COUNTRY LAD TO SOLDIER

Eric Houldershaw

of South Lincolnshire

His experiences during World War II in his own words…

Eric Houldershaw was born in Hundred Fen, Gosberton Clough, Spalding and spent 50 year in agriculture there. Moving into Spalding in retirement he wrote these words to set out his detailed memory of three years in the army during the Second World War. Eric and Peggy, his wife of over 65 years, now live in Abbeygate Care Home, Moulton. They have a daughter, 2 grandsons and 4 great grandchildren.

Many thanks are due to Sue Palmer for transcribing the hand written document so that it can now be read by others.

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1939...

Sunday the 3rd of September was a fresh breezy morning, rain in the night had left puddles on the road.

On our bikes we made our way to Sunday School at the Chapel down Quadring Fen. Coming home through the village we heard someone say we are at war. Being thirteen and a half years old I cycled home quickly wondering if we would be bombed.

Coming home from school for my dinner at 12 o'clock, I used to hear the 1 o'clock news and then have to tell it to Mr Goddard (our headmaster) who was not able to hear it

Dads' Army – Late 1942...

At the age of sixteen and a half years, I joined the local Home Guard at Quadring Fen, Company Commander being Mr A K Wright of Donington. Platoon Commander was Mr Garfield who sometimes paraded with his belt upside down.

The guard post was at Evisons Bridge at the end of Hundred Fen under the chestnut tree, being an old steam cultivator van fitted with stove and bunks.

We went on guard once a week from 10 o'clock at night until 6 o'clock in the morning, and then went to work.

Parade was on a Sunday morning and one night in the week, after a few weeks I was transferred to HQ (Headquarters) at Donington, in the signal section.

Getting issued with a Morse Code transmitter powered by a battery. Morse Code and the phonetic alphabet (Able Beher Charlie) were taught on a Monday night.

HQ for the signal section was a room the Bank used in the Red Cow Hotel in Donington, from there a telephone line was laid to the top of the tower in the church. We had to climb the church steps to reach a ladder to get over the bells to get outside onto the parapet from where you could see all around.

About this time we had at home a Vickers machine gun on a tripod in the front room, Father being a Corporal was in charge of it, the machine gun was finally sent to Russia.

Joining Up...

About the end of 1943 I had my army medical examination at Grantham, going on the train from Gosberton station, being graded A1. To be exempt from the forces I would have had to go to work on a larger farm which I would not do.

I received my calling up papers on the 12th April 1944 (being eighteen years and twenty days old). To report to the new barracks at Lincoln on the 20th April.

Cycling with Father (so that he could push my bike back) caught the seven thirty train from Gosberton Station, this was the paper train and stopped at all the stations up to Lincoln.

Going from the station into Lincoln to get a bus that went up the hill by the Cathedral into Burton Road where the barracks were.

After giving all details and being given a number (mine was 14745928) we were taken to a room to wait until there being about twenty of us, and then marched to a Nissen hut number 13 (this was a corrugated iron hut half moon-shaped with a concrete floor).

Next we had to go and collect three blankets and a pallaise to be filled with straw (a pallaise was a mattress.) The beds were made of solid wood with no springs, being useful to lay your trousers on to keep pressed.

Afterwards we had to collect our uniforms and equipment, also rifles and boots etc. Then being shown how to lay our bed out in the morning for inspection, after the room was brushed out and dusted, the pallaise was folded in half, the blankets were folded and wrapped, spare boots and socks, small pack and other equipment all laid out in a certain order. We were then informed we would not be allowed out of the barracks (camp) for about twelve days, this seemed a long time.

Reveille (time to get up) was at six thirty, get up then get washed and shaved in the washhouse having just taps running into a concrete trough. Pushing in among fifty or sixty others, sometimes the water was cold other times it was hot.

Breakfast was at seven thirty, always porridge, bacon, egg etc. NAFFI break was about ten o'clock, dinner at one o'clock and tea at five.

The food at Lincoln was up to standard, three of four nights we had strawberries for tea. I was lucky enough to be asked three times to join someone at their table for a birthday tea, when the cooks made an iced cake.

In the days that followed we all had inoculations, being taught rifle drill, having one hour in the gymnasium where you were not allowed to rest for one minute. Dental treatment, also having our hair cut very short.

Lincolnshire Regiment...

After six weeks of this training, I was moved to another part of the barracks to join the Lincolns. This training took another ten weeks, going into a wooden barrack room with bunkbeds, I was lucky getting a bottom one.

This training of ten mile route marches fifteen mile and twenty mile (one on a very hot August Monday) with full equipment and rifle. Water bottles were filled beforehand, but we were not allowed to drink any, they were always checked when we came back.

Blisters were a problem having to be lanced and then covered in Iodine which made them tingle.

Parading with our gas masks on we were marched into a sealed chamber about twenty of us at a time, when inside gas was released and we walked around, then the order was given, 'Take your gas masks off.' After about one minute the door was opened and we ran outside, choking and gasping with the top of our mouths itching, throwing ourselves onto the grass. We were alright after about ten minutes. This was to show us how effective gas masks were.

Most Saturday mornings we did a run down the steep hill into Lincoln and back up again, it was nearly as easy coming back up than going down, as you had to hold yourself back all the time.

The assault course was over the road from the barracks in Burton Road, it meant going over obstacles crawling through rolls of barbed wire, having thunder flashes thrown at us.

Coming to a twelve feet high wall we had to stand on two others' shoulders and grasp the top to pull ourselves up, then hang down and jump, the last two men had to be pulled up.

Further on we came to the pits that were full of water, and had to crawl around the outside of them in the water through roll of barbed wire.

Returning to the barracks we had to clean our rifles and equipment with a hosepipe.

Going out at midnight on a night exercise we were caught in a thunderstorm, on the first flash of lightning and crack of thunder, the biggest man in the platoon ran off as fast as he could, he was not found until the next morning.

On another exercise we had to take up positions to stop an imaginary enemy. I was lying behind a hedge and my mate said, 'I will climb up this tree.' When up there he said, 'Right we have got them now.' I looked around and he had left his rifle at the bottom of the tree.

Halfway through the ten weeks, one morning we had to lay our beds out with blankets folded and equipment polished all put in a certain order, the best two beds out of twenty were given a pass to go home for the day, on the following Sunday.

I was fortunate to get one. So I left the barracks about eight o'clock in the morning, walking and hitchhiking, finally getting a ride with two Americans in a jeep, who dropped me off at Gosberton, then I walked the rest of the way.

We were allowed into Lincoln Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Sometimes going to the pictures on a Saturday where the organ used to come up out of the floor playing.

Sunday mornings there was a church parade when we went to the church parading at the church on the end of Burton Road. Some Sunday afternoons two of us used to come home unofficially, catching a milk lorry at half past one in Lincoln going round some farms to collect some milk churns, then getting off the lorry at the Sloop Inn, Donington Bridge, and running up the forty foot bank getting home about three thirty. Then cycling to Gosberton to catch the bus into Spalding, then catching the eight o'clock train into Lincoln. The four months ended at Lincoln with us all getting seven days leave.

Training in Northumberland...

Reporting back to Lincoln, we were told to prepare for another six weeks intensive training in Northumberland. Leaving Lincoln one damp morning in the middle of August, getting up around five o'clock. Having breakfast then collecting sandwiches to put in our mess tins (they were about eight inches long by about five inches wide with an handle on the end being issued with two, one for veg and one for pudding, also a tin mug for tea).

Moving out about six o'clock in the morning, marching down to Lincoln station, three abreast to catch a train for Newcastle, this train was very slow and we arrived in Newcastle between nine and ten o'clock.

Army lorries came and picked us up taking us through Morpeth to a village called Long Horsley, the camp was abut three miles through Long Horsley in a small wood next to a farm. It had been condemned and closed and was all Nissen huts, it took us a week to clear things up.

Being after midnight, when we arrived we thought we would get something to eat and then get some sleep. This was not to be, putting our kitbags down and equipment we were ran around the camp to be shown the position of the cookhouse, washhouse etc. This was in total darkness because of the blackout.

Coming back to the Nissen hut to get a lecture in how our beds were to be laid out in the morning. This was not much use because everyone had got something laid wrong next morning.

More do's and don'ts then about one thirty in the morning we were allowed to have a meal, which was very small and very poor, the meals did not improve all the time at this camp, most of the time feeling hungry.

One thing everyone had to do was peel three potatoes before you were allowed your five o'clock meal.

Feeling hungry one Saturday afternoon I went with three others on a bus to Rothbury to find a bakers to buy some cake, it was a very pretty village, but cake or bread was not to be found anywhere, so we returned hungry.

The cellar in the farmhouse had been converted into a small church which we used to attend Sunday mornings.

One Saturday we did manage to get into Newcastle, on the way going by Morpeth racecourse.
After getting there I asked a policeman if he could direct me to Aunt Alice's. After showing him the address, his reply was, 'You will not find it if you stop a week.' So I gave up.

Once or twice we walked along a very narrow country road, this was at night to a RAF station to have a cup of tea and bun, if they had any, in their canteen. Being army they never mixed or associated with us, so we were not very welcome.

