

Chapter No.1
Early days up to Dunkirk.

Hitler was ignoring the treaty signed after the First World War and was taking over various parts of Europe. Nothing was being done to stop him. It appeared to me at that time, that sooner or later Trouble was going to erupt in Europe and if I was going to be involved I would make my choice as far as possible.

Having seen and heard accounts from my father who was a regular soldier of the Royal Horse Guards and went to France on the outbreak of the 1914/18 war and was wounded, recovered and returned only to contract T .B. from which he also recovered. I recall the experiences he had in the trenches with the mud and shellfire, and I did not fancy following in his footsteps.

At first .I applied to go into the Auxiliary Air Force as a trainee pilot, but was informed that there were no vacancies. I think that this was my first lucky break, as I found out several years later that all the original pilots in that particular Squadron, were killed in the Battle of Britain or shortly afterwards.

I then met a local fellow who said that he belonged to the Territorial Army, namely 210/Battery, 53rd Medium Regt.,RA.,T.A. In fact this was the Unit I was to join and spend my early days from August 1938, attending regularly each week.

My first evening at the Drill Hall, .I was given a piece of emery paper about two inches square and instructed to make sure one of the trail handles on a 6 inch howitzer was clean. This handle was about an inch in diameter and less than a foot long and was already burnished. It. was my introduction to "Bull".

Later we were formed up into groups of ten and instructed in Gun-Drill and given various other instructions concerning the Gun, how it was operated and the names and functions of various parts.

We were also at that time selected to line the route of the Royal procession on the way to open Parliament, and over the next: three weeks, were instructed in marching drill and rifle drill and kitted out with our uniforms.

.I felt. the "Bees Knees" in my outfit with Breeches and puttees, polished belt. and boots, Rifle and all the polished brass buttons etc., Breeches were part of our equipment then, as we were equipped to use horses although we had by then, been equipped with motorised transport to tow the guns, and transport bodies. We stood in front of the crowds with the Police behind us and, of course had a front line view of the procession.

After several weeks .learning about the gun and doing gun drill etc, we were separated into various groups consisting of gunners, signallers and surveyors. I joined the latter group and was designated a G.P.O. Ack. (Gun position officer's assistant) This entailed using basic trigonometry to work out the angles to targets from guns and using range tables and differences in map positions, also working out corrections for predicted shooting by making allowances for temperature of charges, air temperature, wind direction and force at different heights etc., These corrections sometimes amounted to several hundred yards, quite a considerable distance if you were engaging a target near to your own troops. To do this we were supplied with a "meteor telegram" three times a day which gave us the necessary information to do the calculations required. Time allowed for this was 20 minutes so we were always kept busy when in action. These days, a computer would do the work in as many seconds.

We also had the task of passing on the orders to the guns and to give the order to fire when told by the O.P .Officer.

We did an Easter camp at Longmoor and a summer camp at Beaulieu where .I bought my first pint, price 2d. Less than 1p. in modern money. This is where we were shown how to layout kit for inspection and various other Army practices. The weather at this camp was very wet and we had arum ration issued. I recall one of the lads got very drunk and a friend and I almost carried him the five miles we had to march to the railhead.

1st September. 1939. rat-atat-tat at the front door. Telegram.- Report at once with all kit to the Drill Hall, Offord Road, Barnsbury .And so it all began. When we had all assembled at the Drill Hall we were taken to Kempton Park Racecourse and billeted in the Tote buildings. It. was vast change from my comfortable bed at home and mum's cooking to a bed on a concrete floor and Army grub.

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We were fortunate in some ways that we could manage to get home most evenings.

Unfortunately the last train did not get into the local station until after the time our passes expired. So being the raw rookie then, I went through the front gate and was booked for being late in.

The following morning, several of us were detailed to do various fatigues, mine being to assist in the cookhouse. I did not realise it at the time, I was one of the lucky ones. While I sat down and peeled my way through a load of potatoes, those who knew the ropes and had returned through a hole in the fence, were taken on a twelve mile route march. All returned with sore and blistered feet. It was the last route march before we were all shipped off to France.

During this time we were kept fully occupied digging slit trenches as an air-raid precaution.

On the 3rd September we heard Neville Chamberlain say that a state of war now existed between Great Britain and Germany.

An air raid siren sounded and we looked up half expecting to see swarms of enemy bombers overhead. This was not to be for the time being although later during the war, London and its surrounding area had more than its fair share of bombing.

We had a room in one of the buildings set aside as a mess and bar. One of our gunners was an excellent pianist and could play most pieces of music by ear. I remember asking him to play the Warsaw Concerto, must have been one of the top ten then, and he did so without any music. I thought what a state of affairs when a gifted pianist such as he was going off to an unknown fate.

