them so. However, Cameron eventually overcame all his troubles and when the battle on the Escault came a day or two later our guns did magnificent work in hitting the Boche.

From Froidmont I went on to Esplichin to see Joe Beckett of 1st Survey Regt R.A. and found him in his office in the process of interviewing an alleged woman spy. There was much weeping and gnashing of teeth going on but all was sorted out and I think the spy was found to be no spy at all.

Then back to Cappelle, where I found I had been given a stable and outhouse as an office and Map Depot. The H.Q. offices were in the large and dilapidated chateau close by and the Mess was in a farm house up the road $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away. Crossing over the frontier again into France only nine days after we had crossed it the other way was a sad affair. There were no Belgians now to wish us "bon chance" and wave as before. However, I saw for the first time some British tanks drawn up on the roadside just on the Belgian side of the frontier. I never saw them again and I do not know if they went into action that day or not.

The stable was soon cleared out and the office working and as I now found that I wanted maps of the area we had been in for so long I sent the map truck into Douai to see what could be found. Fortunately the driver was very lucky. Our old map Depot was still intact and the maps we had left behind were untouched so it was possible to replace all my stocks. Douai itself had been badly bombed with large bombs, especially near the station, and the driver reported that French troops were looting the shops.

This driver was to prove an excellent chap in every way. He was always cheerful, full of guts and quite a good cook as well. He also was a bloodthirsty man. Hearing that a Boche plane had been shot down near the Chateau he dashed off in his van and came back with a most gory souvenir, the pilot's hat, which he gave to me. How often I blessed his "Would you like an egg for your tea Sir?"

There were periods of great excitement during the two or three days we were in this chateau. Visits from Boche planes were frequent and some flew very low indeed. It is definitely not a good thing for a Corps H.Q. to go and park itself in a large and conspicuous chateau in the middle of spacious grounds. At that time of year the grass was long and men and officers too, would persist in walking across it and thus making tracks which must have cried to high heaven when seen later in the air photos the Boche were taking. Even my own Director, who visited me at Cappelle, got shouted at for taking a "short cut" through the grass.

On May 20th we moved late in the evening to a small village called Ascq just outside Lille, on the main Tournai – Lille road. It was a nasty little village, really a working class suburb of the huge industrial town of Lille.

On our way to Ascq on the right hand side of the Pont a'Maroq – Lille road we had to pass Seclin Airfield and my driver had it firmly in his mind that there was a raid on and drove like hell, so much so that I had to stop him as the danger of death in the car was far greater than that from German bombs.

The village of Ascq was almost deserted, the streets and houses were very mean and it was with difficulty that offices and Messes were fixed up. The Mess was in quite a small house but it had a grocer's warehouse attached to it and this was full of stuff. It was impossible to stop pilfering those rations we so badly needed and I myself took two packets of chocolate which sustained me later on the beaches.

Corps H.Q. "G" offices found a largish house with quite a good garden and during our stay here we were frequently visited by a Lysander aircraft. There were nasty rumours about these machines which we used as Army Co-operation aircraft and which often dropped messages on Corps H.Q.

It was said that the Boche had captured some and that it was theirs and not ours that so frequently flew around Corps H.Q. Here our Provost Marshal told me he had had one of his "redcaps" on point duty shot and killed by a Lysander, but I never heard if this story was true.

However it is perfectly true to say that whenever these R.A.F. chaps came over, everyone was windy, wondering whether it was a Hun and in any case we felt that his continually circling was showing the Hun exactly where corps H.Q. was.

There were lots of tame rabbits, Belgian hares etc., in cages at the back of our Mess and I let them out as they had had no food or water for days. I suppose that owing to their long captivity they didn't know what to do as next day they were still hopping about and I fed them again. The cows in the fields were also in a dreadful state as they hadn't been milked and some we had to shoot, but it was remarkable the number of chaps who seemed to be able to milk a cow.

During the time we were at Cappelle I had moved the Survey Coy back to Brebieres west of Douai into its old original billet. I soon found this was the wrong direction as the battle was then raging round Arras, so I chose a spot near Merville, due north of Brebieres.

While at Ascq several officers of the Company came to see me about various technical Survey matters and one of them, Lieut Peel, had dinner and then went off to find his unit. This he failed to do and having spent a hectic night with only a short sleep in his car he had breakfast with me as well! Up to this point we were still able to supply the Corps with all the maps they wanted chiefly because we were able to revisit Douai and raid our original depot. It had been arranged that G.H.Q. should clear this Depot when we went forward into Belgium but thank God they never did, the reason I believe being because they couldn't find it.

On May 23rd Corps split and rear H.Q. went to Armentieres with an advanced H.Q. actually in the city of Lille itself. I had never actually been into Armentieres in the last war and I was surprised to find what a fine town had been built up on the rubble. When we arrived the town had not been bombed, but when we left, it was a very different story.

We were allotted houses at the west end of the town near an extreme large church, and I was early surprised to find that 2nd Corps H.Q. was also in the town. I thought "What madness. The Boche will soon discover this from Fifth Columnists, and we will be bombed to." And we were.

Our Mess was a large new 3 or 4 storied building standing in its own grounds, locked and deserted. I'm afraid I just broke in like a common burglar. It was a fine house inside and the rooms were large and I, as P.M.C., allotted everyone a bed. There was trouble in the kitchen as the water supply didn't work, but after some effort the stand-by pump was made to function after first producing the blackest of water!!

A garage was soon found in Armentieres suitable for my Map Depot and stock was taken to see exactly what maps we had left to issue, as by now I was getting very short. After a quiet night on the 25th May things got more-lively next day and more and more German aircraft came over. Capt Wilson dug a large shelter in the garden which came in very useful later on. I found out where 2nd Corps Survey were in the town, and I found also that 3rd Corps were only just down the road near Ploegsteert.

During my meeting with Lt-Col Sanceau of 2nd Corps who was in a large factory, a large force of German aircraft came and bombed in daylight and we were driven to take shelter. The shelter was full of distracted women and children, but although bombs dropped near, no-one was hurt.

