

## Chapter No.4.

### Salerno and Italy.

In due course we embarked for Italy. We knew that we were not going to go ashore in Sicily. We were informed then much more than old soldiers in the past were. We were prepared for a beach landing. Vehicles waterproofed and all necessary equipment stowed although at the time we did not know our destination. We made our way up through the straights of Messina and supported by a large contingent of naval ships which were firing their guns at various targets ashore, made for the beach near Salerno. I'm not sure what the craft I was on at that time, probably an L.S. T., as we went in very close and I did not even get my feet wet going ashore on this occasion.

Driver Mortimer, who was the G.P.O.'s (Gun Position Officer) truck driver at the time managed to get ashore without difficulty but the truck stalled half way up the beach. We had to get the truck well ahead as without it the guns could not be given instruction. Mortimer said "It's O.K. I know what to do" whereupon he got out of his cab and went round to the petrol tank, gave it hefty kick and returned to his cab. The vehicle started first go and we carried on up the beach and on to the first gun position. When I asked Mortimer what he did that for. He said "It always starts when I give it a kick there" looking back I can only think that there must have been a cake of desert gunge in the tank and a kick would dislodge it from the petrol outlet.

The fighting in Italy was much different from the desert. We were supporting the Queens as before and some of the targets were impossible to reach, as the ground dropped away so steeply that we would have had to fire into the ground to direct the guns in the right direction.

Mostly we were directing defensive fire for the infantry and were kept very busy supporting them. I remember that this was one of the most exhausting times of my whole service. We were on the go for about twenty hours a day for days on end and it's another time I would have given a weeks pay for six hours sleep.

I took over a gun when one of the gun sergeants was killed and remember the gun got so hot that it was only necessary to load it and after a few seconds it would go off on its own. We poured water down the barrel to cool it and when it was poured down the muzzle all that happened was that steam came out both ends of the barrel but no water.

The mosquitoes were bothersome then. We were issued with anti mossie cream which was a cream resembling lard and when applied prevented the sweat from evaporating and left you literally wet through. We also had mossie nets but found them almost impossible to use. One evening I had answered a call of nature and a mossie attacked me in a most delicate part. It was most embarrassing and irritated for several days, much to amusement of several of the lad, who said "I don't know how or when you could have picked that up".

One night, I was sitting on the seat of bliss and looking into the distance and saw what I thought to be an ammunition lorry on fire as it was shooting up sparks and fire. It went on for all the time I watched and didn't get any bigger or smaller. It was then I came to the conclusion that I was watching Vesuvius giving a display.

Naples was passed and some very hard fighting went on over very close country. It was completely different to North Africa.

The weather had deteriorated then and we had to cope with rain and mud. I recall at one time I woke up at first light and as I turned over in my blankets it felt a bit squishy. On investigating, I found that I was in a furrow in a ploughed field and the rain was about three inches deep inside my bed. It was quite warm so I just turned over and had another hour's sleep.

The action continued more or less without a break. Scafati and Naples were taken and we reached the Volturno where there was a pause, with both sides facing each other across the river, and sending out raiding patrols. We had by this time reached the vicinity of Monte Cassino. Tank officers, doing reconnaissance's in the forward defended areas of the Rifle Brigade, with immaculate white belts and large map cases, were not at all popular, however they might have considered their presence instilled confidence into the infantryman in his slit trench. Their visits were invariably followed by an unpleasant half hour with mortars and S.P. guns stonking the area.

The wet weather was quite a problem now as ammunition had to be carried for quite a distance from the point on the road where the lorries could not get through the mud, and a lot of the work had to be done at night as we were then overlooked by the heights of Monte Cassino. It was not long after this position that we were pulled out of the line

Villa Littorno, where we were employed in cleaning and replenishing equipment. We were billeted in a block of flats near the railway station. Guns were dismantled and everything was spread out for general inspection to see what was needed. I was in my room on the second floor of the block of flats when I heard some planes fly over at a low height. I've always been interested in planes so I went to the window to see what was going on. I saw three planes flying towards the village about half a mile away and as I watched they banked steeply and I saw dirty big black crosses on their wings. They started heading in our direction as it must have obvious to them that there was a potential target where we had everything spread out. I saw guns twinkling and I realised that they were firing at the building in which we were staying. Within seconds I saw one of them drop a bomb from no more than twenty or thirty feet. It was so low that it hit the ground, bounced once, and was skidding in my direction. I beat a hasty retreat to the other side of the building and waited for the blast which never came.