All I can remember of the one pub in Long Horsley was it had a wooden aeroplane propeller on the wall or ceiling.

For the first three weeks we were here it rained, sometimes every day or night, making the gorse and heather wet on the moors and hills, having to crawl about in it and lie around during training. We had to hang our denim uniforms in a special room to dry.

Some days were double days, this meant every one moving around at a trot when in camp and no walking until after five o'clock.

Live Ammunition...

One part of the training was firing live ammunition in the hills using tracer bullets, this was a bullet that lit up when fired, so you could see where you were firing, the Bren gun.

It was a light machine gun and when loading ammunition into the magazine, every eight round was a tracer bullet.

Also in the hills we had to lay side by side about five yards in line, while live artillery shells were fired over our heads. With a whine like an express train going over a level crossing, they exploded about fifty yards away.

Having been given a pencil and paper we had to write some sentences while they were exploding.

Some days we had to take boats out to a lake and practice doing landings on the shore.

Somewhere along a track in the hills was some gallows that they used to hang people years ago, this and an odd house every two or three miles made it a very inhospitable place.

The last week of the course we had to go out in the Cheviot Hills for a week, by now the weather had improved and it was fine.

The first day going in sections of about ten men we marched and ran across fields attacking different objectives. Doing about twenty four miles during the day, then all gathering together on a hillside for our dinner.

After this we had to dig a slit trench, a slit trench was about six feet long and about twenty inches across. Being about three feet six deep, this was big enough for two men to get in side by side. Keeping us digging more trenches until midnight, then flames were sent up to light everywhere up and we had to jump in the slit trenches and fire at different targets. Thinking that would be all for the night, we were wrong, and we had to carry on digging for the rest of the night.

One after another we would crawl off in the heather in the darkness to sleep, but all were seen and brought back to resume digging until morning light.

After breakfast was brought to us by trucks, we resumed marching again, falling asleep as we went on our way and waking up as our feet hit the road, never again experiencing this sensation.
After doing about twelve miles we came to a small Scottish type castle, by now it was about two o'clock. When we went inside, the castle part was occupied by some people. So we were given some blankets each and taken to what had been the stables, laying the blankets on the stone floor we were asleep in no time. Being shaken and woken up by someone later on, I thought it was morning, but it was only five o'clock and our dinner had arrived, after being eaten quickly we were soon asleep again.

The next morning we were given a map reference of a village about twelve miles away, and then sent off in pairs to find it.

There were umpires placed around the area and we had to dodge around them and not be seen, one instruction was, 'If you get anywhere near the coast you can give up, you will not get there before night.'

After going more than halfway, I looked up the top of a ridge, there was a house named 'Sea View'. Thinking that was a funny name to give to a house well inland, we went up the ridge to have a look. To our surprise there was the sea.

This did not stop us reaching the village well in time, to get into it we had to cross a fast flowing shallow river, as we were unable to use the ridge because of umpires patrolling it.

This brought to an end the training in Northumberland, we were then given some tropical equipment for use in the Far East (Burma). Finding out that six of us were eighteen years old, we were not allowed to go, to the Far East you had to be nineteen.

We were all given fourteen days embarkation leave, after which we had to report back to Long Horsley.

On going back we were the six of us separated from the rest and sent to an army hut in the middle of Long Horsley where we stayed for a few days until things were sorted out.

Instructions soon came through that we were to be ready the following morning to go to Europe.

Going Abroad…

Being picked up by an army lorry in the early morning and taken to Newcastle station we got on a train to go to Southampton. It was a rather long journey and we reached there by the time it was dark, being taken to some tents in a wood that had been used by the D Day forces.

After a day or two we were taken to Southampton harbour and embarked on the Lady of Man, a ferry steamer that used to go before the war back and forth to the Isle of Man.
Moving out in the Solent we anchored near the Isle of Wight to await darkness so that we were able to sail, this was done so that we were not seen so well by enemy submarines or aircraft.

When sailing four sailors were walking one side each of a square on the bridge of the ship, all the time looking out for submarines.

After hugging the French and Belgium coast we reached Ostend harbour in Belgium in the early morning.

Leaving the ship with all our gear kitbags etc. we marched over the cobbles in the half light into Ostend whistling Tipperary, Home Fires Burning etc.

Reaching a camp that had been built by the Germans in Ostend, the six of us that left Long Horsley were still together.

After being given our breakfast we were told we would have to stay in the camp every day. We were there until 2 o'clock in case of orders coming through to move.

So after 2 o'clock we were able to have a look around Ostend. There were some shell and bomb damage to the shops and houses. Several of the shops especially the fruit shops had chicken wire in front instead of windows, as most shop windows had been broken. The fruit shops had ample supplies of grapes, pears and apples, whereas the shops in England had very little.

Going out at night with two others we were walking past the main railway station, we noticed a lady trying to carry two cases and a big bag. Asking her if she would like some help, she replied, 'Yes please, I have just come back from London, I married a Belgian and left him and my two daughters nearly five years ago when the Germans

occupied Ostend. I heard from my daughters a week or two ago, the first time for years. But not from my husband, he never was any good.'

She said they kept a café (pub) in a certain street. On turning the corner of the street out ran the two girls from the café throwing their arms around their mother. The lady then asked us to go in for a drink.

On entering the café, there was an accordionist sitting on a stage playing, and altogether about a dozen people inside.

On bringing our drinks, the lady said, 'That's him, my husband.'

He was sitting in the corner with two of his mates looking as black as thunder, not even speaking one word to his wife. The two daughters were sitting across the other side with their boyfriends.

The lady then came across and asked us if we would like another drink, and said, 'I wish one of you would shoot my old man.'

Declining the other drink, we thought it was time we left.

After about two more days we left Ostend for another holding camp at Bourg Leopold in Belgium, this was an ex-German Prisoner of War camp with barbed wire all around, and sentry boxes high above the ground that had had searchlights in them.

This was the time of the Buzz bombs, they were large bombs with an engine fitted on being filled with enough fuel to take them the distance they were intended. Mostly they were sent out when it was dark, they could be heard coming a fair way off, then when the engine was heard to stop it was best to take cover.

The second night we were here I was in the toilet when I heard a Buzz bomb coming, Hoping it would keep going, when all of a sudden the engine cut out. Outside I could hear army boots with their studs hitting the cobbles running away to take cover. Standing up my trousers fell round my ankles and I could not move. It was quiet for a few minutes, then I could hear voices and footsteps again. The bomb had landed just behind the camp and very luckily did not explode.

Into Holland...

Moving onto the next holding unit at Hellmond in Holland, because by now the Allied armies were entering Holland. This was a large building being two storeys high. In the top storey were kept about twenty deserters (one from Boston) who had run away from the front line. Our job was to guard them night and day.

One thing they did was hang a tin out of the window on a long string with some money in, so that the Dutch civilians could get them cigarettes and put in the tin to be pulled up.

Only being kept here for a few days and then the six of us moved to St Anthonis, a little further into Holland, where we joined the 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment.

Their positions were in a wood overlooking the German positions. As they were due to be relieved the next day we spent the night in an old house with most of the roof having been blown off previously.

Two of us, Houldershaw and Higginbottom, were detailed to go into B Company 10 Platoon (similar names) Two Section.

Coming out of the woods next day we went in Sections (mostly seven or eight men to a Section) with One Section left side of the road, Two Section on the right side, Three Section left, always moving in this order, men being about five yards behind each other led by a Corporal and a Lance Corporal to each Section. One Section led by Cpl Hickman and LCpl Aubrey. Two Section by Cpl Frank Everton and LCpl Frank Storey. Three Section by Cpl Nesbit and LCpl Murray. This comprised 10 Platoon with an officer and a sergeant. Noticing that Cpls and LCpl were called by their Christian names and not by their rank, this was different than when in training.

After about two miles we came to a farmyard with a few old sheds and a dilapidated barn in. The barn was to be where we were to stop for a few days, holding all of the Platoon.

Sleeping in our blankets with some straw on the floor, it was fairly warm and comfortable. Being Sunday the next day, the padre arrived with a small altar he set up and we had a church service in the barn.

LCpl Murray, a proper Liverpool Irishman all dis and dat had received a letter from Big Minnie (she was supposed to weigh about sixteen stone, he weighed about ten) saying that she could drink a pint of beer in one go. Reading from the letter he quoted she wrote, 'How I would like to hear your boots coming crunching up the cobbles down our alleyway, and be able to sweep you up high in my arms.' He was disappointed because he had not received a letter from his brother named Ignacious Gilltrap Philip Murray.

There were four or five Liverpool Irishmen in the Company, who were dedicated soldiers and could be relied on at all times. One of them different from the others who was just over nineteen, who had a face that looked like it had been hewn out of a block of concrete, was all talk of how many pubs he had been thrown out of in Liverpool, how nothing scared him etc. etc. I will not put his real name only call him Scousie, more about him, later.

Another character was Seth Braithwaite, a thickset miner from Nottinghamshire, an old soldier who had been in India and Burma, when having posted him for two days, his Section found him sitting up a tree with a Bren gun. He could do five steps of a tap dance and finish up with one foot behind the other with his hands held above his head. His favourite saying was, 'I don't know nuddings, nuddings at all.'