It was agreed that we should all three meet next day and pool our resources of maps. This was done on the 26th and it was the last meeting between the three Assistant Directors of Survey of the three Corps for a long time. We shared out for the mutual benefit of the three Corps, and I allotted one of 13 Coy's printing machines to the Survey Coy of 3 Corps. This had been asked for in Douai just before the battle began but I had refused. I decided on the afternoon of the 25th to visit 13 Coy who were now located a long way off at a farm called de Groot Kwinte about 3 miles beyond Furnes on the Furnes – Coxyde Road. This journey took me through Messines and Ypres and had for me very many memories of the last war. My Field Company then had helped to consolidate, after the blowing up the mines at Messines, and I had been through Ypres many times. Both places had been entirely rebuilt since the last war but had already suffered bomb damage in this war.

I found the 13 Coy comfortably installed in a good billet which seemed miles from the war. I had brought some urgent work for printing and I sat in the garden and slept while it was being done. On the long journey back the roads were very congested and there were several holes and fires in Ypres which were not there when I went the other way in the morning. Close to Ploegsteert a few Boche aircraft came over to bomb the road but missed and killed some cows in a field. I told my driver about this on my return to Armentieres and he took the van out, and got an excellent steak off a cow which he cooked for my supper very well indeed. That driver was a versatile man and could turn his hand to almost anything.

On the 26th May I visited advanced Corps H.Q. in Lille. They were in a factory and were difficult to find. Lille is a large but rather dirty looking city and although there were plenty of people still about they seemed neither friendly nor keen to help me find the factory. However I saw the B.G.S., told him the map situation and he seemed quite calm and happy about the battle. Actually he was playing about with a small adding machine he had found in the office of the factory and asked me how it worked. I had an uneventful journey back to Armentieres and saw rather an interesting capture. A British soldier was driving a six-wheeled German lorry with trailer attached near Armentieres.

When questioned he said he had captured it from the Jerries “over there somewhere”. Asked where the driver was he just said “Oh I bumped the blighter off.”

He was himself dirty and unshaven and most of his clothes were German and it is a bit of a mystery how he got back into the British lines without being bumped off himself as a German. Both lorry and trailer were new. The trailer was carrying a new 35ft German motor boat. The lorry contained bits and pieces for the boat and a good deal of loot, mostly soap and sweet French champagne.

The camp Commandant decided to take the lorry when we moved and leave the boat. If we had only known what was coming a few days later we would undoubtedly have taken the boat as well!

During the whole time we were in Armentieres there were frequent air raids but the most violent ones seemed to come in the evening. About 6 p.m. on 26th May about 60 enemy aircraft came over and bombed the town. They each dropped about 6 fairly heavy bombs and most of them fell together. At the time I was sitting in high-backed French chair in the Mess, in my tin hat, having a cup of tea. I heard the roar of aircraft but having heard it so often before I took no immediate evasive action.

Then suddenly there was the scream of 360 odd bombs all coming down together and I remember it reminded me of those super rockets we used to have on Guy Fawkes Day, which make a squeaking noise. Some bombs fell in the garden not 30 yards away and some on the houses on both sides of the mess, but none actually on the Mess. All the glass in the windows blew in on top of me and it was good thick glass too. I was thankful I had my tin hat on. After the racket was over I went out to see what the damage was as I knew the R.A.F. Corps wireless trailer, my car and various other vehicles and many drivers were in the garden. The house to one side was already burning furiously and that to the other side was also hit. In the garden only two men appeared to be hit, one of which was my batman Richards who had a fairly big chunk of bomb under his arm. I asked him how on earth it got there and he said he thought it went in just as he was jumping into a slit trench. Although he was evacuated by ambulance he was seriously wounded and after a long interval I eventually got him back again in England and we went through the bombing of London in the winter of 1940-41 together.

The other man was seriously wounded in the leg which was bleeding badly. Just after we had got this man under cover and onto a stretcher, the Boche came over bombing again but although a lot of stuff dropped, nothing fell quite so near as in the earlier raid. Eventually this man and my batman were evacuated by Ambulance and both recovered.

My car was a sorry spectacle. Every window except the front driving window was shattered by blast which made the “triplex” glass go white. There were holes in the roof and through the driver’s seat and one of the wheels was badly damaged and the spare blown off and useless. By means of great efforts we jacked the car up, pinched a spare off another Ford V8 and ran on four good wheels until very nearly the last phases at Dunkirk. The car always became an object of much interest after the bombing as with its white windows and bomb splinter marks in its sides everyone came to speculating about the fate of the occupants. Luckily the “occupants” were not in the car at the time!

The house next door burnt very quickly and most fiercely and nothing could be done to save it. Casualties seemed to be very few despite the intensity of the attack over a small area. Other houses nearby were burning and the large cathedral-like church was seriously damaged.

Shortly after this raid – or it may have been before it – the Corps received orders to move to a small place called Ryveld a few miles N.W. of the large town of Cassel. This move was made late in the evening and was along the main road N.42 and through the large town of Bailleul, which I had known so well and spent so many hours in during the last war. The roads were crowded with M.T. all going west and it was late by the time we reached Ryveld. Even in the dark this village seemed a most unsuitable place for a Corps H.Q. It stood on a rise some 200 feet high which was really part of the hill on which Cassel stands. Thus it had a clear view northwards over the flat plains of Belgium towards the sea and Dunkirk.

It was from here that I first saw the black smoke of the blazing oil and petrol tanks of Dunkirk, a sight that will remain in my mind always.

It took a long time for the Corps to shake down on arrival. The roads were narrow and un-reconnoitred and there was a system of half-finished French defences which made things even more difficult as barbed wire was all over the place. There were also some good concrete M.G. emplacements.

Obviously the Mess could not get into action that night as regards food and there appeared nowhere to sleep. However with my Captain and two French mission officers we found a farmhouse in which Madame cooked a most excellent hot-pot kind of meal, mostly of bacon, which went down very well.

They also gave us a room in the farmhouse to sleep in. I can remember most vividly the look of awful apprehension in the look of the farm people in this house. They asked us questions like “Is the Boche coming?” “Is he near?” “What shall we do?” and it was very difficult to answer such questions truthfully.

I slept very well but my captain who had already been bombed several times was up with the lark and had dug an excellent slit trench by the time I got up. This came in very useful later on.

Quite early on the 27th May I walked into Ryveld village to look for our Mess lorry and see what hopes there were of breakfast. I had some difficulty in finding the Mess staff and as I was walking down the narrow road towards Cassel I heard a well-known whine, or rather four of them, followed by four bangs over on my left. All the soldiers were looking into the air to see where the aircraft was but I remember saying “Those weren’t bombs, they were shells!”