They dropped three bombs at that time. One set light to the Q.M.'s vehicle which was parked in the station alongside of the platform which made it easy to load and unload. Another a little further to one side and wounded an officer and the Battery clerk. The bomb which I had seen, slid to a stop, about a couple of dozen yards from the building in which we were. He must have been too low for that bomb to arm itself and it didn't hit the target.

Three of the lads were sitting on the latrine, which was a trench dug about fifty yards from the building, saw the planes turn over the village and head up across the field where they were. They could see they were in a direct line of fire and had but little option but to take cover in the latrine trench. Fortunately for them, the trench had only been dug a few days earlier, so they were only ankle deep in the contents but they did the wise thing at the time.

The O.P. Tank had been parked by the building and when I went outside I was amazed at the number of bodies that can get into a Sherman when squeezed in. I think I counted six which didn't include the driver or wireless operator who emerged any port in a storm.

The Q.M. of course indented for supplies to replace those destroyed by enemy action. When the replacement supplies arrived a couple of days later, they arrived on three three-ton lorries and the Q.M. then had the task of packing his own vehicle (a three tonner) and reluctantly distributing the remaining goods to the troops. I think it must have hurt him as he never liked issuing anything if he could avoid it. We were then given billets in a small village near Sorrento and some of the lads visited Capri in their time off. It was a rest period for us having been action without a break from the 9th September until the 7th November. We did manage to get down into Sorrento however and I thought that it would be great to return sometime

Then it was time to move again. I was running a temperature of 103 F. and was feeling very much under the weather so I was allowed to travel in a vehicle down to the docks. The rest of the lads had to march, and that didn't go down at all well as there was no one who liked marching then.

Vie embarked in the docks in Naples and after calling in at Oran, made our way back to Blighty. Once more I had another Xmas and birthday at sea. I think we had an orange extra to our rations, but I was not feeling at all well and wasn't bothered what happened.

On the ship returning to England the heads (toilets) consisted of a long trough with a long wooden seat placed over it with several holes for the necessary accommodation. A stream of water continually flowed down this trough to flush away the effluent. It had possibly been done before, but one of the lads made several paper boats, and setting light to them one at a time allowed them to float down the trough, creating quite a panic as they passed under some of the occupants of the heads. Such is life.

## Chapter No.5.

### Normandy onwards-

We arrived back in Britain; I believe it was at Gourock in Scotland. The Harbourmaster started giving instructions as to what we should do when we disembarked, but his voice was drowned out by the whistles and cat-calls by the troops, who were not in the mood to be ordered about. However, calm was restored and we were taken by train to Norfolk where we were found billets in East Rudham, "D" Battery at least. Other units were billeted in various other parts of the area. We were then given disembarkation leave and except for a small holding party, everyone disappeared to various parts of the country together with about 200 odd blankets with which we were issued when we were given our billets. Mine was still doing good service up to a year ago, when it went to another good cause.

Leave over we returned to our billets and I remember standing in the "Crown" with a pint of brown ale in my hand in front of a roaring fire wearing my greatcoat and still shivering. We had still not got used to the colder weather since N. Africa.

We spent a while re-equipping here and did one or two exercises, not that we needed much practise in our normal routines, but we had to keep on top of procedures.

I was fortunate enough to have a billet where I could have my wife to stay for a few days, which, only having spent one leave and embarkation leave together since our marriage, was a bonus to be remembered. When it was time for her to return, the Major allowed me to use an army vehicle to take her two Kings Lynn Station, a concession not allowed normally. But times were not normal then.

While we were there, the local Air-Force chaps, who were flying night operations, had given us an open invitation to their mess. I remember one particular night, about six of us had spent a very convivial evening there and were returning in the black-out to East Rudham. I thought the driver knew the way so was not paying much attention, when we heard the fellows in the back of the truck making quite a racket. "They've had quite a skinful" said my driver, "Still they sound happy enough". A few seconds later there was a roar and a gust of wind as a plane taking off passed only a few feet above us. We had mistakenly taken a turn on to the run- way of the airfield and the fellows in the back of the truck could see this plane coming up behind us and could do very little about the situation. I made sure that we did not take the "good" road on any future occasion.

Shortly before "D" Day we were taken to a holding area at Brentwood in Essex and were told that our presence was not to be revealed to all and sundry, and a Military Police Guard was put on the barbed wire enclosure. Needless to say a number of the lads to whom London was their home were not prepared to be incarcerated so near their loved ones.

A steam roller, which had been left in the area, was fired up and driven through the barbed wire, leaving a fair sized gap through which some of the boys disappeared.