Whilst here in the barn one morning we had a kit inspection, having to lay a blanket on the ground out in the farmyard, and then lay our kit out on it. I was standing next to Freezenbruck, a big chap who came from Bermuda. (There were sixty others who were in the Lincolns that came from Bermuda). The inspecting officer picked up a

knife, fork and spoon that were all joined together off his blanket, saying, 'I suppose it gets the food in your mouth.' They had once belonged to a German soldier. Freezenbruck was standing there with both hands in his overcoat pockets holding his coat together, because he had lost all of his buttons.

While all of this was taking place, a few German shells were dropping about three hundred yards away, no one was taking much notice of them.

Leaving the barn after about five days, going at night so that we could not be seen, sections marching each side of the road, part of the road had been made by laying tree trunks side by side.

With it being dark and raining heavily, walking was very difficult with rifles and all equipment, the spade we all had to carry, for digging a slit trench, was pushed down our belt with the steel digging piece covering our chests.

Some shelling was going on, on the way along and some houses were on fire at the side of the road. This was a very wet part of Holland being very low with mud all around.

Coming to a small village called Veulen, half held by the Germans, we relieved some men of a Scottish Regiment whose slit trenches were in a very wet, desolate field, who were very pleased to be moving out.

After sitting in these trenches for an hour or two, water would slowly rise up making us all cold and wet. After midnight every night when possible we used to very quietly dig another trench, this would be dry for a few hours.

No movement was possible here during daylight hours, as that brought down more shellfire and firing from the enemy positions, all our food was brought up to us at night.

After three or four days and nights, my trench mate (Jimmy Blood from Derby) and myself were allowed to, under cover of darkness, go to an old house about a hundred yards behind us for a rest. The house had all of the windows blown out and half of the roof gone, it was occupied by our Signal's unit, who had a man upstairs overlooking the German positions reporting on any movement by them, the other members were in the cellar using a radio set in touch with our artillery to put a barrage down if wanted.

We were not allowed down the cellar, and when the German shelling which was now getting intense with some exploding just outside in the garden. The man upstairs would come down the stairs with two big leaps and get down the cellar. We were only allowed to quickly jump down the cellar steps, this was not as much a rest as stopping in the slit trenches.

Driving the Germans back...

Going back at night we were given a briefing (instructions) that next morning we were to advance and drive the Germans back.

That night after the enemy had brought up Spandua machine guns up in front of us and fired across our trenches using a lot of Tracer bullets (they were bullets that lit up so you could see where they were going) we prepared all our equipment next morning under the cover of our trenches.

When a voice came from a trench about ten yards away, 'I have got to go,' (it was Freezenbruck). 'I cannot hold it any longer, or I shall dirty my trousers.'

With that he jumped out of his trench and went ambling towards a small hedge saying, 'Don't forget old Freezenbruck shot doing his duty.' Pulling his trousers up, he came back saying, 'All right boys, toilet is open.'

Not a shot was fired at him and we got out of our trenches and went forward, and to our great relief the Germans had gone, moving out in the night. Moving forward to the Overbrook area with only some slight shellfire, I was getting through a house that was on fire, when I got burnt under the chin and on both wrists. Having to go back to a farm building that had been converted into a field hospital, being treated with a blue ointment, coming out after about four days, this was too soon and after a day or two I had to go back several miles to a school that had been made into a hospital, the rooms and cloakrooms were the same design as Quadring Fen School.
Every afternoon someone had to go out in the playground to saw some wood to keep the stove going.

One of the patients, a proper London Cockney, said he had been lying on the ground when on a patrol with his mates one frosty night where he had become frozen solid. They all got up to go then saw him lying there, two came back and picked him up standing him upright, when he fell down again, they then carried him by one holding his legs and one his shoulders. He was still stiff as a board when they got back with him so they sent him to hospital to be thawed out. What he was in there for no one seemed to know.

After treatment by the new drug penicillin I was back to Overbrook within seven days.

We were living in an old farmhouse that had been badly damaged with half the roof gone. It was here that each platoon had to do their own cooking, we fetched our rations with an old three wheel bike that had a big basket on the front, pushing it not riding it.

When the Bermudians did the cooking we had rice as a vegetable which we had not had before.

Little pigs were killed and cut up for chops, chickens were caught and cooked, we were living like Lords, then all of this was stopped, or the Dutch would not have had any livestock left.

Along River Maas...

Going from here to positions in the woods that overlooked the river Maas, the Germans had withdrawn to the other side of the river.

Our trench (being still with Jimmy Blood) was on the edge of the wood, being about three feet six inches deep and having tree trunks cut and placed over the top of it, with a doorway into a slit trench at the front. This was a very dry part of Holland, on the floor of the trench we had some straw, and on top of that a groundsheet. There was a shelf cut out of the wall, for a round cigarette tin to be placed on, this was filled with cotton wool and then diesel fuel, a hole was made in the lid and a piece of string put through, then we had a light for night time. A blanket was hung over the door to stop the light showing out. After an hour or more our noses and mouths were black with diesel fumes.

Having a uniform on with a denim uniform on top (these were kept on for three weeks at a time, boots were sometimes allowed off for ten minutes in the daytime) having three blankets each, we were warm when in the trench. Small packs that we carried our mess tins in etc was used as a pillow.

Food was cooked and brought up to us in containers by a truck in the darkness. Mainly consisting of dehydrated potatoes (which were foul tasting), corned beef, beans (twenty eight was the official ration) and tins of sardines, bacon was wrapped in greaseproof paper and tinned, it was very fat. Mackonikies stew had a taste of its own and was not liked. Sweets were mostly rice pudding with three prunes, a real luxury was bread and jam done in batter and fried.

Water was brought in Jerry cans and rationed, some mornings we were able to fill half a biscuit tin with water, put some sand on the ground, pour some petrol on it, then drop a match on it, getting some hot water for eight of us to wash and shave in. The sand and petrol were used so that we did not make any smoke to give our position away. Most times we had to leave some tea in our mugs to wash our mess tins out with, also to dab our faces with and to shave with when water was not available.

Shower units were filled up sometimes in old wooden buildings behind us, maybe getting a shower every fortnight or three weeks. Shirts, underclothes and socks were exchanged, sizes were all in. When getting the fresh ones we had to hold them out while someone with a tin like a large pepper pot, shook louse power all over them.

By now we were getting one bar of chocolate, three boiled sweets and a tin of fifty cigarettes a week, the cigarettes could be swapped for a bar of chocolate.

Guard duties were as follows: Every morning one hour was done at the last half hour of darkness and the first half hour of light. Every man in the battalion had to do this including the cooks. The same was done the last hour at night, these hours were the most likely for us to be attacked.

Patrols were sent out every night up to the river Maas, these took about three hours. Another patrol had to go out and lay on the ground for about two hours watching for German patrols, in the very cold weather. Bren gun parts and rifle bolts froze up and had to be oiled with antifreeze and quietly moved every ten minutes.

Every night about twelve men went forward to an old house occupied by our signal unit overlooking the river. One of the times I did this a German patrol met one of our

patrols, and after an exchange of fire just behind the house, the German patrol ran across the back garden back to the river Maas.

Afterwards we had to be extra alert and Frank Everton sat me on the steps of the cellar watching out of a small window at ground level having the Bren gun with me. Leaving me for two hours, hearing his footsteps fade away, and within five minutes hearing them coming back, when reaching me I said, 'What do you want, I have only just sat down?'

He said, 'You have been there two hours and I have brought someone to relieve you.'

When German patrols were about you did not relax or go to sleep, if you did it was a very serious offence. I did not jerk my head up when I heard him coming or jump and was perfectly awake, this never happened again and where I went I cannot imagine.

Going outside in the half light of the morning, I picked up two German stick grenades and a mirror with a photograph of a German girl in. I used the mirror every morning for shaving in, it is now in my scrapbook. Someone on the German patrol had dropped these.

Every night two two-hour guards had to be done round our own positions, also having to stand to most nights when German patrols were active. So after three weeks of this we were well ready for a rest. Trip wires were laid around our positions, when they were tripped a flare was lit, often being tripped by an animal, this caused us to stand to in our trenches.

It was never pitch dark as we had clusters of three or four searchlights about two miles behind us shining straight up in the sky, they were known as Monty's Moonlight, after General Montgomery. The Germans did not shell these because it helped them as well as us.

Every night we had a spoonful of rum, also one for every patrol we did. This on a cold night you could feel going down.

Being on guard one night I noticed what I thought was a shooting star going on and on. Finding out next day it was a V1 which was a rocket carrying a large bomb most likely bound for London.

Across the other side of the river Maas every night about 6 o'clock could be heard a horse trotting along on a metallic road, this was bringing rations up for the Germans.

When moving into Overbrook we noticed a long line of Dutch men and women coming towards us, also putting their feet into the footprints of the first man, the women having to step out, and it just looked as though they were goose stepping. This was so that they did not step on any mines, for they were laid all over the area. Here someone from Surfleet came and had a word with me, he was driving a jeep, later when enquiring about him I was told he had stood on a mine, and lost a leg when washing his jeep.