It was, to say the least, disconcerting to find that Corps H.Q. was within shelling range of the Hun and in daylight one saw how very unsuitable Ryveld was for such a large organisation as a Corps H.Q. It was also impossible to hide all our vehicles on that ridge.

As the morning went on it was obvious from the shelling, bombing, and even rifle fire to the S.W. that an action of some importance was going on round Cassel. Corps H.Q. was organized by the senior officer present, Brigadier Halstead, to resist an attack which, however, never actually reached us.

I tried to dispose of various stocks of maps, technical books etc., which were obviously no longer required and in order to lighten my map vans which were heavily overloaded. It was here that I found how impossible it is to burn maps in bulk and how equally impossible it is to burn them individually because it takes too long. I also took a “rocket” from the Corps for making a lot of smoke and as they said indicating to the Hun that we were retiring and burning our secret papers. I rather thought this had been obvious to everyone for several days!

In the end I disposed of heaps of maps and other gear in the pond of the friendly farm where I had slept the night. Here I found how paper will float when you want it to sink but I’m sure that most of the stuff would have been too badly damaged for use by the enemy. Also the water in the pond was very foul.

About mid-afternoon urgent orders came for the Corps to move to a small village called Warham about 10 miles due north and a mile or so east of the old walled town of Bergues. As the Corps had not unpacked much after its move from Armentieres the night before it was soon on the road again. The march was slow, the roads narrow and very congested with M.T. and all the villages, even the small ones, bombed.

We joined the main Dunkirk road at les 5 Chemins just inside the Belgium – French border at Oost-Capel and after passing through Rexpoede movement became slower and slower and there were obvious sounds of much bombing ahead. The road for 2 miles or so east of Bergues was blocked solid with M.T. but to get to our destination of Warham it was just possible to turn off this road to the right before all movements became impossible.

It was at the cross-roads (325756) about 1 mile south of Warham that I first really realised how serious the situation was.

At this cross-road there was a Military Policeman who stopped my car and asked “Are you 1st Corps, 2nd Corps, or 3rd Corps?” When we said “1st Corps” he said “Orders have been received for you to abandon all transport and make your way to the Southern outskirts of Dunkirk”. I was astounded to hear this and asked him if he had this order in writing. He said “No, but it is genuine”.

It was undoubtedly being acted upon and with, I regret to say, some considerable panic. M.T. of all sorts was being driven recklessly into fields, ditches or anywhere they could get. The vehicles were being hacked with picks in the petrol tanks and on the dashboards and their drivers were just beating it across the fields towards Dunkirk which all could see burning in the distance. Truly it was an incredible sight.

I had been in a retreat before in 1918 and I was determined not to abandon my M.T. till the last possible moment. I had also been told by my Corps to go to Warham. Thus I got past the "Red Cap" and abandoned M.T. and got into the fair sized village of Warham, where I found many other people of 1st Corps.

Eventually late in the afternoon most of the Corps and M.T. were assembled in a field about ½ mile west of the village. Here we stayed till night fall. During that time Bergues was heavily bombed several times and Dunkirk most of the time. Air battles raged miles high over our heads and I well remember spent cartridge cases falling onto my tin hat from the sky. I picked one up and was pleased to find it was English although I couldn't see our planes. In fact it was about now that we all began to say "Where is the R.A.F.?" It was not till long afterwards that I read what magnificent work the R.A.F. had done. All we on the ground saw was German bombers and far too many of them and far too often.

The rest of the late afternoon and evening of 27th May was spent chiefly in hanging about and sorting out kit. It was obvious to all that we should probably be captured and only if we were extremely lucky should we be taken off the beaches at Dunkirk. Many donned their best uniform and put their most valued possessions in their pockets. All the rest of one's valuable kit and equipment had to be left behind. I personally put my washing gear and a few other possessions into very small light suitcase which I managed to keep with me, but I did not after this shave or remove any clothes until late in the evening of May 31st.

I remember quite well the Corps Provost unit coming in and going through their kit and it was very noticeable that they, who should have set a good example, had more loot than anyone else. Their trucks were overloaded with all sorts of things including some very fine looking soft mattresses.

Sometime just before dark Brigadier Halsted had arrived from Advanced Corps H.Q and he assembled all the officers and told them the situation as he knew it and then issued orders as to what he wished done. In the main these orders were for all officers not actually required for fighting to be thinned out. These were told to make their way to the beaches around Bray-Dunes and Malo and from there be sent to England. The distance to the beaches was about 7 miles and there were several roads through the very intersected and wet countryside.

Two defence parties under selected officers were detailed to defend two bridges over the Bergues Canal not far from Warham, one at Hoymille (292776) and the other at Moeres (305779). I never heard what happened to these two parties.

Although I was one of the party detailed to go to the beaches I asked and obtained permission from Brigadier Halsted to make my way somehow to 13 Survey Coy who were still at de Groot Kwinte farm near Furnes about 15 miles away to the N.E. I realised that this unit was now well out of 1st Corps area and that no one would give it any orders unless I did and the only way of giving it orders was to give them personally.

About this time - about 9 or 10 p.m., and very dark - my Captain who had been away on a job returned with my car. He had had an extremely unpleasant time and came in for some quite severe bombing at Rexpoede. I think somehow that Brigadier Halsted thought I was going off on a rather lost cause, as I remember him wishing me luck and I'm not sure he didn't shake hands as well. My last vision of him was one of calmness and a determination to get some sleep come what may. The farmer in this farm was a curious fellow and showed every desire to listen in to all Brigadier Halsted's orders. So much so that in the end we had to eject him and treat him as though he were a Fifth Columnist, which he very likely was.

Then for me began a most trying cross-country night journey along unknown roads congested with troops and abandoned transport, and no really clear knowledge as to where the enemy was.

From Warham I turned north till we met the Bergues Canal and kept along its bank going East all the time. I stopped frequently to check that I had made no mistake. On one occasion troops were pouring down the road from Hondchoote and all they could say was "Please sir can you tell us the way to Dunkirk?" "Please sir can you tell us the way to the coast?" So overwrought were they that they literally walked into the car and bounced off it. They never waited for the answer to their questions or heeded my insistent advice that they must stick to the roads or they would be drowned in the canals and dykes. I heard many splashes of men falling into water and no doubt many of them were too exhausted to get out. I remember the barrier into Belgium at 385790 but there was no one about now to worry about International Frontiers.