On another occasion, an Officer and Sgt. Major formed up a squad of O.R.s and marched them through the front gate, receiving a very smart salute from the Guard on the gate. Once out of sight the squad was dismissed with instructions to be back without fail. I'm glad to say, that when it came time to set off for Tilbury Docks and to embark for the invasion beaches, there was not a single absentee

It was while we were at Brentwood that we were all paraded one day and Field Marshal Montgomery turned up. He, as was his custom, told us to break ranks and to come closer around his vehicle so that we could hear him properly. He then told us that although some of the Division might have thought it unfair to be used again after what we had already experienced, he knew that he could rely on us to do the job which we were set; and that if he used untried troops, they may not reach the designated targets and would also suffer many more casualties than troops of our experience. Fair or not, we were given that boost which I believe he inspired in many of the troops which served under him.

Came the Day to depart. All vehicles were waterproofed and we were taken down to the Docks where we embarked on a "Liberty" Ship bound for the beaches. The conditions on board were very cramped as all who have travelled on a "Trooper" will confirm, but when it came to washing and shaving, I had quite an advantage. A couple of years previously I had been persuaded by my friend Len Cawley, to start using a cut-throat razor and had obtained two of these, and although I say it myself, I had become quite proficient in the use of these to the exclusion of all others. I found that giving a few flourishes of my right arm gave me plenty of elbow room to shave in the crowded wash room conditions which existed below deck

I used these two razors all through the rest of the war. They drew plenty of rude remarks

when I was observed shaving whilst standing up in my gun-tractor with my head and shoulders out of the observation hatch and travelling across a bumpy field. You'll cut yer bloomin' 'ead off one of these days, or words to that effect were shouted across the field.

The trip down the channel was quite un-eventful and the great Armada of all different shapes and sizes of craft steamed steadily south westwards. A little sporadic shelling occurred when we passed through the Straights of Dover but this ceased when a smoke screen was put down by the Royal Navy and the shore batteries were engaged by some of heavy Naval ships

I believe these were H.M.S. Warspite and H.M.S. Ramilles.

It was on this ship that I met one of my old School friends, Bill Doulle, who was now a Colonel on the way to take charge of one of the landing beaches. It must have been 5 years since we had had a chance to exchange news, and since then, I had seen France and Dunkirk, North Africa Salerno and Cassino since our last meeting, so we had quite a lot to talk about and news to exchange, which we did in his cabin, making inroads into a bottle of Haig which he had brought with him.

At this time I was in charge of an advance party of about a dozen specialists. G.P.O. and C.P.O. assistants, Surveyors and signallers.

We arrived off the coast of "Gold" beach and went down the scrambling nets into awaiting L.C.I. (Landing Craft Infantry). There was quite a swell running at the time and it was a matter of timing, to jump off the net into the L.C.I. when the swell brought the craft as high as it was likely to be. If you landed in a heap it was acceptable as long as you were in one piece.

The landing craft grounded and we managed to get ashore in no more that three feet of water, avoiding metal anti-tank obstructions and shells placed on the top of posts, which must have been placed there to prevent craft from landing when the tide was higher.

A few shells were exploding, but they were a fair way off so did not cause us any trouble and, basically, things were fairly quiet so, we made our way up to an open area of the beach and used some of our self heating rations (tins which heated up the soup inside when a ring on the top was pulled)

We then made our way inland a short distance and managed to pick up a jeep driven by one of our officers. He took several of us to the assembly point which was only a mile or so away and then went back for the remainder of my group. We then joined up with the Battery and were moved out and into action before the evening.

I think we had been sent over on a different ship in case of casualties, which, had there been any, at least a working party would have survived on one or another ship. Or such was the hope.

From then onwards, things became very hectic. During the night, the German airforce, which was notable for it's absence during the day, made several sorties over the bridgehead, dropping bombs and machine gunning. I found that the biggest danger was from the rain of shrapnel and low trajectory A.A. fire which was put up every time a plane came over.

We found that some of the French people we met at first were none too pleased with the invading army as they had been treated quite well by the Germans, being in a position to supply them with meat, eggs, butter, fruit and various farm supplies, but generally, the inhabitants were pleased to see us and we were given drinks of cider and calvados, a vicious spirit which went up in a sheet of flame if thrown on the fire. Some of our boys went to town on the Calvados and suffered accordingly the following day.

We were nevertheless kept very busy during the following days and nights as we were in action supporting the Infantry (1/5 Queens) and also the tanks of the 4 C.L.Y.s. Our main task was to put down Defensive fire in front of our troops in addition to engaging any targets that our O.P .s (Observation Posts) could find, and they, under the circumstances proved to be very numerous.