Christmas 1944...

So back to the positions in the woods where we were relieved by another battalion on Christmas Eve. We made our way back to the village of Horst for a short rest. Reaching the house of the Joosten family just after darkness where twenty of us were billeted using two rooms and all sleeping on the floor. They were the millers of the village and were helping other people in the village with their food rations, as everyone looked very thin and food was very scarce. On Christmas Day we were given two cigars, and most of us gave them to father Joosten who was very pleased.

After five days here we left to go back to the same trenches in the woods, being given a silver guilder each by Father Joosten.

Getting back for New Year's Eve, I was on guard with Jimmy Blood from 11 until 1 o'clock in the morning. All was very quiet until 12 o'clock as 1945 came in the Germans fired everything they had straight up in the air tracer bullets making it look like a gigantic firework display, I did not realise there were so many of them in front of us. All was quiet our side then the artillery sent over five or six shells, they did not seem very high and with it being very frosty, we could hear the air being pushed in front of them.

New Year 1945...

So to the start of 1945. Leaving the positions in the woods by night and going to Lotrum Kasteele (castle) which overlooked the river. The walls were about two feet thick and were proof against shellfire. The Germans had a spandua machine gun on a fixed line that fired very often at the castle, this only chipped the stonework.

All of the Company were together in here including the cooks, after one burst of machine gunfire two cooks were seen going round the table on their hands and knees after a bullet had come through the cookhouse small window. This then had to be sandbagged up.

The Bren gun position here was up some steps in an outbuilding on the edge of the moat. Mostly having to run to it to miss the machine gunfire.

Whilst here the weather became very cold with sharp frost and snow, the Dutch people said it was one of the coldest winters they could remember. Going out at midnight on patrol and laying in the snow for two hours with no overcoat, gloves or anything over your ears was very, very cold.

Being sent out one night on a walking patrol with a gale force wind and in a very heavy snowstorm that you could not look into, only look down at the man in front of you watching his bottom half of legs and feet.
Going about a quarter of a mile and then going into a stable, all twenty of us leaning side by side on the manger. Stopping here for nearly three hours and then returning, it was better than any four star hotel.

The castle had a very big cellar which had boxes of clothes, sheets etc. Most of them had never been worn. White shirts, long pants, sheets, were all used to make into snowsuits for camouflage.

Just after midnight twenty of us were sent out to fetch a German in who had been killed, when one of our patrols had met a German patrol. Noticing someone with long rope I thought they were going to tie him up to carry him. Moving out in the snow, and going through the woods, we came to where he lay. The man with the rope went forward and tied the rope to his foot, then moving back with the other end of the rope, we all had to lay down, while he gave the rope a pull, to see if they had been back to booby trap him, which sometimes they did.

Putting three rifles under him, six men started to carry him back, the others moving out around the trees in a large circle to guard them. Thinking to myself that's got out of doing that, when only a quarter of the way back they stopped and wanted a change.

Keeping well out the way while six more men did the job, they did not go far before they wanted a change. Realising then that none of them wanted to do it, I kept well out among the trees. But hearing my name whispered, I had to go help carry him the rest of the way being a lot more than halfway, a stretcher was left outside the castle and we placed him on that, so that the stretcher bearers could collect him.

Moving to other Dutch villages in their turn Vierlersbeek, Swollen, Saltum, Odijen etc, all deserted with all the houses and buildings, churches as well, all destroyed or badly damaged.

Occupying one cellar in a damaged house, we had a tin with three or four stones in it hanging in the cellar, with a string fastened to it running outside to the guard trench. Every time the string was pulled and the stones rattled in the tin, we had to run to our slit trenches because the two on guard had seen or heard something. This happened many times a night.

Eric in Brussels

Early in February we left the banks of the river Maas. Being taken by lorries, after going about five miles we came to a halt with the very severe winter, and all the transport moving on the roads, the roads collapsed. Having to spend the night in a brickyard, using some boxes to keep the wind off, and others to make a bed.

Back To Belgium...

After the road had been filled with stone, we moved on next day, travelling about one hundred miles we came to the village of Wilselse in Belgium where 2 Section was billeted with the Baptiste family. Being mother and father and two daughters. On the first night there we were all, sitting round the stove, when the letterbox rattled, one of the daughters going to have a look came back with photos and letters that her boyfriend had put through, he would not have anything to do with her because we were staying in the house.

The family all slept in the cellar because of Buzz bombs, and we slept on the floor upstairs. Having all our equipment upstairs we had to go up and down several times a day. Mother told us, 'Nix clompen on the staaren,' which meant boots had to be taken off every time we went upstairs.

The family had very little food, or coal for the stove. Going out one night we scrounged some for them from our cookhouse.

The town of Louvain was only three miles away, and we were allowed to walk there some nights as long as we were back by 10 o'clock.

Whilst here it was Joe Leeson and my turn to go for forty eight hours leave to Brussels. Having all the best hotels reserved for British troops, we were hoping for a four star one.

Arriving by army lorry we were taken round finding all hotels were full, ending up at a school with beds set round the outside of a room and run by the YMCA. The food was similar to army food, army blankets were on the beds, the only difference was we had one white sheet.

Going to meet our battalion transport we waited a while and were then told they had all moved back ready for the attack on Germany. By one way or another we made our way back to the house at Wilselse, where mother and father met us at the door trying to tell us they had all gone showing us all the photos on the sideboard they had left. Stopping about half an hour, we left a photo each for the sideboard, mother and father coming to the door to see us off both of them crying.

Next thing was to find a holding unit so that we could be passed back to the battalion. Eventually finding one we had great difficulty getting a meal for we had no mess tins or anything, finding a tin each and using our fingers, we managed and reached the battalion who were on the border into Germany.

Getting briefed (orders) almost as soon as we were back, we were to attack and clear the Germans out of the woods in front of us. Always being told the enemy troops were second class and low grade troops.

Spending the night sleeping in the hay in a barn, amidst a lot of noise from shellfire, including one rocket fired projectile that aroused me around midnight, just missing the barn and exploding with a loud noise nearby.

Being awakened for breakfast around 3 o'clock and moving forward to our start line ready for 7 30, when it was half light, standing in a small ditch behind a small hedge with a ploughed field in front of us, woods at the far end and both sides.

At 7 30, down came our artillery fifty yards in front of us (to give us covering fire). As the artillery lifted, another fifty yards the whistle was blown and we moved forward A and B Companies stretching right across the field each man five yards apart. Going forward fifty yards and then laying on the ground to wait for the barrage to move forward again. By now the noise was deafening.

Glancing to the centre of the line one of our shells had fallen short and men were staggering and falling, finding out afterwards one of these was Jimmy Blood.

Time to move forward again and as Frank Everton got up, clods were thrown up in front of my face, he lifted his feet up and stepped over them, realising about three hours after this happened, that it was a German spandua machine gun firing at us. On telling him about it he could not remember anything about it.

At the end of this field we were told there was a small stream we could easily jump over and enter the woods. On getting to it, it was about seven yards wide, seeing some trying to cross and going under, someone's steel helmet was floating upside down. I looked to the left and they were going over with the water only coming up to their knees. Sam Hall sank and lost the Piat anti tank gun. Running to the shallow end I was soon across and we quickly cleared the woods.

Before we could dig our slit trenches down came the 88s (a German artillery and anti tank gun that was far superior to any of ours). Diving for the German slit trenches, I landed on top of Harris who had beat me to it.

For what seemed like half an hour, the 88s rained down, it would only be about ten minutes, breaking the branches off the trees before they exploded. The nearest shell hole we found after getting out of the trench was one stride away.

Gathering together in the woods when things had quietened down, we were sitting on some fallen tree trunks when Cpl Nesbitt said, 'Pass my Sten gun.' Looking his way we could just see a German helmet appearing through the undergrowth. Suddenly the face under the helmet looked up, it was Seth Braithwaite with a big grin, spreading from ear to ear. (Scouse with the granite face has gone very quiet)

This attack went all to plan and over sixty prisoners were taken.

Advancing onto...

Moving forward again to the village of Kervenheim with the rain making the ground very soggy and conditions difficult. Digging our slit trenches on the outskirts of the village in the darkness, we could hear A Company helping the Royal Norfolk regiment clear the village noise as the battle was very intense. A Company finally clearing the enemy out next morning.

Arising from our trenches next morning with eyebrows and hair that was wet under the side of our steel helmets, there was no need to worry about having any water to wash.

After some breakfast, time to get briefed for an attack on the village of Winnenkendonk, said to be very lightly defended. Advancing about three miles we were on the start line for the attack on the village scheduled for 5 30 at night in the half light.

Lying behind a hedge waiting, there was three quarters of a mile of open fields into the village.

Punctually at 5 30 our barrage came down in front of us, six Churchill tanks arrived and through the hedge we went in extended line.

The noise was tremendous with guns firing tanks and tracer bullets being fired at us snaking across the field.

Only moving about five yards forward when with a big explosion an 88 exploded just to the right of our Section.

Looking straight into it and throwing my left hand in front of my face, the middle was a ring of flame and the outside all black smoke.