The road did not follow the canal all the time and was in fact most tricky through Houthem Elzentap and Bulscamp, and we made several mistakes. It was a very dark night and driving with no lights a very trying business. Also our torch so necessary for map reading began to give out.

At the large village of Bulscamp I tried to turn right to get on to the Ypres – Furnes main road but was prevented from doing so by some burning Lorries which it was not possible to pass. Turning was very difficult in those narrow roads and with so much water about that if you made a mistake there was no hope of getting your vehicle onto the road again.

However we eventually reached Furnes safely and as I had been in this town before when visiting 13 Company from Armentieres I knew my way out of it. I had some trouble with Belgian sentries at their pathetically inadequate road block on the Coxyde road but eventually reached H.Q. 13 Coy at about 2.30 a.m.

The Coy was sleeping peacefully, but the sentries were very alert and I woke up the O.C. Major O’Hara Moore, told him the situation as I knew it and also that I had heard there was some sort of H.Q. in La Panne and that I intended to go there to report and I wished him to go with me.

Leaving my car driver and my captain to get some sleep I left with Major O’Hara Moore and a new driver and after great difficulty we succeeded in locating the H.Q. in La Panne at about 4 a.m. The last mile of straight road into La Panne was already blocked with what appeared to be derelict and very large vehicles of some French unit. When I came down the same road two days later there were literally thousands of vehicles blocking the road.

The Duty Officer in this H.Q. which turned out to be that of 3rd Corps under Sir Ronald Adam was Major Dove, a Sapper whom I had known before at G.H.Q. in Arras. I had a talk with him, told him who I was, what troops I had and then General Lindsell, lately L.G.A. Middle East, spoke to me. I repeated who I was to General Lindsell and he spoke to General Adam and I was then given orders. General Lindsell gave me the situation as he knew it and he said that as I still had transport and at least 60 sappers who could shoot that I was to go to Furnes and attempt to put this place into some state of defence, and be prepared to blow up the bridges. Knowing what a large place Furnes was with at least 6 bridges of major importance in it I remember saying “Good God, with 60 men.” General Lindsell said there was no one else and 60 trusty Sappers could do a lot of damage, so I went off in quite good spirits to see what we could do.

Back at Coy H.Q. the unit was assembled and I spoke to the officers and senior N.C.O’s and said what the situation was and my plan for the recce of Furnes. I then went and laid down on one of the officer’s beds for an hour, as by this time I was very tired indeed, but about 7 a.m. I went myself to Furnes which was only about 2 miles away to see how the Coy were getting on and to see if I could now make a detailed plan.

It was again a beautiful morning, this 28th May, and when I got to Furnes it was quite quiet. I was met almost at once by one of the Coy Officers and a Belgian Major who seemed in a state of some excitement. In view of what follows it is as well to remember that the Belgians gave up the struggle at midnight, 27-28 May, so that at this time, 7a.m. on 28th May, the Belgians were out of the war and there was literally nothing to stop the Germans coming down the Belgian coast from Ostend on the British left flank.

This Belgian Major asked me if I would come to the Mairie to see his General as he resented British soldiers messing about on the bridges in Furnes. He was very hot and bothered, this Major, and I went with him to his H.Q. which was in the centre of this large town. At the H.Q., I was treated rather like a spy and asked for every sort of pass but was eventually ushered into the General’s office.

The General was a small man sitting in a corner by the window. Hair en brosse he was smoking a cigarette out of a long holder. He gave me the impression that he had not been out of that office since the war began and that he had no intention of letting a horrible war disturb him now. Conversation was difficult as my French is very poor but I managed to tell him what my Sappers were doing and who gave me my orders.

The Belgian General then requested me to return to La Panne and inform my General with his compliments that he had plenty of Belgian soldiers to defend the town and plenty of Sappers to blow up the bridges. He also requested me to remove my Sappers at once.

At this time, about 9 a.m., I did not know that the Belgian’s had surrendered but it is most likely that this Belgian General did. I decided that I must call my Sappers off, and I sent them back to the farm while I rushed back to La Panne to report to General Adam.

On arrival back at H.Q. on La Panne there was a heavy air raid on and I remember how we all crouched on a flimsy staircase, but fortunately nothing fell very near. I saw and spoke to General Adam and told him my story. He informed me that the Belgians had surrendered and that I was to go back to Furnes and do the best I could as he was sure the Belgians would do nothing to help.

So back we went once more to Furnes and just as I arrived there was an air raid. I also saw the Belgians pulling out including the Belgian General I had seen only an hour or so before and I often have wondered since if he knew when I was talking to him that the Belgians had finished with the war. I wonder, in other words, if he too was a Fifth Columnist.

I now found on arrival at the cross-roads (443875) just outside Furnes that a Gunner Brigadier called, I think, Lawson of the 48 Div had arrived and established his H.Q. in a house close to this crossroad. I told him what my orders had been up to the present and he asked me particularly if I had any transport. I said I had been in a retreat before in March 1918 and that I still had all the Coy M.T. intact.

He then told me what he thought was the situation, which was that the Belgians had packed up and that so far as he knew there were no troops on the British left flank at the moment or likely to be for some time. He said he believed the Huns were already coming down the Ostend main road and would shortly be at Nieuport. He then said he wanted me to go to Nieuport and do what I could with what men I had and others that would come up later to stop the Boche.

He also said he wanted some 3-ton lorries under an officer left at his H.Q. and I arranged with my Captain to look after this party while I went with 13 Coy to Nieuport.

I remember again saying as I had said to General Lindsell earlier in the day "Good God" and Brigadier Lawson who was in excellent form had a good laugh with me.

I then went back to the Coy, arranged for a hot meal and made plans to leave about noon. I again addressed the officers and N.C.O's and told them the present situation and the new plan. I have been told since that I was a bit gloomy on this occasion, but I didn't really feel it as the situation seemed too fantastic even to think about.

The Coy also were given orders to destroy everything they could. This they did, quickly and well, but it was a great grief to destroy all our printing machines. Here again the farm pond came in remarkably handy and I'm sure the Boche didn't get much serviceable stuff out of it.