On one occasion, I was out on a high point, taking bearings on enemy gun positions, when I observed a low level attack by heavy night bombers. I estimated that there must have been about six hundred Lancasters and Halifaxes all flying at about 5000 feet or less and dropping their bomb load about a mile or two in front of us There was quite a lot of German A.A. fire to start with, but that soon became much less and eventually disappeared, as the town being bombed (I'm not sure if it was Caen, Aunay or Villers Bocage) became just a large cloud of smoke and dust. The raid was over in about six minutes.

I saw just one of our planes, a Lancaster, hit. It turned over and blew apart into many pieces.

No parachutes appeared and it gave one a sinking feeling in the stomach to think that there were seven men in that wreckage plunging to earth. I believe that we lost three planes on that raid. I suppose that it was considered light casualties for that particular raid. The fighting continued with little break for sleep, night or day, and we were annoyed to hear that some of the people working on the beach, would not load the vehicles we had sent for further supplies of ammunition, until they had

had their lunch break. I think our own lads loaded the ammo which was desperately needed, and, no doubt, gave the beach party a bit of their minds in no uncertain terms.

It was about this time when we suffered our first casualties. I had been talking to Lt. "Ronnie" Demaine, about his O.P. position and had just returned to the Battery Command Post where I was in charge, The Command Post Officer being off somewhere else, writing up the war diary.. when the signaller on duty turned to me and said "Ronnie Demaine has just been killed". It came as quite shock to me as I had been talking to him only a matter of three or four minutes earlier and things were comparatively quiet at that time.

It appears that he had only just arrived back at the O.P, when a shell landed in the middle of the O.P. Party and killed not only Ronnie and L/Bdr Cameron M.M. but had fatally wounded Driver Brand and severely wounded Driver Potter. All of whom had been in the desert with "D" Bty .

Ronnie Demaine, was incidentally, the Officer in charge of the party which marched past the guard at the camp at Brentwood and was very much liked by all ranks.

Another casualty at this time was Bdr. Wise, the Battery clerk. He had just thrown his bed- roll off the back of a truck when there was a muffled bang and Bdr. Wise clutched his backside and exclaimed "I've been shot". He had been as well. What had happened was, that he had wrapped his Sten gun in his bedroll, and being subject to going off if bumped on the butt end, the gun had gone off and Bdr. Wise had received a slight flesh wound which prevented him from sitting comfortably for a week or two.

We had eventually got round to the South of Caen and the Falaise Gap and were then pushing North, hoping to close the gap and there by cutting off a large number of German troops.

Every time we pushed our recce. groups forward, we were heavily attacked by "friendly" fire, from the air. Should I say more? .No I'll leave it at that.

One thing I do remember also is the devastation of the Towns of Villers Bocage and in particular Aunay sur Odon, where the bulldozers had to go in first to make a road through for the tanks. Above all was the sight of dead cattle in the fields and the all pervading smell of bodies buried in the rubble. At this time I seemed to be having regular stomach upsets and was being sick on numerous occasions. The M.O. said that it was either due to my food or an infection and should get better. It wasn't until three years later that the trouble was diagnosed as a chronic duodenal ulcer from which I suffered for many years and still have to watch my food intake.

We continued with the fighting through France and were kept very occupied. When the guns were not firing, we in the Command Post were kept very busy plotting D.F. targets. These were lines drawn on the map which were registered as regards ranges and angles on which the guns could fire to protect the infantry at a moments notice. D.F. Targets were given a code name "CAT" "DOG" "RAT" or any name which came to mind. Then all the O.P. Officer or infantry Officer had to do was to call on the radio or land line and say 5 rounds gunfire on D.F. "CAT" or whatever the necessary area to be shelled, was covered by that particular code name. So even when the guns were not firing we were kept busy all the time

It was about this time that I was transferred from the Command post and took over "C" subsection Gun in "A" Troop. A position I had always wanted. --No.1. on a gun team.

At this time we were on individual messing, a procedure which was adopted in the desert, which means that each individual truck or gun-team looks after itself as regards food preparation. The Sgt. Major or Q.M. issued out the proportion of rations to each gun-team or truck and it was then up to the party to cook and prepare their own meals. Most teams did a very good job after a bit of practice and usually fed quite well. Bjll Whitely, one of my gun team usually did the cooking but we all took a turn when necessary. I remember on one occasion, it was Bill's birthday and we cooked a cake. Eggs, flour, oleo-margarine and fruit was available, we used Andrew's liver Salts for baking powder and the stove consisted of a petrol can with one end partly removed and covered with earth. The fire was part of a 7lb. Potato tin filled with earth and petrol and placed underneath the stove and stirred

frequently. We cooked it for best part of an hour as far as I can remember, numerous replacements of the fire being necessary, and it turned out quite successful.