Landing in a heap with Frank Storey and Chick Read, I crawled with Chick to a German slit trench. Sitting on his haunches I asked him if he was alright, his mouth was open and he never answered, there was blood coming down from under his helmet over his left eye. (This must have been a bad wound because he did not return to the Regiment).

(Frank Storey was wounded in the shoulder and rejoined us after the war).

Looking at my hand, it was bleeding slightly, being very lucky I had only got a small scratch.

Frank Everton, thinking he had lost half of his section, appeared at the top of the trench with a 'Come on let's go.' This had all happened within a minute. Running after Frank to the left side of the field and getting into a small ditch that was about eighteen inches deep.

Pushing forward we were held by the intense shelling and machine gunfire. Seeing one tank in the middle of the field get its turret blown off and someone tossed out like a ragdoll, another one against the ditch was blazing furiously, both hit by 88s.

By now all the tanks were put out of action, they were commanded by the ex Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Runcie who that night won the MC.

Running forward again in the ditch which by now was full of telephone wires because the poles had been knocked down. It was run five yards and then trip up in the wires and land on your nose.

Sam Hall crawling along the ditch had his small pack shot off his back, losing all his writing equipment and mess tins.

Down came the moaning minnies, an eight barrel mortar that fired a large bomb all eight together. Making a squealing, rumbling noise as they went up and came down exploding in the ditch just in front of us. Finally what was left of us reaching the village in darkness, and digging our slit trenches behind a large house. (In the cellar behind us were a British medical officer and a German one attending the wounded).

Only just getting the trenches dug in time when down came the 88s. For half an hour they rained down, someone was hit out in the field although crying out, no stretcher bearer could get to them.

I find some chewing gum in my pocket, (not having anything to eat since breakfast) give some to my trench mate, and in a lull in the shelling, take some to Rowley in a trench about five yards away, the 88s came down again, and I have to dive the last two yards to get into the trench.

Becoming quieter as the night wore on, towards 1 o'clock in the morning, I was half asleep and half awake gazing out of our slit trench.

When about two miles behind us I spotted anti aircraft fire bursting lazily in the sky looking like flaming onions. Within seconds with a whistle and a terrific explosion, down came a very large bomb landing some thirty yards away. Stones and lumps of earth rained down on our steel helmets for what seemed like minutes. Going to have a look at the crater next morning, it would have held a large house.

Around 6 o'clock in the morning, Frank Everton asked me to go round the front of the house to see if any breakfast was coming up for us as by now things had quieted down.

In the half light going round the side of the house, I saw a soldier from another company of the Lincolns. Kneeling on one knee holding his rifle with his spade and all equipment intact, as though made of wax, just staring at the house. Another one was crouched at the side of the house standing on both legs just his little finger leaning against the wall, not a mark on either of them. How they had been killed, I have no idea, it must have been by blast. I would not have believed it, but I had to come back that way. By the time it was light they had been fetched in by the stretcher bearers. Not mentioning this to any of the others.

Getting to the house I was told breakfast had been brought up in the dark, and was all gone, having had very little for twenty four hours, all the Section were very hungry.

Due to the very heavy shellfire, some of the Company were suffering from shellshock (known as being Bomb Happy). Sitting on their haunches with their backs to a wall with every muscle in their face and body twitching. Moving your hand in front of their eyes they would not see it, someone would light a cigarette and put it in the middle of their mouth, this would jerk up and down uncontrollably. They never received any medical aid, and were left on their own until time to move ready for the next time.

The next morning tanks and vehicles poured through to get to the banks of the Rhine. Seth Braithwaite was given the job of taking about thirty prisoners back to captivity, going off with a loud 'Hi Ho' and starting with a fast trot.

When he came back four days later, his ammunition pouches that were fastened on the front of his belt were cut to ribbons, saying that he had been caught in shellfire.

I went with Geo Herson to have a look round the village, every house was badly damaged or knocked down, we climbed the church as far as where the steeple had been knocked off, the shell holes were nearly touching all round the village, looking like a large draught board.

We stayed in a cellar of a house that had been a German Headquarters. After two days there, someone decided to go have a look up in the attic, and finding thirty four German soldiers hiding there, waiting for us to move out so they could escape.

Having to live in the cellar for ten days to await for reinforcements, who all came from the London area.

At the start line for Winnenkendonk, Scouse from Liverpool, was found crying and would not move, he was made to go by an officer pushing a revolver into his back and keeping with him all the time.

Winnenkendonk was defended by the German 7th Parachute Division, so much for second grade troops and being lightly defended.

The village of Winnekendonk after 1945 battle

The Banks of the Rhine...

After ten days we moved to the banks of the Rhine going to the villages of Flochend and Obermomter. Total casualties for the operation were two officers and twenty one men killed and four officers and eighty two men wounded.

Here stopping at a house that was a vicarage and having a gigantic bed in one of the rooms where nine of us lay side by side to try it for size.

Here we encountered some shellfire, but worst of all was the evil smelling smoke. Canisters were placed all around us and smoke was released to obscure the view, so that the enemy could not see the build up behind us ready for the crossing of the Rhine.

One night we had to wear our gas masks all night to stop coughing, they became very hot and caused us to sweat a lot.

The battle began as darkness fell with every artillery gun and rocket gun firing from our side carrying on for five hours, when you could not make yourself heard when speaking. Around midnight the 51st Highland Division with much noise and shouting went across the river in landing crafts.
The following morning the planes came over carrying the airborne forces, followed by planes pulling gliders, the sky was black with them. Straight through the anti aircraft fire, they went without flinching and released their gliders. Watching one four-engine Halifax bomber making its way back to the Rhine with one engine smoking, it suddenly broke in half, and someone either fell or jumped out the middle of it, their parachute opening, just before they reached the ground. On landing they did not move and a jeep came and picked them up. The front of the plane came down like an arrow, with the tail end section going from side to side like a leaf.

Later in the day an amphibious vehicle floated by us that had been abandoned.

The engineers by now were constructing a bridge across the river Rhine, made by lashing boats together and putting a track over to carry vehicles, with a walkway at the side.

On the 28th of March 1945 (my nineteenth birthday) we went across the river in sections, with tanks and transport moving at the side of us. Crossing over at Rees which was completely destroyed, a war artist was sitting at an easel painting a picture.

Moving forward to occupy the town of Haldem where we took up positions for the night, only to be told about 3 o'clock in the morning that B Company were to send a patrol out to see if the bridges of Lensing and Doing had been blown up, (not the one at Lensing). Dismounting from the carriers we walked across the river on the remaining debris, going through the last positions of the Kings Own Scottish Borderers.

With 1 Section on the left of the road, 2 Section on the right and 3 Section on the left, we moved forward. Going about half a mile and then turning left onto another road, having to watch for mines that had been laid and not covered over very well.

White flags made out of sheets were now appearing out of the bedroom windows of the German houses. Looking in one barn we found nine or ten places in the hay where German soldiers had spent the night.

Going forward again only to be met by a German soldier riding a bike, with his rifle slung across his shoulder. Most of 1 Section fired at him, and he zigzagged across the road, fell off and jumped down a dyke, where he fired one or two shots back. By passing him and going forward more German soldiers were running out of houses, and after being fired at jumping down ditches.

Looking to our right, about a mile away, we could see the riverbank, on the far side were thirty or more German soldiers marching in threes with their rifles sloped on their shoulders, not at all aware that we were there.

Almost getting to the village of Lensing when we were heavily fired on, diving for a shallow dyke and taking cover, when there was a loud explosion. Looking over the bank of the dyke I saw the full span of the bridge go up in the air. Crawling along the ditch and then running we took cover in a house which was then shelled and missed hitting the house just behind us. Being a farmhouse all the upstairs had hay in, and the bottom used for living in. Going from one room to another, I opened a door and there looking very ill was a German lady lying in a bed. Where the other people were, I do not know, closing the door very quickly I moved out.

Being fired on when looking out of the front and back windows, we were cut off all ways, one or two thought we should surrender but they were out voted.

Finding some gingerbread biscuits in a cupboard, they were the only food I had had since early morning.

At about 4 o'clock time we made a run for it, jumping out of the back windows and running across the fields, all of us getting out safely, someone getting their trousers caught on a barb wire fence, and then shouting for help, finally getting clear.

Running and taking a breather behind each farmhouse as we reached them, coming to one, a German lady came out with a large jug of milk and a glass to give us a drink, some had a drink, but I did not wondering if she had put something in it.

Getting back to the rest of the battalion by the time it was dark, and then having to dig a slit trench because there were snipers about. Being given a meal and detailed to carry some canvas boats back to the river for the rest of the battalion to do the river crossing. Getting to a farmyard near the river and handing the boats over, we found about twenty German civilians in a make-shift shelter underneath a hen house. Immediately D Company moved up top of the riverbank, a spandua machine gun opened up and killed five of them.

They pressed on and the crossing was done, by morning the engineers had put a bridge across. Casualties were one officer and fifteen other ranks. Thirty two prisoners were captured.

Brief Respite...

Spending three or four days rest in the area, we moved to a very quaint village, surrounded by stunted conifer trees and bushes about ten feet high. The land was all stone and sand with only tracks leading through the bushes.