We moved off about noon with all the available M.T. carrying all the men and all the arms, ammunition and petrol we had. The M.T. included the two Scammell tractors used for towing the printing machines trailers and still driven by R.A. drivers.

We proceeded in good order through Coxyde-Oost Dunkerke and thence to Nieuport. As we proceeded we met less and less traffic and refugees and nothing was going our way at all. The quietness of everything seemed and felt ominous and in view of the situation as given me by Brigadier Lawson, I decided to halt the Coy in the triangular shaped wood about ½ mile east of Nieuport while I went forward to reconnoitre.

I was destined to see a great deal of this wood in the next 48 hours. It still bore signs of the last war in the shape of some excellent concrete pill boxes. One of these afterwards became our H.Q. and a pleasant refuge it proved as it was still proof against most things although while I was there it did not receive a direct hit.

Having halted the Coy in the wood I decided to go forward with Lieut Halliday to reconnoitre. Also with me I took Cpl Fugler on a motor-cycle. We went in a 15-cwt truck and Lieut Halliday sat in front beside me and the driver with a rifle and fix bayonet.

There was now no one on the road and as we went forward towards Nieuport we came to the first bridge over a canal. This bridge had only recently been blown by someone as fresh debris was lying about. I never discovered who blew this bridge as I saw no British troops about.

I decided to reconnoitre to the right and sent Lieut Halliday and the M/c to the left. The object was to see what further bridges we could blow up.

Walking down the single line railway to the right I soon came upon a railway bridge very much on the skew over the same canal already mentioned. The rails were carried on single very large rolled steel joists and as far as I could remember were supported in the middle of the canal by circular iron pillars. I had a look under this bridge and it had already been prepared for electrical firing presumably by the Belgians. I remember thinking that this bridge had a very heavy charge on it. The leads which were some 200 yards long were on the far side and I walked over the bridge and dragged them back over to my side. I could not find an exploder. Later this bridge was successfully blown by Lieut Halliday by using the battery out of the truck. The explosion was very great and a house nearby collapsed. Another smaller humped back brick road bridge over the same canal was also blown sending up a cloud of yellowish brick dust into the air.

As a result of reconnaissance to the left towards Nieuport railway station at least one more bridge was destroyed by Lieut Halliday. The really important bridge, however, was not destroyed. This bridge was a new concrete one and carried the main road from Ostend and entered the town in the N.E. corner. The whole of Nieuport is a maze of bridges of all sorts and the map we had – and we only had one was very difficult to follow.

On arrival at 13.30 hours I thought from the information given me by Brigadier Lawson, that the enemy were in Nieuport and this view was supported by the attitude of the few Belgians I saw and spoke to. This was not true. As it turned out there were some Gunners actually in Nieuport and also a troop of the 12th Lancers with 3 Armoured Cars.

The Germans had come quickly up the main road from Ostend to the N.E. outskirts of the town but only in light vehicles and motor-cycles, although tanks arrived later. Both the R.A. and the 12th Lancers did excellent work with, I fear fairly heavy casualties.

After reconnoitring the bridges for demolition I returned to the wood and attempted to organise a defensive position to stop the Germans getting over the Nieuport Canal which ran parallel with the sea on my right flank, round the north of Nieuport and so into the sea at Nieuport-Bains.

The 13 Coy occupied a position just in front of the wood on the left of the main road looking towards the station. They also made a road block of derelict Belgian A.A. guns which had been abandoned. The ground on the left of the road was fairly wooded, sandy and easy to dig, but the sides of the trenches kept falling in. We had tools to dig in with as I had foreseen this contingency and had sent a scrounging party round Furnes before we left to collect every pick and shovel which could be found.

On the right of the road the ground was marshy with thick grass and intersected with dykes. However, it was not very wet. I organised a party to defend this area from a number of officers and men of all types that began to roll up at about 4 p.m. Most of these were R.A.S.C. and very many of them had never fired a rifle. We had a few Bren guns but no anti-tank rifles and very little ammunition.

At first H.Q. was established in a very obvious red brickstack on the right of the road so that no one could fail to find us. This was later changed, largely because of shelling, to the concrete dug-out already mentioned, which was on the left of the road.

Some 25 pdrs arrival later and got into action in a farm on the right of the road not far from H.Q. and did some excellent work, using as O.P. a tall tower of a large factory just in front of H.Q. on the left of the road.

About 4 to 5 p.m. there was a thunderstorm and in the low clouds the Boche came over and bombed and I saw the bombers wheeling in the clouds looking for their objectives. They dropped both H.E. and incendiaries in the woods but did little damage although I saw some dead civilians later.

Somewhere about this time I made contact with Lt Colonel Brazier R.A. who had come down from Nieuport where, unknown to me, he had been all day with his men. I also went up to reconnoitre on the left, and got into touch with a subaltern of the 12th Lancers and went with his Armoured Car to a concrete bridge carrying the concrete road over a small canal just north of the station. There was some rifle fire from the far side and from the direction of Lombartzyde but no mortar or shell fire.

Later still in the evening and just before dark I went to the bridge over the Furnes Canal at Wulpen (475905) to report to Brigadier Clifton who, I had heard, had arrived to take over command of the sector. I found him at the bridge, reported what we had done and as he seemed satisfied I returned to Nieuport driving my own car.

Just after I left, long range shells came over and I heard later that serious damage had been done to the Brigadier's H.Q. and that several men had been killed. The shells were undoubtedly from the Infantry 5.9" long range German gun which had by this time got into action somewhere north of Nieuport.

When I returned to my H.Q. near the wood it was already dark, and after the thunderstorm and rain it was very wet and damp.

Various parties were arriving to help in the defence and one of them was an R.E. one. This party had with them an R.E. officer and a Belgian officer who was reputed to know all about the bridges in Nieuport and how they were prepared for demolition. It was agreed that this party should go right up into Nieuport and see if they could destroy the main concrete already mentioned. Lieut Halliday had also gone forward to see if he could do anything to destroy this bridge. He managed to get on to it, but by now the Boche were very near and I believe actually on the bridge themselves. Despite most gallant and determined efforts, Lieut Halliday failed to blow this bridge. For his efforts here and for those on other bridges and for his general work and conduct throughout the day he was awarded the M.C., the first to be won by an officer in the Survey Service.