It was not unknown for a pig or bullock to meet an untimely end and occasionally we were asked if we would swap a bit of our beef for a bit of pork, or sometimes a couple of chickens for half a dozen pork chops. It did not happen all the time but there were the odd occasions.

The old desert practices came into use quite often, and bully fritters, rissoles made with army biscuits ground up, with the gun handspike, bull), onions and eggs, Sardines fried in batter and numerous other concoctions all made for a varied diet.

All these items were cooked on what we called the Benghazi stove. This consisted of a large biscuit tin placed on it's side with a hole about six or seven inches across cut in the top, a German bayonet inserted beneath the hole and about five inches from the top and across the tin to support a brew can, and a shallow tin, usually cut down to two or three inches and placed in the bottom of the tin, filled with sand or soil mixed with petrol. This enabled us to get a can of tea made in a very short space of time.

In fact, with gun-team precision, we could have a brew going in no more a minute flat when everyone did his bit. One man setting up the stove, one man filling the brew can with water while one man held it, another filling the petrol and sand can, one man standing by with a match. Meanwhile the other man of the team prepared the mugs with milk and sugar. A handful of tea was the right amount for six mugs of tea and the longest wait was waiting for the brew to "mash".

The weather was one of biggest problems. When it rained it was almost impossible to keep dry. On one occasion I remember, Johnnie South, my Bdr. and I had set up a two man bivvy and, as was not uncommon, dug a trench the size of the bivvy to give us some protection should we be bombed or shelled. This was about six feet by five feet and about eighteen inches deep. In this we had put about a foot of straw for insulation.

During the night I found that there were several inches of water in our funk-hole, so we dug a small sump and put a tin in it and every so often, threw the water out through the flap before it reached the level of our bedding. It was raining continuously so the ground outside was waterlogged but we managed to keep our bedding above water level nevertheless.

Can you imagine pulling into a gun position at one o'clock in the morning, dog tired after having been in action all day and hearing the order "Dig gun pits". This entailed digging out about ten tons of earth in the darkness with the rain pouring down, and sliding around in the mud. Then manoeuvring the gun into the pit. Only to get the order "Prepare to move"

Things were not easy at times but I'm glad to say that I had a splendid gun-team and although there was inevitably much swearing and cursing, there was a job to be done and we were there to do it.

The first Christmas after "D" day we were in a static position in Sittard. The weather was bitterly cold and it always necessary to put a piece of material or rag over the gun hand-spike to prevent one's hands freezing to it. Nevertheless we were quite comfortable considering the situation.

We had made a dug-out with a short communication trench to the Gun pit. This was roofed over with logs and earth. We had "requisitioned" mattresses and a coal burning stove from a deserted German village a mile or so into "no man's land" and we also had our issue of Zoot-Suits. Tank suits which had numerous zips and could be turned into sleeping bags. All in all we kept very cosy in spite of the sub-zero temperature.

Also at this time we were friendly with a local family and they had invited us to share their home with them. We then at night left three men on duty in the dug-out and three of us slept in a room in the house.

One night there was a terrific bang and the black-out blew in. There was a flood of bad language, the blackout was replaced and we settled down again. Within ten minutes or so, there was another explosion, this time much nearer. The three of us in the room were covered with plaster and glass and the room was filled with smoke. This time we decided to move to the cellar with the family. We heard nothing else that night. The following morning we examined the situation outside the house.

The first shell, we think it must have been a 210mm. (about 9 ins) had landed about 100 yards away. The next, about 40 yards away. We later heard that the Germans were using a railway mounted gun and had unfortunately for us had targeted our position.

We also discovered on further examination, that a piece of shrapnel about the size of a fist, had gone through the wall of the house, under the two lads on the bed, over me on the floor and out through the wall on the other side of the house. And we were making a fuss about being covered with plaster.

The cold weather continued and we were given a short lesson on how to use explosives to help with the digging of gun-pits. Five Hawkins mines, strategically placed and connected with instantaneous fuse would blow a pit which could easily be cleared. This was very useful when the ground was frozen solid two or three feet down. It was necessary to dig down at least two feet to place the mines, a feat which took quite a time as every spade full of frozen ground needed to be loosened up with a pick-axe and was not unlike digging solid concrete. When the preparation was completed we retired to a safe distance after lighting the slow burning fuse, and, within a fraction of the time it would have taken to dig out a gun-pit all we had to do was to throw out loosened earth and trim up the edges and lo and behold a lot of effort was saved.

Also during the thaw which followed, vehicles had to keep to a very low speed limit as the top of the ground including the roads, became very waterlogged, the top layer being unable to drain away as the ground beneath was frozen, and it was not unusual to see lorries stuck in the mud in the middle of a main road when they broke through the top crust.