We were living in an old school that must have been built in the late 1800s, being a two storey building, we slept upstairs. The playground was a very rough area being marked out where the bushes finished.

There were eight or nine houses starting about ten yards from the school each side of a rough track, they were one storey with a long roof. Having no fences or boundary line with just fir bushes here and there, no flowers or vegetables or telephone poles or electric. All of the houses were locked and the blinds drawn, the people had moved out somewhere, the only person we saw was when a man on a cycle appeared out of the bushes after riding up a track.

Moving from here back into civilisation we were forming up into ranks of three when someone's Sten gun that was slung on their shoulder accidently went off. Someone fell flat out, looking round I saw it was Scouse from Liverpool, up the centre of his forehead was a ridge and scorch mark where the bullets had just missed him. After a few minutes he came round.

We climbed into army lorries to practice jumping out very quickly when they were moving, to be prepared in case we broke through their lines.

On the move again we cut back across Holland to the village of Graenlo reaching there by nightfall. Digging our slit trenches on the village green, and being stopped when half done and told we would be moving out early morning.

Being taken to a Dutch house, the section slept on the floor in a bedroom, being woken up by a Dutch man and woman at 3 o'clock in the morning. Wondering where they had come from and what they were doing dressed, realising afterwards that being liberated they were too excited to go to bed.

Moving out early morning where we liberated part of the Dutch town of Enschede, where the people were all out cheering, waving and throwing flowers.

Stopping overnight and taking messages from the Dutch Resistance fighters, which parts of the town were occupied by the Germans and which not, they were coming and going all night.

Early next morning going in vehicles back across the German border into Nordhom, then leaving the vehicles to enter the village of Sublohne.

Moving forward in sections we moved towards the town of Lingen, passing one field cookhouse where the cooks were holding their pots and pans up to show us all the holes in them made by shrapnel.

Getting to the town of Lingen half held by the Germans and half held by us. By now it was quite dark and we took up positions in a large house.

An order came through from someone way back that we were to clear the rest of the town. Forming up after midnight we pushed forward amongst houses and shops that were badly damaged and some on fire. A Bren gun carrier drew up at the side of us as we were taking cover in doorways, and a solder jumped out and ran across, saying to me, 'Where do you come from mate? I come from King's Lynn.' With that he jumped back in again. Moving and running across some back gardens being fired at when being shown up by the houses on fire.

Coming to a large three storey house with a big garden, all was quiet until we were halfway across, and then heavy firing broke out from three or four windows. Diving for a small shell hole that was nearly full of water, with two others, not being able to get right down leaving our head and shoulders out the top. Facing the house seeing a flash from the second floor window about twenty yards away, then the crack as the bullets just cleared our heads.

Hearing the German pull the bolt back on his rifle and the empty bullet case jingle as it flew out the floor, the next shot came as the bullet came just above our heads, I would move my head to see if I had been hit. After four or five shots, I said, 'Right let's go,' jumping up and running, he must have moved because he did not fire.

Getting back to the Company just as they were bursting into another house with a hole in the side, firing as they went down to the cellar, then coming up with two wounded German soldiers. Having to watch out of a side window and watch the two wounded soldiers, one wounded through the arm who was sitting on top of a sideboard, the other one badly wounded was lying on the floor.

As the night wore on the badly wounded one was picking pieces of brick up off the floor and hitting himself on the head having to crawl across the floor, and take them from him, all the time calling for his mother and father. A stretcher bearer finally got to him early in the morning.

Come daylight the Germans were in the houses on three sides of us and there was no way out, with bullets being fired through the windows at us, and ricocheting round the room like angry bees. Hearing a shout from across the road behind us, learning later Geo Herson had a bullet glance off of his steel helmet, this knocked him down some cellar steps and he landed on Harris who was at the bottom, and did the shouting. (I will not write about this).

The Germans now attacked us and got as far as the garden. By mid morning tanks with flame throwers came in and got us out, running with them we cleared some more houses, including one large flat that had a very thick carpet on the floor and large furniture units round the walls, all removable items had been taken away, but one stringed musical instrument in a glass case, maybe it had been booby trapped.

Going from here to the station yard, we came to a big bell shaped air raid shelter, having to move all of the women and children out to separate some Italian men that were hiding there. About a dozen of us were standing round them when they slowly

parted and an old German lady came across and said to me, 'Tommy will you now shoot us.'

I said, 'We do not shoot women and children.' By the look on her face I could see she did not believe me.

Within a minute or two the officer said, 'You can go back in again.'
The biggest sigh of relief went up that I have ever heard.

Casualties in Lingen were one officer and four soldiers killed with seventeen being wounded.

For years after this I never liked sitting in a room with my back to the door, and do not want to see the place again.

Quickly moving next morning from here to near Platelunne, going forward up a narrow country road with a tank on the road and 1, 2 and 3 Sections each side of it pointing where we wanted it to fire. Pushing forward all day with the tank taking some prisoners as we went, resistance getting harder as we came nearer to a railway line. Looking to the left side of the road I saw something spinning in the air, not realising until it had exploded that it was a two inch mortar bomb.

By now it was getting near to nightfall, and suddenly a Spandua machine gun opened up straight in front of us, tracer bullets coming straight between my eyes and at the last split second lifting and going over my head.

Heavy firing from the right hand side of the road, Geo Herson and someone else carrying back Frank Hickman, their Section Corporal badly wounded through the lungs.

By now it is about dark and the tank lurching onto the grass gets bogged down, up comes the turret lid and three men jumped out to run back down the road when he went by me and said 'Look after our tank mate.'

Having to dig in near a farmhouse for the night with the tank against us, at the entrance to the farmyard was a concrete air raid shelter, not being able to dig very far down in front of it we had to build our trench up with stones and brick, this then left most of our bodies showing out of the top.

The Germans were dug in about fifty yards in front of us at the next farmhouse in front of the railway line, firing was going on all night from both sides, and then a German patrol, tried to reach the tank, but was beaten back. Someone from the rear sent a message up around 2 o'clock in the morning that a patrol had to go forward to see if the Germans were still there. Still being fired on if we moved, 3 Section had to mount a patrol and go, not going above ten yards they were fired on and came quickly back.

As it was beginning to get lighter I said to my mate, 'I am moving behind that wooden shed, we have no cover here.' He quickly followed.

Being spotted by Frank Everton when it became light he said, 'What do you think you are doing?' After telling him he said, 'Right the cooks are doing breakfast at the farmhouse behind us, go get your mess tins and mug and fetch yours, do not eat it there, bring it back with you.'

Making our way back having to take cover and get down quickly from mortar bombs and firing we were losing half our breakfast, getting nearly back we heard a loud explosion. On getting back someone said, 'Look at your trench.' The Germans had fired a Bazooka at it and blown it to pieces, another one was fired at the tank but landed under the track and did not go off. Frank Everton never mentioned this again.

Towards Bremen...

Giving covering fire about 10 o'clock in the morning 'C Company came through us and drove the enemy out, capturing many SS prisoners. Going from here to take up positions in the woods near to the port of Bremen.

Sending a patrol out early morning, we went about half a mile forward to ten very well kept semi detached houses on the edge of another wood. Searching the houses, I found a bucket nearly full of eggs that had been preserved in glass water. (When eggs were cheap in the spring we used to do this at home). The rest of the Section did not know about this.

Leaving them outside ready to pick up when we came back after going further forward, I noticed a rabbit in a box in the garden, so I opened the door for it to get out to get some food, as all of the people had gone.

Doing the same patrol next morning I found the door closed and the sneck fastened. The people were watching us and hiding somewhere.

On the first patrol I picked the eggs up. Also two in the Section found an alarm clock each, so by now we had one each hanging from our small packs, using them for time keeping. Taking the eggs back everyone in the platoon had two eggs for breakfast.

The people in the towns had very little food, but parts of the countryside had plenty, on the banks of the Rhine finding several twelve stone sacks of sugar, taking them to the cookhouse on a set of wheels, also finding jars of pears, plums and cherries, that had been preserved, the farmyards were full of cows and cattle that had been taken from the Dutch people, we loaded them into army lorries and sent them back.

Leaving the woods and going in positions that overlooked the port of Bremen, although some shells were falling on it, we could see the cranes working in the dockyard.

Much of the countryside around the port had been flooded by the Germans to help the defences.

After a day or two the attack began when we rode on the front of tanks (having to cling on to anything) into the suburbs of Bremen. Then dismounting and clearing the streets one by one, moving towards the airfield, and after a battle capturing it, taking

many prisoners, some U Boat crews and Hitler youths, some who only looked fourteen years old.

Clearing the airfield and coming back to the suburbs making our way down a back alley being fired on with the bullets hitting the brickwork and showering us with fragments, (unbeknown but this was the last time).

Getting back to the airfield and spending the night in the stores and canteen, finding numerous armbands and badges, the airfield hangars were badly damaged with only two fighter planes inside.

After one day here then moving to Delmenhorst, a town that was undamaged and declared an open city, so we went to the outskirts moving into a cottage with a tank and crew standing on the crossroads.

The Section eight of us in one cottage meant we had to fetch some more chairs out of the other houses. My sleeping place was at the bottom of the stairs, where the great luxury was to be able to take our boots off in between guards at night.