The other R.E. party also failed and eventually returned early next morning. Another R.E. party of the 7th Field Coy R.E. tried to blow up the railway bridge on the right where it crossed the Nieuport – Furness Canal. This they failed to do after a gallant attempt in which they had some casualties including an officer wounded.

A truly amazing incident occurred just at dusk. A party of Belgian officers came up the main road from the rear on horses and wanted to be allowed to go through our lines into those of the Boche.

I pointed out the impossibility of this but the Belgians were insistent. They said they lived over there they had surrendered and there was no reason why they shouldn't go. Apart from the impracticability due to blown bridges and rifle fire, I had no desire for these Belgians to tell the Germans how thin we were on the ground. I therefore told them to return the way they had come and that quickly. As they were troublesome and showed no signs of going I ordered a few rounds on a nearby Bren gun to encourage them on their way.

13 Coy on the left and other troops on the right were now dug in, and settled down for an anxious and uncomfortable night. It was obvious the Hun was pushing forward and was getting up guns and mortars.

During the night at least 50 shells were sent over but they did little or no damage. They were 5.9" from a long range gun, and in the morning of 29th May I dug up a base plate and a nose cap to check this. These shells had detonated very badly and had merely broken into large pieces of metal about ½" thick with signs of the yellow explosive still on them.

Troops came in and out of the dug out all night with various reports. Some of the reports were from the right and were rather alarmist, saying that the Hun was over the canal. When dawn came however we still held the line of the canal and there had been no crossing anywhere during the night.

After scrounging some bully and biscuits on the morning of 29th May, I went up with my orderly, Fus Griffiths, to see how 13 Coy was getting on. I found them well dug in and in good form and they had suffered no casualties during the night. There was now some enemy mortar fire but this was falling around the station area. It was causing no harm and there was no shell fire.

It was by now known that fighting troops were to come up during the day to relieve our scratch crowd, but the actual time of arrival depended on many things. These regular troops began to arrive early in the afternoon and they continued arriving during the evening.

At this time there was some rifle fire slightly to the left front where some R.A., was putting up a good fight on an island in the river. There was also some fire and activity over on the right. A crowd of people were observed streaming away from Nieuport on the Pervijze road all carrying white flags. Some Bren gun carriers which were now available were sent along the bank of the Furness – Nieuport canal to see if they could find out who they were. They later reported them to be Belgians fleeing from Nieuport but whether there were any Germans with them was not known.

Some more British field guns had also arrived to support us and they were in action on the right of the road in a farm just behind the H.Q. There were also one or two French armoured cars who now and again came out from behind a house rushed up the road towards Nieuport fired their guns, and rapidly retreated to shelter again.

Somewhere about 2 p.m. there was a commotion on the right of the road and the rumour went round quickly that the Huns were attacking. There was much rifle fire and men were seen running but no enemy were seen and eventually the firing died away. Our guns set the tower of Nieuport church on fire about 3 p.m. and it blazed furiously and even in the bright sun the flames were visible.

About 4 p.m. a M.G. battalion of the Middlesex came up and went into action on the right of the road. I stayed talking with one of their Corporals for some time and we saw the streams of people leaving Nieuport on the right. Through glasses they looked very much like Huns and he decided to try a burst of M.G. fire but when he tried to fire the gun jammed.

Later in the evening it was arranged with the incoming Brigade that our troops should be relieved on the night of 29th - 30th May. The plan was to relieve the 7th Field Coy R.E. and that the R.A.S.C. contingent on the right first and the 13 Coy later. The actual time for the 13 Coy was midnight. I had arranged with Sgt Fox to collect such transport as would still go near a cross-road on the Oost-Dunkerke road at 488933 and to wait there till we came, no matter what the delay. This he did very well indeed.

The battalion that took over the 13 Company front was one of the Royal Fusiliers. They were very tired indeed and had already seen much heavy action, I think in the Ypres area. Orders were given in the H.Q. dug-out, for one of the Coys to take over and secure the line of the canal. The 25 pdr Gunner officer was present at this conference. A plan was drawn up but the Coy Commander detailed to carry it out had great difficulty in taking in what was required of him. It was now dark, he had not seen or reconnoitred the ground, his Company were very tired, and with no large scale maps available it was difficult to co-ordinate the Gunner plan. However, the Colonel Commanding the Battalion gave very good orders and eventually the Company moved off. O.C. 13 Coy said afterwards that the bearing of these men was excellent.

Soon after the relieving Company left H.Q. firing commenced and there was a general rumour that the enemy were attacking. Everyone stood to and the Germans started shelling with 5.9" guns again. A large number of shells burst immediately to the front of the H.Q. pill-box and some behind, but none actually on it.

The fire died down and somewhere about 11 p.m. the 7th Field Coy and other troops who had been relieved began to come down the road. The Divisional Commander, General Jackson V.C. visited H.Q. with his Bde Commander Brigadier Hawkesworth, during the night and had a conference with the Battalion Commander.

There was by now a good many casualties coming down and we only had one Doctor and where he came from I have no idea. However he did most gallant work in a R.A.P. that he rigged up in a farm house close by, and which was now being shelled. All medical gear was very inadequate and as far as I remember there were no ambulances.

It was I think about midnight when 13 Coy came down the line and I met Moore. He said he had had some casualties but that he had had them seen to. His men were coming down in an orderly fashion with all their arms and I told him to proceed to the pre-arranged transport rendezvous. The roads were now blocked with debris, fallen wires and shell holes and I think it was about 3 a.m. on May 30th when everyone was reported in.

There were now only 3 lorries serviceable and we had collected about 90 men of various sorts and one, not ours, was seriously wounded and lying on a stretcher. Doubt was expressed that we could all get on these vehicles, but when I said "Well you walk to La Panne if you don't", everyone managed to get aboard.

I went in the leading lorry and the job of map reading in Oost-Dunkerke and in Coxyde was not easy and dawn was breaking when we got to La Panne. As we neared this town we began to see everywhere masses of abandoned transport, guns and all the equipment of war. Apparently the orders were to leave all transport outside the town but these orders I never received and we drove right in and almost down to the beach.

While the men made breakfast in the Dunes near the sea front, I tried to get some M.O. or Hospital to take the wounded man. Everywhere was full and no one would take the poor chap. Eventually we carried him in and left him in the hall of a General Hospital which was in a huge house on the sea front. We could not look after him but there was some hope that the R.A.M.C. would eventually.