One late evening a half a dozen of us were warming ourselves around a fire when a voice said "shove up a bit and let me have a warm". It was General Lyne, who had come to see how the troops were failing, and he spent a short while asking how we were managing and if we had any suggestions. I think there was a much better understanding between the higher ranking officers and men than there had been in the past campaigns.

When in N. Africa, Lofty Stern, one of our old experienced Sergeants, always engaged Stukas or any other enemy plane, with a Bren Gun fired from the shoulder. This idea I was to copy on numerous occasions and although I would not claim to have shot down any enemy aircraft, I did have the satisfaction on more than one occasion, of seeing, an attacking aircraft, veering away from a stream of tracers and I still believe there were holes in some of them.

On one occasion we were in a gun-position up near the German border. We were advised to dig slit trenches as German aircraft were active in the vicinity. I was without my Bren at the time so I and one of my team dug a trench about five feet long, eighteen inches wide and about two feet deep. The rest of the lads also dug their funk-holes. It was fortunate that we did, for at dusk we were attacked by fighter bombers. One bomb dropped on our gun position, wounded three of the Command Post lads and set my ammunition on fire. Two of us sat in our funk-hole and passed a bottle of whisky back and forth for about twenty minutes, until the charges had burnt themselves out and only a few bits and pieces were falling around us. We then examined the situation, found that the gun was undamaged, although we had only been about fifteen yards from the exploding charges.

Meanwhile the three wounded Command Post lads were taken off to hospital and Johnnie South, My 2 i/c and myself managed to contact Battery Command Post and get the Troop's four guns back into action again. The Sgt. Major then arrived "to sort out the mess" as he put it. He was told where to go in no uncertain terms, and disappeared without a comment.

Sit. Rep. stated that 80x25pdr. charges destroyed, one signal truck damaged but serviceable, all rations on the truck useless as it had been peppered with shrapnel, three wounded including one officer and, amazing although it may seem, one axe head, completely cut in half by shrapnel. Gun position back in action in less than thirty minutes.

On another such occasion, we had just got our gun into a gunpit which we had been told to dig when we heard the sound of incoming shells. I looked up, and believe it or not, I saw clearly a shell coming down towards us. It was so plain that I recognised it as a 105mm. and of course ducked instantly. I thought I had ducked quickly enough but although I was unhurt, I found that I had several small bits of shrapnel embedded in my tank-suit and about an inch or so of the zip in the front of my suit completely ripped off. Better be born lucky than rich was the remark made to me. The shell had landed about ten yards in front of us.

From the time we landed at Arromanche until we finally reached Berlin, we had spent only a matter of three weeks out of the line for a rest. We almost got a rest period near Mallines and were told to unload our vehicles to rest the springs. There appeared a pile of various items at the side each vehicle which almost exceeded the size of the vehicle itself. It made you wonder where it was all packed. After only 24 hours we were given the order "prepare to move" and, we were off again. About that time I had sustained petrol burns to my right hand and finished up in hospital. First I was put down to "Evacuate by air" then "Evacuate by sea" and finally "Transfer to Hospital". After about three weeks my hand had healed sufficiently to be returned to unit.

About 40 of us were taken by lorry to an R.H.L.T. (Re-enforcement Holding Unit) , here we were told that there was no room for us. Then to another R.H.U., same result. After the third try to get rid of us, the Officer in charge took us back to the first R.H. U .where we received a meal and were then told we would be taken to another R.H.L.T. This was getting beyond a joke so I and a chap from the 53rd Welsh Division agreed to drop off the next time the lorry stopped and to make our own way back to our units. This we did. Staying the first night with a French Family in Amiens .who looked after us very well and gave us a good breakfast before we left. We arrived in Antwerp after having been given a lift by a Guards Officer on his way to the town and went into a building where Pay Officers were collecting pay for their units. It was here I met an Officer from my previous Regiment who said "What are you doing here" When I told him the situation he said "You are deserters then" but you are going the right way, carry on". Later that day we met up with some Canadian Paras in Vehgle who "were resting after the Arnhem fiasco. They were interested to hear about our adventures and experiences and fed us very well and let us bed down for the night with them. The following day we found the Div. Axis and, as luck would have it the Q.M. from our Battery was passing on his way to pick up supplies, He said he would call back and take me back to my unit, which happened. The chap from 53rd Div. then made his own way forward when I reported back to the Major, he said" take over your gun and let the Battery Clerk know that you are back", That was the last that I heard of my desertion..