Finding a wind-up gramophone and one English record called 'I am going to lock my heart and throw away the key', this was played time after time.

Going outside in the garden next morning hearing a plane taking off not far away from us, a German plane that had two engines and looked very new flew low over us, heading north, it was someone making their escape.

At Last...

After a day or two the whole battalion gathered together in the local cinema to be told by the commanding officer that it was unlikely that we would go forward anymore.

As we left the house we were living in, the German people were going in and fetching their chairs back.

Going from here to the large village of Lengerich, near Osnabruck, where we heard that the war was over.

The guards we had to do here were at the military hospital when going on the first one all the German soldiers and the nurses were all gathered in the windows to watch us.

Going out in the countryside to guard an iron ore mine that had trees and a large camouflage net to hide it, nearby was a farm with a large cherry tree, the cherries being very good.

Out in the country again to guard a large house and garden that held German officers that had been wounded, who were very sullen and arrogant.

The local company guard was done in the village when after guard mounting, the six of us had to march taking up the full width of the street, the Germans having to move on one side.
Whilst here the Americans came into the village one day in their jeeps looking for revolvers to buy. Seth Braithwaite, having a German Luger pistol, let them have it for a bottle of Hooch, after drinking it he threatened to shoot the Sgt Major with a pistol! Having this taken off him by the Company Commander, he was sent inside for 28 days, coming out looking very thin and white.

Stopping here for about two weeks, we were on the move again, after all of the battalion had been to a Thanksgiving service at the church.

Bottrop...

Going down to Bottrop in the Ruhr near to Essen, quite a long journey made in army lorries. Meeting hundreds of German people all pushing prams, trucks and all vehicles that had wheels all piled up with their possessions going somewhere. Going by prisoner of war camps, displaced people's camps and finally reaching Bottrop.

Being billeted in a block of large flats with the cooks being below us. Guards here were on the Russian camp which had Russian prisoners of war and Russian displaced persons in it. Having a Bren gun post at each corner the Russians were supposed to ask us permission to come out. Getting out at night they used to go round farms killing cattle and pigs, then cutting them up and putting them in sacks to bring back in.

If we went into the camp we had to go in pairs, and afterwards take our clothes to the delousing centre.

When on guard here one Saturday night several of the Russians made a hole through the wire and came to the white line that they were not allowed to cross. After waving them back a time or two, I fired the Bren gun in front of them, two or three of them dashed back to the camp and came back with a bottle, pushing it in front of them with their feet to the line. When I fired again and broke it, all of them giving a loud cheer, by now the CO came to see what was happening, and all firing from that time on had to cease.

Quite a different guard was the one at the Polish displaced persons camp, being a much cleaner place, looked after by a German nursing sister. In here was a Polish girl who was a little light in the head, having a baby in a pram. Saying good morning to her one morning as she was coming out of the gate, I had a

girl, baby and pram follow me backwards and forwards across the gate for the rest of time I did my guard.

Patrols had to be done at night because there was a curfew on and no Germans were allowed out between 10 and 6 o'clock in the morning. Going on one of these with an old fashioned Sgt called (Tiger) Hart, who used to say, 'Don't Tiger me what do you think these three stripes are?' He made us surround and advance on someone he had seen move, on getting there we found it was a gatepost. The same Tiger Hart at Xmas, when at Horst, took a party of men to visit some Dutch people one night. Just before getting there he said, 'Right boys, load your rifles, they might be spies.' On entering the house someone caught the trigger and a bullet went through the ceiling, with the Dutch people screaming and running all ways. Jimmy Blood, being one of the soldiers that went there, visited the same people about 25 years after. On entering the house he looked up at the ceiling and the Dutch people sand that's where it went through.

By now an order was issued that we were not allowed to speak to any Germans at all, also when walking on the pavement, make them step in the gutter, this lasted for about a month.

Whilst here I did a signals course using and operating different kinds of radio sets, and going out laying signal wires, this was for every morning for three weeks, the afternoons were taken up with going out with the Section looking for tanks, aircraft and guns that had been abandoned.

Being fetched out of my room one night by the sentry at the gate, there was a man outside wanting to speak to me. Speaking in a real Lincolnshire accent, he said he was born at Louth and married a German woman and been in Germany since 1918 and I was the first one from Lincolnshire he had spoken to.

Whilst here I came second in the battalion shoot on the range and got into the Lincolns shooting team, going for practice about twice a week, but getting out of it quickly because it made such a mess of your rifle.

Moving on again...

After coming home for ten days leave from Bottrop, we were told to pack all of our gear, we were moving out once again. Being the only assault division in the British army, we were to hand everything over and get ready to fly to America, ready to do the invasion of Japan.

Moving from Bottrop to the village of Zulte in Belgium, the advance party had got to Brussels airport, when the atom bomb was dropped on Japan, thus saving many casualties.

Being billeted on my own in Zulte with a family, mother, father, eldest son aged twenty, who weighed 18 stone, middle son who was as thin as I was, and the daughter who was fourteen and weighed about twelve and a half stone.

The cookhouse being about a quarter of a mile away, I was asked to have my breakfast with the family, having bacon, eggs etc., and then a sort of malt loaf, having drunk my coffee and eaten my malt loaf, I got up to go, but was pushed down in my seat, and given some more coffee and malt loaf. Thinking I should have left my coffee until last, I went round again, after the third cup of coffee and about five pieces of malt loaf. I stood up with my cup in one hand and malt loaf in the other, in went the piece of malt loaf, up went the cup in one movement and I moved away from the table. After that always getting away early to the cookhouse for breakfast.

Coming in a night or two after about 6 o'clock, I noticed a big frying pan on their stove, full of potatoes and tomatoes, thinking this was the family's supper, mother started pointing to a chair, it was for me. Liking potatoes and tomatoes, I managed to eat it.

A few nights later coming in there was the frying pan on the stove, half full of potatoes, being pointed to a seat, I thought I shall manage this, after putting them on my plate, mother went to a black pot on the stove. Tipping it up on my plate, out came a whole rabbit, eating most of it and afterwards feeling a little sick.

My last meal there was Sunday dinner, being the same as we eat in England, after dishing it up father went to flick off bacon that was hanging on the wall, with knife he cut a slice off. Thinking to myself, 'How is he going to get that cooked in time?' he went to the drawer and took a pair of scissors out, and went round all the plates clipping some on each. Putting the first piece in my mouth, it would not go down, so I had to cough it into my handkerchief, ending up with a handkerchief full. With the family speaking very little English, it was difficult to communicate.

G Rowley lived just by me in a very nice old house with a grapevine over the back door, living with two old ladies who were very prim and proper having a toilet down the garden with three seats. When Rowley was sitting in there one morning, one of the old ladies came and sat at the side of him.

To the Middle East...

Finally it was time to leave Zulte. Being sent to the British Mandate of Palestine (Israel) where there was trouble between the Arabs and Jews.

Leaving behind Bottrop in Germany where in the town centre the red Woolworth sign still hung sideways in the rubble of the shop, and dogs in harnesses helped to pull along cyclists, and shops were nearly all empty.

Holland where the people were very patriotic and short of clothes and food.

Belgium where the food shops were full of cream cakes, ice cream and food of all description, much more than in England.

So at the end of September going to the rail terminal of Ghent, not far from Zulte, and getting on a train for Dieppe in France. From Dieppe next day eight to a carriage taking three days and two nights to go across France to the port of Toulon, some sleeping on the carriage rack, some on the seats and some on the floor.

When drawing into a French station early the first morning, I looked out of the window and saw a French lady with a shopping basket open a carriage door, thinking it was her train, when someone rolled out onto the platform wrapped in a blanket.

Being a very slow train, we were in the daytime able to climb outside and sit on the buffers.

Arriving in Toulon then going to a camp for three or four days, we were taken for short route marches round the harbour etc., where the super structures of the battleships, that had been scuttled by the French to stop the Germans getting there, could still be seen, also submarines etc.

Setting sail...

Embarking on the French boat the Ville De Oran, with all the brigade consisting of the Lincolns, Kings Own Scottish Borderers and Royal Ulster Rifles. Sitting on the deck most afternoons to listen to the Scottish pipe band.

After about five days sailing going between Sicily and Italy we landed at Port Said in Egypt, getting into a train for Qassasin, with natives in the carriages and on the roof with their trays of egg and bread, watches etc. that they were trying to sell us. Getting out in the desert, I saw a kitbag go sailing out of the window with an Egyptian in a long gown go diving after it. So now all of them were cleared out onto the roof of the carriage.

Getting to Qassasin we were in a large camp consisting of tents, with a cinema that had no roof, you could look up and see the stars at night, the main luxury being peanuts coated in chocolate and sugar that were for sale.

Leaving our mess tins with some crumbs in under our beds on the sand, we found next morning they were full of insects, this was not done again.
Being issued with tropical gear, shorts for the daytime and khaki drill trousers for night, with mosquito nets to put over our beds.

Going for a run every morning at 7 o'clock just as the sun was rising, being about a mile from the Suez Canal, the battleships and aircraft carriers looked as though they were sailing through the desert.