The sea front and shore was crowded with troops and litter of every description. As evidence of recent bombing, ships were burning on the beach and altogether the prospect of getting away looked grim. Mercifully we ourselves had not been seriously bombed yet.

There was an organisation going for the proper evacuation of troops and I sent an officer to report to their H.Q. giving our numbers. We were told to go under the trees in the Dunes S.W. of La Panne at about 395895 and await further orders.

It was a chilly and misty morning but we were all so tired that everyone just lay down in the sand and slept for hours. We still had bully and biscuits, our petrol cooker and a wireless set which still just worked. During the day there were constant alarms about air raids. Any plane that came over was fired at with .303 by every soldier in the place and there were thousands of them. I could hear distant shelling but although there was bombing over Dunkirk way, we were not bombed.

The afternoon passed slowly and I had a walk round the Dunes. There were incredible sights to be seen as everyone realised they would be lucky if they ever got away at all and if they did they could only take what they stood up in. Thus transport everywhere had been broken up and vast quantities of valuable stuff lay all over the place. I remember well a medical lorry that had been looted, and the resultant smell of ether.

An officer reported every two or three hours for orders to the staff who were running the evacuation from the beaches but it seemed that the chances of getting away that night 30th - 31st May were very poor.

The afternoon and evening dragged on with constant scares about air raids. It got dark and the wireless finally gave out. Somewhere about 10 p.m. we were told to march to the beach. This we did in very good order but on arrival at the top of the beach we were told by the staff in control there that the beach was already overcrowded and that we must go back to the Camp. However the men lay down where they were and I visited a H.Q. in a house on the front and saw several people I knew. They said the boats were not coming in properly and that the chances of getting away were poor.

About 11 p.m., for some reason which I shall never know, we were told to join a line moving down towards the beach and the sea. This we did and we remained in this queue till 4 or 5 a.m. next morning.

The beach at La Panne is very flat and the sea goes out a very long way indeed, 500 or 600 yards if not more. The sand was left wet as the water receded and every step let a phosphorescent trail which was very pretty. As the tide went out so we went slowly forward. The men kept their places all the time. No one tried to jump the queue. As one's eyes became accustomed to the dark it was easy to see a long way and I noticed that we standing quite close to two ships on the beach that were unloading A.A. ammunition. Not a pleasant prospect if we were bombed. However, we were lucky, very lucky. There was a constant stream of aeroplanes all night both ways but no one dropped a bomb near us. You could hear crumps in the distance and see flashes all the time but as I say we were amazingly lucky.

It was possible in the dim light to see ships off shore which might have been destroyers or merchant ships. These never got any nearer and as the tide went out they appeared to get further away. After long hours of slow movement down the beach, due to the outgoing tide and not because men were getting away, I left the queue and went forward to see if I could find out what was happening in front. Dawn was not very far away and the thought of being caught on the beach was not a pleasant one. Moreover, the tide was due to come in again shortly and then we should be driven off the beaches again.

At the water's edge I found large and abandoned boats of various sorts mostly waterlogged, stove in, or in some way useless. There was a good deal of debris about of one sort or another and a few dead men drowned. But of any boats that were taking men from the beach to the waiting ships I could see nothing. The sea was quite calm with small waves all phosphorescent and very pretty if the circumstances had been different. I walked along the beach in both directions and whilst there were a few boats about there appeared no possible hope of getting the waiting crowd off before dawn or in fact at any time.

Then almost miraculously, boats began to appear. They were mostly R.E. folding boats of the canvas type used for bridging. These held some 30 men and there were also some very light R.E. canvas river reconnaissance boats which took about 6 men. Some of these boats came from the land side and were erected on the beach and some came from the sea side but where from heavens knows. They were manned by Sappers and most of them had paddles. The work of the sapper in each boat was beyond praise. As each load went out to the large ships the one sapper in each boat was left behind to get his boat back to the beach somehow for another load. This was a difficult job for one man against the tide and it must have been an obvious temptation to jump aboard the waiting destroyers and abandoned the boat to the sea. No such thing occurred.

Gradually the queue got shorter and we, the 13 Coy plus a few others in our party, got nearer the sea. It was getting light but still there was complete order and again no one jumped the queue. When our turn came it must have been between 4 and 5 a.m. I know it was light. I was conscious of the hulk next door to us unloading ammunition and I could not help wondering when the first bomber would arrive. I could also hear shelling not far to the North in the direction of Nieuport. When the Coy's turn came the first boat was a R.E. canvas boat and as the water was very shallow all that happened when some 30 men got in was that the boat grounded and became unmovable. The men were so weary and so stupid that it became a major task to persuade them that must get out and push the boat into deeper water before getting in again. After a frightful effort and the most awful swearing on my part I got the boat afloat with her full load.

With 6 or 7 others I then scrambled into an R.E. recce boat and the load made the boat sink to her gunwales. We had no paddles so we hitched ourselves to the large boat by the painter. Although the sea was still calm there were gentle rollers and almost the first one came into our boat. We baled with tin hats and kept her afloat. I remember the French interpreter of 13 Coy who was in my boat being quite annoyed at getting his bottom wet. As I had already got wet up to my armpits, a bit more made no difference. Getting wet seemed to have no ill effects on any of us. Our clothes gradually dried off during the day and my battle suit, which I still have, seems none the worse.

After about half an hour struggle with the boats we managed to get alongside the destroyer HMS *Express*. Many willing hands helped us up the side and just as I stepped on board the alarm bells rang for "Action Stations". I went below but found the ward room completely full of officers, most of them asleep and all of them wet.



HMS Express

In May/June 1940, HMS Express made a number of trips to Dunkirk and was one of the first to arrive and commence taking troops off the beaches. At first there were not many troops on the beach, but numbers soon grew and they were subject to continual attack by enemy aircraft. Taking troops off from a shelving beach could only be done in small boats, although there had been an attempt to make a pier by driving lorries into the sea for the troops to walk out on. Later troops were taken off from Dunkirk Harbour. The Express and Shikar were the last ships to leave with troops, before the evacuation was ended. The Express brought out 2,795 troops, including some French. Many ships were sunk or damaged during the evacuation. The Express was damaged by bombing, but was repaired in time to continue taking part in the evacuation.