At the end of September, we were taken down to Southampton and transferred to Cherbourg by troop ship. Uneventful crossing I'm glad to say, as none of us knew what was going to happen at that time and the thought of submarines was in everyone's mind. So the B.E.F. (British Expeditionary Force) arrived in France.

From Cherbourg we were taken by a French train with wooden seats and square wheels, or so it seemed, to Lille and thence by lorry to a small town called Anoeullin, our base for several months.

Our billet was in a farm building. Up several wooden steps and into a concrete floored store room about 10 ft. by 16 ft. This room was shared between eight of us. Not a lot of room but we managed O.K. The farmer and his two sisters, I think they must have all been in their seventies, were very friendly and made us palliases filled with corn husks which were quite comfortable and warm.

Occasionally, my friend, Les Turton and I were invited into the farmhouse for coffee and a chat. I was able to speak a little French and the Farmer and his two sisters, all who spoke the local patois, very different from ordinary French, spent time trying to make ourselves understood.

Sometimes we were invited in to a meal with them. Chicken and chips, and also rabbit cooked with prunes, and chips was the usual fare and much appreciated. When we had had a good meal and felt stuffed, one of the sisters would appear with another mountain of freshly cooked chips, and encouraged us to carry on. We could not always manage to eat the rest but were very grateful for what we had.

We washed at the pump in the farmyard and the water smelled horrible, but was not too bad for washing. I think the Farmer and sisters used bottled water for cooking as no way could they have used water from the pump for human consumption. Incidentally the earth closet was only about ten yards away from the well and I'm quite sure some of the contents filtered down to the well.

The farmer whilst we were there pumped the contents of the cess pit into a tank on a cart and spread it on his land to fertilize the crops he was growing. I'm glad we were out most of the time he was doing the pumping, as the stench was overpowering. In fact some of the lads wore their gas masks when they went to the closet.

At this time, morning parade was held in the main square of the town and five minutes before parade time there was no-one to be seen. When the Sgt. Major called out "On Parade" the whole unit appeared as if from nowhere. The parade ground was surrounded by several estaminets and everyone went into one or the other, where it was much warmer than standing on the parade ground, and of course we usually had a coffee and cognac whilst waiting.

The Sgt. Major we all called "Fingers" or "Fingy" as whenever he gave an order, instead of the correct position of the hands, i.e. Hands lightly clenched and thumbs in line with the seam of the trousers, his fingers stuck out straight and spread out. He always wanted to know "who was this "Fingers" the lads spoke about and I don't think he ever found out it was him.

It was he, who decided it would be a good thing if a bugler sounded "Reveille" each morning in the square and this was duly organised. However, what he did not realise that Ronnie Devon was billeted in one of the houses facing on to the square and Ronnie Devon was a champion "Raspberry Blower" who followed "Reveille" every morning with a demonstration of his "art" from behind a curtain facing on to the square. "Fingers" never found out who the noisy culprit was but he cancelled "Reveille" very shortly after it was instigated.

We were unfortunate enough to have a case of meningitis in our billet at about this time, and were all confined to quarters and not allowed out. Meningitis at that time was considered a life threatening infection, but the availability of a new drug, Sulphonamide I believe it was, had put a new perspective on the situation and the infected man was back again with us within three weeks. It was during this period, I discovered the art of spit and polish. I found that by first smoothing the toes of my boots with a hot spoon handle and then applying Kiwi black boot polish with my finger and rubbing gently in a circular motion many times, it was possible to obtain a patent finish when gently polished with a soft duster. Many and old soldier will know this procedure. Les and I also made friends with a French lad by the name of Georges Isore Langlon, the son of the local postman, I often wonder if he is still with us. I know that he survived the war as I went to see him on one my short passes when the hostilities had finished. He had been taken to Germany as a slave worker but had not experienced any great hardship fortunately. We were invited to his house and met his family of mother and father (The postman) a brother and sister. His mother reminded me very much of my own. Les and I were received like old friends and often had a good meal with them. Usually finishing up with a mug of hot chocolate and kirsch which tasted very pleasant..

It was on one such occasion we were intercepted by the Orderly Officer and Sergeant on our way back to our billet. It was then 10.45 p.m. "Lights Out" was at that time 10.30 p.m. so we were fifteen minutes late back to our billets. Placed under open arrest we were charged under section 40 of the Army Act, Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline, and appeared before the O.C. the following day and sentenced to Seven days First Field Punishment. This consisted of one hour marching in full kit morning and evening, locked up overnight, one week's pay stopped and relegated to the bottom of the leave list. During the day you carried on with your usual duties.