On going out on an exercise one day, a sandstorm blew up, having to take off our vests to wrap round our faces, the wind was that strong it was impossible to stand up straight, having difficulty to find our transport to get back, because all the landscape had changed.

Going from here by train being all cattle wagons, that were more comfortable than carriages, we arrived in Palestine at a camp not far from Haifa, being in a tented camp surrounded by orange groves, called Parders Hanna.

Duties here included stopping any Jews entering the country by land or sea, also searching villages after terrorists had blown up railway lines, hotels etc. Doing one guard in the high street at Haifa before an information building, sloping arms and marching up and down. I was accompanied by a native the other side of the street wearing a long white nightshirt, with safety pins for medals and a stick for a rifle with a big grin on his face.

Outside about 5 o'clock one morning with Geo Herson going by the guard tent, when Cpl Cushy Davies (an old fashioned Cpl) put his head out saying, 'Boys I could eat an orange, would you get me one, only don't get in trouble, be careful boys.'

Going to the far side of the camp and getting through the wire in the orange grove, we found boxes of oranges stacked up, getting one with about one hundred and twenty oranges in, we took it back, going into the guard tent Cushy jumped up. 'Oh no boys I did not explain myself enough I only wanted one.' Saying we were very sorry, he then woke the other four members of the guard up to wrap some of the oranges up in their blankets to take back to their tents, amidst much grumbling from them, and Cushy apologising to us again, we took the box back and put it over the wire.

The Company had to go for about four days to take up positions between mountains in a passe, the first night I woke up thinking someone was having a nightmare, but it was hyenas with their (ha ha ha) laugh and Jackals calling (Clitheroo Clitheroo) they could be seen in packs in the daytime.

With Geo Herson one very dark night coming back to our billet, we heard something padding behind us, waiting a moment or two a donkey came up to

us, on moving on, it followed us, wondering what to do with it, we took it back with us. Going into our hut we saw that John Keenan was not in, so we decided to put it in John's bed and put his mosquito net over it, getting a front leg each we lifted the donkey onto his bed.

At that minute in came John and ran us round the hut, shouting 'Get it out, it's got fleas,' the donkey stood there unconcerned.

Seeing the Company office door ajar with some light showing out, knowing the Company clerk would be in there, we took the donkey across putting its nose against the door and going to give it a push at the back, we fell forward as the donkey trotted in. The voice of the Sgt Major shouted out. 'Cpl Cpl look here at this.' Doubling up with laugher we made our way back to our billet.

Next morning seeing the Company clerk we asked what all the noise was about. 'Oh,' he said, 'You will never guess a donkey trotted in and the Sgt Major is going to keep it.'

Getting the Company on parade after breakfast the Sgt Major said, I have an announcement to make, a donkey trotted into the Company Office last night, this is a good omen, so we shall keep it for a Company mascot.' Not daring to look at John or George, the donkey was still with the Company when I came home. So back to camp for Christmas 1945, when the donkey was dressed up in a uniform and paraded around.

1946 Bethlehem...

Going to Jerusalem and Bethlehem in February with Geo Herson to see the manger and the Church of Nativity, seeing the water carriers with goat skins turned inside out the legs tied up carrying them on their shoulders full of water, the pancake makers with their stand making and selling in the street, also the Arabs smoking their Hooka pipes.

Back once again then volunteering to go on a guard detachment to Beirut in the Lebanon guarding a vehicle camp on the seashore, also about fifty Polish Jewish women in tents who we were stopping getting into Palestine. The camp was attached to a leave camp so we were able to get our own meals and then go into the leave camp and get another one.

There were about five young Jewish women in the camp including one they said was a Countess, who was taller and far better dressed than the others, who would never say good morning or speak to us, always walking in front or behind the other four.

When coming into their camp one night as usual she was about five yards behind the others, thinking she did not understand English, I said to her, 'Inside

Chickoo and let me shut the gate.' She stopped and turned and said, 'I am no Cheekoo, I am older than you, I am Swenty, you are only nineteen,' with a toss of her head in she went. No one in the camp knew my age, how she knew I never found out.

Another guard when going out to a camp in a lonely part of Palestine, being on the gate at about 5 o'clock in the morning, seeing a lone figure coming up the road with a pack on his back, his trousers tied below his knees and a large sombrero on his head, when reaching us I could not help saying 'Adio simego.' He stopped swept his hat off and bowed saying, 'Adios Adios,' and turned and waved every fifty yards until he was out of sight. I think he must have been frightened of soldiers.

Coming home...

Finally getting into the Company football team and reserve for the battalion long distance running team, it was goodbye to all of the guards, and home in May 1946.

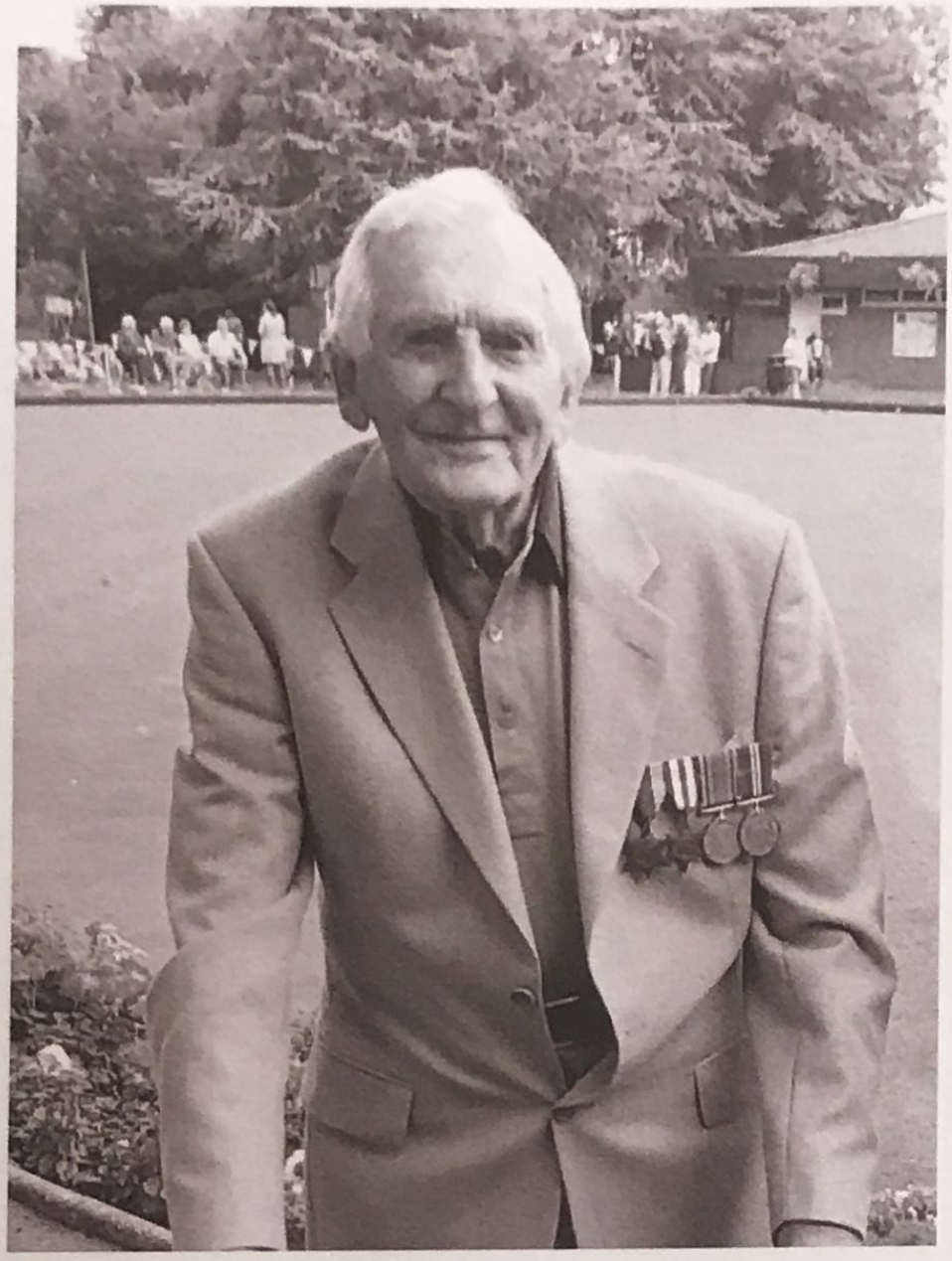
Getting aboard the liner Strathaird at Port Said with G Rowley, on a lovely calm sea I was very seasick after two days sailing.

Getting to the Bay of Biscay which was very rough, then having to walk round and round the deck to stop G Rowley being sick, six times round was a mile.

Landing at Southampton where there was a band to greet us, and then by train to Beverley camp, to get demobbed at York, being fitted out with civilian clothes once again.

Going to Spalding a week or two after getting home, I was asked if I would like to join the Youth Club. Having one or two grey hairs I thought I had better not.

One of the reunions, 1989.
L to R John Keenan, Jimmy Blood, Granville (Sam) Hall, George Herson, Peggy and Eric Houldershaw.



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