We crossed the Rhine at Wesel and were involved in a lot of neutralising fire to help the infantry consolidate. Several gliders had passed over and we were surprised when a glider landed almost on the gun position. We were wearing our usual overalls as we often kept our uniforms packed away to keep them clean, so it was not obvious to the Airborne troops who emerged from the glider, .who we were. They appeared very belligerent and said "What ....king army is this and where are we. I replied." Come over to the Command post and we can tell you where you are within a few yards". They then lowered their guns and accepted that they were not where they were supposed to be. Apparently shrapnel had cut their tow-line and they had come down a little short of their destination.

It was around about this time that we chanced upon an egg collecting centre. Hundreds of fresh eggs, mostly packed up in boxes. Of course, we had eggs for breakfast, dinner and tea for a day or so as many as anyone wanted, and we put a box of about one hundred plus on top of the gun-tractor. Unfortunately, during a move the following day, making our way across a bumpy field, the box fell off and the limber and gun ran over it leaving an enormous omelette and no chance of retrieving anything.

Although we were well into 'Germany now, resistance was still quite stiff on many occasions and it was not unusual to fire up to 150 rounds per gun per day. On some occasions we have been known to have fired over 450 rounds in a day but that I must admit was rather unusual. Our usual rate of Gunfire was 5 rounds per minute(or was it six), but could not be exceeded as the gun, although loaded, would not have reached it's full run out after recoil, to engage the firing lever, and I remember on many occasions,, Ted Dowsett, My No3., pulling the firing lever several times before the gun fired.

I know that the Germans we met were all enemy, but they were not always bad.

I remember on one occasion I had let a couple of my team go off on an egg scrounging mission.

They returned about five minutes later without any eggs and when .I said "What's Up" they said "We've got a couple of German prisoners over behind that hedge" I said "Why did you leave there then" to which they replied "Well, we couldn't take them to the command post without our rifles". So after collecting their rifles they went to retrieve the two prisoners..

When they arrived back, both Germans were carrying their rifles and both had grenades in their belts.

We immediately removed those, but I think the Germans were only too glad it was all over for them and they quite happily went along to the Command Post and thence down the line.

Another instance occurred before this which I recall. The infantry were passing our column in their Bren carriers and we had pulled off the road to let them through. One of the Carriers had a couple of German prisoners sitting on the top of the vehicle as they could not be handed over to anyone at that particular moment. Shortly afterward, we passed the carrier which had been carrying the prisoners. It had unfortunately hit a mine and the two Germans were attending to the crew lying on the ground who had been injured. .It was a strange situation at times.

It was shortly after this that we heard that Germans was negotiating surrender, and within a day or two we entered Harburg, a suburb of Hamburg. There were very few Germans around, and these were living in the cellars below the

enormous piles of rubble to which the city had been reduced. What struck me was the fact that the roads were clear of all rubbish and rubble, and I gathered that the survivors had been organised by a local leader to clear the rubble by hand, something to take their mind off the dreadful situation, and also to recover bodies which remained buried in the rubble.

With the ending of hostilities we were sent up to the Danish border to a place by the name of Husum where we were given the task of disarming the German forces which were coming down from Denmark. Somehow or other, one of my gun-team had managed to come across a Contax 2 camera, a model I had envied for seven years or more. I made arrangements for £30. to be paid to his wife in payment for the camera and used it for pleasure and professionally for over 30 years.

Then on to one of the better periods of the campaign. Berlin. This was an Ideal place for me as we were billeted in the changing rooms of the Olympic swimming pool, and I was an enthusiastic swimmer. All we had to do was get our guns in perfect condition and they were displayed in the front of the stadium in all their glory. Time off was spent in the pool which was looked after by the German staff and kept in perfect condition. Others who would rather spend time peeling potatoes than do P.T. usually, indulged in weight lifting, running etc., and there javelins flying through the air, discs whizzing about, shots being putt, and many other sports being indulged in by all and sundry.

The ten metre diving board, which some of the boys crawled to the edge on hands and knees to look over, was some times ascended and jumped from by the same people when they had taken on a little Dutch courage, landing with an almighty splash. It's surprising they survived unhurt.

One summer evening, the swimming stadium was almost deserted at sundown, most of the lads having gone off to town, when, Chalky White, one of our Sergeants brought out his trumpet and standing at one end of the stadium played the "Last Post". When he reached the last note however, he did not stop but continued the note for several seconds and without a pause, turned that note into the first note of "Tiger Rag" and played on for a minute or two. A bit irreverent I must admit, but it happened.