The weather during this period was bitterly cold and the Orderly Sergeant, who had to give us orders for our marching drill, had to stand still on one spot and I think his feet must have been frozen while we kept warm doing our marching. I didn't feel sorry for him. We returned to the "Copper Shop" for the evening where we were locked up in a very cosy little room and given mugs of tea and bread and cheese by the M.P .s. In fact, we did much better there than we would have done in our own billet.

Once a week we were taken to Bruay where we had the luxury of a hot shower at the Pit-head showers, usually used by the coal miners, and also a change of clothes. The powers that be did not intend us to get lousy, as they knew that in the first world war, Typhus could be spread by lice, and had to be avoided at all costs.

I had been appointed M.T. Clerk at this time, so was excused all parades and guard duties. I had my own little billet and office and seemed to spend most of my time filling in accident reports in addition to keeping records of all the vehicles in the unit. I was excused all parades and Guard duties, quite a cushy number I was told by all and I didn't argue.

We continued with various exercises, and I recall on one occasion when we returned, we were ordered by one of our officers to wash the guns off, as they were a bit muddy. "Why was this not done immediately you returned"? He asked. We replied that all the water was frozen. We were then told to break the ice on a local pond and get the job done. An attempt was made to carry out orders but all we succeeded in doing was to put gloss of ice on the guns on top of the mud. The Officer then relented and said "Do it first thing in the morning then". I'm afraid that we didn't have a lot of respect for our officer class at that time. It was vastly different in the Desert army later.

We were moved around several times during the ensuing months. First we went to Hellemes where we dug Gun-pits in the rain. We were billeted in an old disused factory meanwhile, sleeping on duck-boards, as the Boor was covered with pools of water which leaked through the roof. Both Les and I picked up a shocking cold, so we decided to go for a quick drink before turning in.

Off to the local estaminet where we had a beer each, then rum each, then a beer each and then rum each and so it went. on for about an hour or more. We saw each other back to the factory supporting each other and feeling that we didn't have a care in the world. I still don't recall whether we cured our colds or not, but it was a good night out.

We were moved about several times. Haubourdin was one of the places in which we were stationed. It was here that I met one of my old pre-war friends. He eventually married my school-friends sister and later was my best man when I was married whilst on leave in 1942. At that time I was a mere Bombardier and Peter was a Major, so we were married in civvies.

Another move was to a chateau in Marcq en Baroeul, a few miles from Lille. It was here I recall, spending my 20th birthday on guard. Christmas was a non event, the day before my birthday.

A trip to Lille was a diversion and several of us went to town one evening. We had a good time there and when we got on the tram to return we realised that the driver was taking his time and was in no hurry. We would not make it back before "Lights Out".-A heinous crime. So we crowded on to the driving platform and hustled the driver to one side. One of our lads was quite proficient at driving a tram and we drove non-stop with the bell clanging all the time until we reached Marcq. The driver would have then had to make the return journey to drop off passengers and to pick up those who had been left standing at the (Non) stops. We heard nothing about this incident as we had caused no harm by our action.

On the 13th May 1940 we had a small-pox vaccination. At that time the Germans chose to attack across Belgium. I was unfortunate not to have been vaccinated when I was young, and so my arm became very swollen and painful. I reported to the M.O. and he said "You are either badly wounded or fit to carry on". So I carried on.

I was then with a gun team and went up to Louvain where we were holding the line against the attacking Germans. We had fired quite a few rounds when we were given the order "Prepare to Withdraw", I must admit that it was one of the most scariest moments I can remember.

We took up several positions in the retreat and fired a fair number of rounds but what the targets were I do not know. Occasionally we were bombed and machine gunned by Stukas and other German planes but I do not remember suffering any casualties up to that time.

We had reached a place, I believe it was near Roubaix, where there was a chateau standing in its own grounds. Some of the lads depleted the stock of cognac and wine which they found in a cellar, some of it was very good stuff too. Meanwhile we were told that if we found anything to eat to make good use of it as the Cookhouse had received no supplies. It so happened that there was a cage containing a number of chickens in the area, so a couple of us set to and managed to supply our cooks with about a dozen of them which made a good meal for most of the Battery.

We then received the order that we were to destroy the guns and would be taken to various places to defend the perimeter. We were then informed that the Germans had broken through our defences and were now well on the road towards Calais. This of course came as quite a shock as up to this time we had no idea what was going on but guessed that everything was in a state of shambles.

The guns were then disabled and put out of action. I don't know why we didn't fire the dozens of rounds that were on the gun positions, but I suppose the Higher-ups knew what they were doing. Or did they?.

We were then split up into several groups and I was put in charge of six other lads, taken to abridge over a canal, and told to stop all traffic and to allow only water carriers, armoured vehicles and ambulances across.