There was no hope of getting lying space there, so I clambered still further into the ship and eventually found a space and lay down and slept. This space was near the hole leading down to the magazine and there was a chain of sailors handing up shells to the guns above. Someone gave me a cup of tea and altogether things seemed very good.

The shell hoist was just outside some of the officer's cabins and a bit later an officer came down to fetch something and most kindly asked me if I would like to sit in his cabin. This I did and again slept.

After a bit the ship's engines could be felt and after another long spell during which I slept I noticed the engines had stopped. I asked a sailor if we had got to Dover and he said "Oh no Sir, we are off Dunkirk!!"

“What an earth have we gone there for” I said, and the answer as far as I can remember was “To pick up the Admiral.” We got safely away, however, and then began to go like hell. The only incident was the clearing of all the ships guns by the simple method expedient of cocking them up and firing them.

We were not bombed or troubled with submarines as far as I know. For this we were duly thankful for another destroyer carrying friends of mine of 1st Corps was hit and sunk and many good fellows lost.

PART 4

ENGLAND AGAIN

Again the weather was lovely and we reached Dover somewhere about noon. The disembarkation was orderly and we were marshalled straight into a waiting train in Dover Station. Rifles were left at Dover and in passing to the train each of us was given an apple and some biscuits by a ladies organisation for which we were very grateful.

The train left within about fifteen minutes of our arrival in the *Express* and it was good to be moving over the well-known line between Dover, Folkestone, and Ashford to Redhill. We stopped at a Kentish village called Headcorn where further supplies of wonderful food and drink were available.

I tried here to send a telegram to my wife in Brockenhurst to say I was alive and well but as I only had 10/- and the boy had no change I had to give him that just as the train was pulling out. No doubt thousands of others were sending similar wires and mine did not arrive for several days, in fact long after I did.

At Redhill we stopped for a long time and I spoke to the Station Master and asked him if he knew where we were going but all he had been told was that we were routed to Guildford. The train organisation in England during the Dunkirk evacuation was a marvel and worked excellently and the food organisation at the stopping places was beyond praise.

It was about this time I got the impression that we were being treated as heroes rather than an Army that had just suffered a fearful defeat. I could not understand this attitude at first but later was able to see what an amazing miracle the evacuation of the Army from Dunkirk had been. Still it was a terrible defeat.

At Guildford we were again given excellent food by more kind ladies. One of them asked me about the R.A.F. over Dunkirk and I fear I said that we had not seen them. I was sorry I said this, as the lady told me that her husband was a S/Ldr and that she knew he was in action. However the Army thought at this time that the R.A.F. had let them down at Dunkirk, in fact they were even called the Royal Absent Force. It was only later that I realised what grand work the R.A.F. had done in protecting the Army but usually at such a height that the Army did not realise they were doing anything. If at Dunkirk we could only have seen a few British fighters I'm sure these accusations against the R.A.F. would not have been made. I apologise to the S/Ldr's wife whom I met on Guildford platform on the morning of May 31st 1940 and I hope that her husband is still doing good work.

From Guildford we went to Reading thence to Swindon and finally reached Bristol about 9 p.m. I had never been to Bristol before so I was quite unfamiliar with the locality in which we found ourselves. Here again the organization was excellent. The officers were taken up to the Camp, which was not far away, in cars, and the men were marched up with a band.

It was now about 10 p.m. and getting dark but an excellent meal was laid on in the camp. It did not take me long to appreciate the fact that the Camp, which was in one of the Bristol public parks, had only been laid out recently. The ground in a tent did not look very inviting or soft so I suggested to Belfield, one of the 13 Coy officers who was with me, that we should find a billet. This he did and we went to a nearby pub where we were treated right royally. We had free drink and a large bedroom where we all three slept, Belfield, Sykes and myself. Better still was the bath and shave after that long period of scarcely any washing at all.

Sykes and I, the married ones, were still very keen to telephone out wives but it was impossible to get to the nearby telephone box as there was a line of soldiers waiting. I therefore quite boldly asked a padre whom I met in the street if I could use his telephone. He was like everyone at this time, kindness itself, and we all went along to his house. The calls were put through to York, Budleigh Salterton and Brockenhurst and we sat and talked and ate and waited. Longest call, York, came through first.

Mine to Brockenhurst came through after Midnight (31st May – 1st June) and I thought, quite wrongly, that my telegram from Headcorn in the morning had long since reached my wife. It is difficult, in fact impossible, to record a telephone conversation of this sort, carried on in the middle of the night between two people who love each other more than anything else in the world, and when one of them has been thinking that the other is probably dead. I told Alice where I was and suggested she should hop into the car and come and fetch me. This she did next morning arriving about 10 a.m. after some excellent map reading. It was just about this time that all the signs posts were removed.

We left Bristol about noon after saying goodbye to the Padre and his wife who had been so kind. I made for Cheltenham to report my arrival to my branch of the War Office. It was a pleasant run, just the two of us in our little car, and we had an excellent picnic lunch by the roadside.

On arrival at Cheltenham we enquired where the office was from the local stationer but he was so spy minded that he would not say. However I asked an elderly inhabitant and he at once said “Oh you want the soldiers in Lypiatt Road”. I said “that’s it” and from his directions we soon found the place.

Here I met Colonel Clough who was my chief in France, and heard from him the adventures of most of the others. It seemed that we had been very lucky indeed although quite a number were still not accounted for.

After tea in the office and after scrounging a fill of petrol for my Morris 8, Alice and I left for Brockenhurst. The weather still held and it was a lovely drive home in the gathering darkness. Somewhere on Salisbury Plain, when I was driving, a Military Patrol at a roads block asked me for the number of the car I was driving. I could not remember as I had not been in it for many months, but after some explanations and amusing banter we were allowed to proceed. We missed our way in Ludgershall but arrived safely at our little home Wilverley Pines, Wilverley Road, Brockenhurst somewhere around midnight June 1st – June 2nd 1940.

Thus ends my part in an episode of this war. This evacuation at Dunkirk was to be followed by much grimmer events but those who were there can never forget their experiences.

(Transcribed by Noel Grimmett from ‘Brockenhurst and back via Dunkirk’ the publication held in the personal papers of Brigadier Fryer at the IWM).

(Editorial Note - The original publication was in plain text but where appropriate I have taken the liberty of adding suitable photographs).