Even Guard duty was not uninteresting. Many high ranking officers both allied and British visited the stadium and it was good for my alto ego to be spoken to by such persons as General Patton who I remember asked me if I had taken part in the invasion. When I told him that several of us had and some were survivors from Dunkirk, had spent time in the desert with the 8th army, taken part in the invasion of Italy at Salerno, before returning to England for "D" Day, he was quite surprised and said "thank you for turning out the guard for me and congratulations on the turnout of all of you", which was quite something coming from one of the top ranking American generals.

Winston Churchill had opened a club for Other ranks .in Berlin and we visited this place on numerous occasions.

They provided very good food and it was not uncommon for one of our visiting party to say "I'll pay the bill tonight for all of us including the drinks". This was because 20 cigarettes would fetch about 50 German marks on the black market and most. of the lads were quite flush with currency.

The time came for the Victory Parade. After rehearsal and much bulling, the day arrived and 3rd Regt. R.H.A. fired a salute at the Blandenburg gate and led the parade with the guns of the 3rd R.H.A., followed by the other Units of the occupying troops and their vehicles, up the Charlottenburg Chausee and past the Saluting Base where Winston Churchill, the prime minister, Clement Atlee, General Montgomery, Marshall Zhukov, chest literally covered with medals, and other dignitaries took the Salute and march past. Quite a day to remember.

All good things come to an end, so the saying goes, but fortunately, it is not always true.

We were then moved to a town by the name of Elmshorn where we were found billets and settled in.

I was appointed Sgt's mess caterer and had a room to myself and was put in charge of all the booze allocated to the Sgts. mess. This position needed quite a bit of diplomacy at times as some of the Sergeants were on the point of becoming alcoholics and would have done so given a free hand.

I had managed to find a German chef who was looking for work, and employed him to cook for our mess. All he wanted was about 50 cigarettes a week and any food we could spare for his family. I kept back from the N.A.A.F.I. issue for the Sgts Mess, about a dozen bars of chocolate each week about which the lads were not worried, and this kept our chef Fritz, very happy. He turned out to be a very good cook and our meals were of top quality, especially when I went out hunting and returned with pheasants, hares and the occasional deer. This was part of my recreation and I had my own pair of shot-guns, plenty of ammunition and could lay on a truck to take me out and to pick me up wherever and whenever I wished. I think the Officer's mess envied us the chef, but he could not be persuaded to leave us as he was treated very well by the boys.

Meanwhile, the Major had formed a riding school, as he thought some of the officers ought to ride as they were of course R.H.A. Officers. About six Officers and I took advantage of this. The Germans, who owned the riding stables, did all the necessary work on the horses and tack and saw to the needs of the horses, and we took advantage of the lessons given by Major Tirrell.

I remember to this day the Major calling out "Hold on to your front arch, now raise your arms sideways. That's the last time I want you to touch that. If you're going to fall off, fall off and then get back on again.. Cross your stirrups, fold your arms, forward walk-- then trot." We began to move round the school, over the jumps, low ones at first, and be kept us at it until everyone had fallen off. Then it was time to start all over again. One of the Officers, Captain Tom Ritson, remarked to me one day "you do fall off your horse most gracefully Sgt. Webber" which I must admit rather amused me at the time. I was fortunately in the position that I could take a horse out into the country at almost any time I wished and did so on numerous occasions. It was from here I was de-mobbed. Through to Cutxhaven where we changed our currency from Allied to English. I remember that we were not supposed to exchange more than the amount which we had drawn in our pay-book, on penalty of being returned to your unit, but the system was, that you gave the pay-clerk about £100 worth of Allied currency, he looked in your pay-book and gave you about half of what it should have been and looked you straight in the eye and did not blink. You passed no comment and carried on. Of course there was very little drawn in pay, as cigarettes were used as the main currency in Germany at that time so there was little recorded in pay-books. Nuf said!!!

A long time ago now but I shall always remember the comradeship and the attitude which was not B---- you Jack I'm alright, but, "You alright mate?" which ~.as the usual remark in those days. Back to Blighty, Civvies, "pin stripe grey" suit, and all the necessities required, discharge papers and travel warrant issued. Then back to the office. So ended six years and nine months of service with the colours.

**887249 Sgt. N.F. Webber,**  
**"A" Troop, "D" Battery,**  
**3rd Regiment R.H.A.**  
**7th Armoured Division. (The Desert Rats).**

**Medals awarded.**  
**1939-1945 Star.**  
**Italy Star.**  
**War Medal 1939/45.**  
**T.A./ L.S and G.C.Medal.**  
**Normandy Medal.**  
**Africa Star with 8th Army Clasp**  
**France and Germany Star.**  
**Defence Medal.**  
**Dunkirk Medal**

**July 2010**