All other vehicles were to be disabled and destroyed and their occupants were to proceed on foot.

We were told to remain there until the R.E. blew up the bridge or until we were relieved. All was fairly quiet for a day or so except for enemy planes that made several sorties. We were not sorted out for any special attention so were thankful for small mercies. Then the convoys started to arrive. We carried out our instructions, and although several senior officers queried our instructions, when presented with the details on a formal piece of paper I was given, gave the required orders.

Within a short time, the road on the other side of the canal was filled with blazing vehicles, and the dismounted soldiers made their way to Dunkirk, or so we were given to understand. We also managed to build up a small arsenal of weapons which the retreating army did not require, including a good supply of ammunition and Mills grenades.

We had another quiet period before the French retreating troops arrived. There was quite an argument before a French General turned up and confirmed the order, and before long there were blazing vehicles stretching along the road as far as could be seen.

Another quiet period when nothing happened, a few vehicles in the distance appeared and I believe they were German armoured reconnaissance cars. A couple of us took long shots at them and I think they thought it was not healthy to show themselves and they disappeared.

It was then that an Officer from the Coldstream Guards arrived. He asked how long we had been there and when I told him it 'Has about five days he said "Make your way to Bray Dunes and try to get off on one of the boats there" After waiting until the bridge was destroyed, I recall we took shelter behind a house about a hundred yards away, When it was blown, bricks and lumps of concrete rained down over our heads but we were in a safe position by that time

We made our way towards Bray Dunes then. I had been left with a map and decided it would be best if we avoided the main roads as they were crowded with civilians, and the Germans were continually bombing and

machine gunning the the people beading to what they had hoped would be safety .This trek took us the best part of one day, I think it was only about twelve miles.

When we arrived at the beach it was fairly crowded with small groups so we just dug a hole and slept for several hours. We awakened two or three times when German planes passed over but it was a fairly uneventful night.

An officer seemed to be in charge on our section of the beach and after he established who we were, instructed us to remain where we were, and we would be called when a boat was available to take us off.

During the day there were several attacks when German planes flew along the beach dropping bombs and machine gunning. We were fairly well sheltered in our sand pits and the planes did not stay over the beaches very long as there was a withering fire from everyone who had anything to use.

There must. have been thousands of rounds fired at. every plane that came over. I don't think the German pilots liked the enormous amount of rifle fire directed at them as they invariably turned out to sea or cut inland after only a few seconds over the beach. I remember looking along the shore line and seeing one long haze of smoke rising slowly into the air which had come from the rifles which had been fired at the attacking planes.

We had no food and although we should have been given an Officer's permission to use our emergency rations, there was no officer there at the time, so we ate the rations which I seem to recall was a very gritty lump of chocolate in a tin. It helped at the time and fortunately we had kept our water bottles full of water. Some of the lads had filled theirs with brandy which was not the best of drinks on that particular occasion.

During the day several groups were called down to the shore and ~ere ferried out to various boats anchored off shore, and in spite of several raids, managed to get away safely. By then it was getting dark and the group to which we had been attached were called and made our way down to the water's edge. One of the things that impressed me was the fact that. there was no panic or indiscipline and the behaviour of everyone was exemplary .

When we arrived at the water's edge, I noticed that every movement in the water created a pool of phosphorescent light and I wondered at the time, if it would have plainly visible from the air. A ship's lifeboat. loomed out of the darkness surrounded by a pool of light and about twenty of the group got into the boat. We then made our way out to sea where a ship was anchored.

Whenever a plane passed over the rowers stopped as every time the oars dipped into the water they created a very visible pool of light. I have never seen anything like it before or since. We eventually reached the ship for which we were heading. This turned out to be The Destroyer H.M.S.Worcester. Someone called out for volunteers to row the boat back to the shore, so I and three others took on this task. When we arrived to take on more passengers we asked if there was anyone there who could row. Several volunteered and when we arrived at the destroyer for the second time, we made sure that we were the first to get aboard and thought someone else could take the boat back for the next trip.

The deck plates of the Destroyer were warm and we collapsed on to them all within seconds we were fast asleep. It was light when we opened our eyes and the White cliffs of Dover were in sight. What a glorious sight to behold.

Such was my experience of the evacuation. Dunkirk, as far as we were concerned was a town which we considered was much too dangerous to approach as it was one mass of smoking debris in the distance and it was difficult to imagine anyone surviving in the vicinity, particularly as it was being subjected to a continuous attack by German planes.

I found later that my weight which had been up to 14 st. caused by comparatively sedentary life style from the time we were mobilised had dropped to little more than 10 st. Such must have been the effect of the last few weeks before Dunkirk.