

## Chapter No.2.

### England and trip on the Queen Mary.

After disembarking at Dover, We were all given cups of tea and a meal which was very much appreciated, and were then put on a train to where, nobody knew. In actual fact, after several hours travelling we were eventually detained at Weston on Trent, Near Derby. We were utterly surprised when we left the station as there were crowds waving and cheering us. We did not understand what was happening at first but learned later that we were regarded as heroes returning from the fray, although as far as we were concerned we were the remnants of a beaten army.

We were then taken to an army camp nearby and a Sgt. Major formed us up into a line and said "take off our equipment and make yourselves comfortable" I had by then found myself an infantryman's equipment, as it was useful for carrying more ammo, than a Gunner's kit and included two ammunition pouches which were packed with ammo. As I removed my kit, I tipped the pouches up the wrong way and the content, including a couple of Mill's grenades scattered all over the ground, much to the consternation of the other soldiers who had gathered to see what was happening They scattered in all directions when they saw the grenades rolling along *the* ground. As I started to retrieve the scattered items, the Sgt. Major said "Leave those things there, I'll get a fatigue party to clear up those for you" I think he said this with a smile on his face. We then had a good meal and were allowed out into the town for the evening. It was quite an experience with people asking if we were alright and offering to buy us drinks whenever we went into a pub.

I had quite a surprise meeting with some fellows I knew from Rolls Royce, where I had worked for some months in 1936. They were working on Rolls Royce aero-engines and of course, were in a reserved occupation. We arranged to meet again but unfortunately, all the gunners were sent to Larkhill the following day, where we joined up with the rest of the stragglers of the Battery. I don't know how many of the Battery were lost in the evacuation, but casualties were not heavy and I do not recall any of the lads being taken prisoner.

From Larkhill we were taken to the West Country and were equipped with several different kinds of armament. I was on a six inch mortar team in Paignton, where we dug an emplacement into a cliff overlooking the beach. Another team had a six-pounder in a pill-box near our position. Others had a mixture of anything that could be fired and our duty was to help protect the infantry that was guarding the beaches. I believe our sector covered most of the South coast of Devon

During the summer months, this was an ideal position as we could go down to the beach for a swim during the day although you had to know your way through the barbed wire.

I was then transferred to the Battery Office in Dartington Hall much to my disappointment, There, I had to make out the transfer notifications of all the various parties and where they were and to whom they were attached. A very boring job and one that kept me in the office until quite late at night on many occasions. We did manage to get to a dance in Totnes sometimes though.

After that we were entrusted with many other various duties, such as guarding A.A. sites and key positions. Anything to keep us out of mischief. As well as Paignton, we were stationed in Bude and Barnstaple. Barnstaple I remember in particular. It was here I got my first stripe. I can only put it down to the fact that on several occasions I was picked as "stick" man on guard parade. That meant one was considered the smartest soldier on parade and was excused all duties for 24 hours. I also remember that it was here that I went down with "Gastric Flu" according to the M.O. This I realised later was the beginning of my duodenal ulcer trouble which troubled me for many years. Next move was to Westward Ho!., Bideford and Wimborne and when the "powers that be" thought we had seen enough of the West Country We were transferred up to Norfolk and Lincolnshire.

Christmas 1940 I managed to get leave, and, as it happened to be my birthday on the 26th December, I was able to spend my 21st birthday with the family and girl friend with whom I fallen in love. The leave was celebrated with as much as could be provided taking into account the shortages which existed at that time.

Then back to the wilds of East Anglia. We were put to work on various farms, and one in particular I will always remember was on Sempringham Fen. Our party consisted of about eight or ten bodies and our duties were to do whatever the farmer required. This consisted of earthing up

clamps of potatoes, riddling good from rotten potatoes and, the most back-breaking job of all, pulling and topping sugar beet. My friend at the time Len Cawley (later killed in action) and I formed a good team, he pulled the beet and I did the topping, and between us we could clear half an acre a day.

Some of the local farming community did not believe this and we arrange a bet of £5 .that we would do it. This was quite a lot as we were being paid by Tom Peake the farmer £4. A week and he expected us to pull and top beet all day for that.

The day dawned and we set out the field markers. At 9 a.m. we started and we broke for an hour for lunch, continued and we had finished the half an acre by 5 p.m. We got our £5.

I should mention in passing that when we started out in the morning, the beet was covered with frost and your hands went numb after a few minutes but thawed out after the blood got moving. I still think that sugar beating was the most back

breaking job there is. Or perhaps I should say "was" as I have no doubt that it is all done by machinery now. I can't imagine anyone would work so hard these days

We managed to get into Boston very occasionally and when the locals asked for whom we were working and we said Tom Peake their reply was "What! That mean old b...d." Still, we did get our own back as the chippy in Boston could not get enough potatoes and we supplied the occasional bag for a consideration.

One night, couple of our lads went missing and we were informed the following morning that they had been detained in the *Cop Shop*. Apparently they had been stopped by the Police riding dangerously or rather swerving dangerously along the road at 1 o'clock in the morning. One of them was on a ladies bicycle and the other was on a fairy cycle. Also one of the lads had a couple of chickens, tied together by their necks, and round his neck, and they were still alive. I think the coppers locked them up for their own safety. When they were eventually released, they told us that they had been given a very good breakfast in the Police Station and told not to do it again.

When a replacement came to this billet and asked where the nearest pub was. We told him "Straight up the road, First right and it's on the left, you can't miss it." What we didn't say was that it was one mile up the road to the first right and then two miles along that road to the Pub. We did make the trip on several occasions though. I also remember that the phone box was another mile further on than the pub. It was necessary to book a phone call in advance at that time, and on more than one occasion, I booked a call to my fiancé to have a few minutes chat. This entailed a walk of ten miles overall after a day's hard work. I must have been in love.

We were then moved to Lincoln where we continued our sugar beet work. The Christmas 1941 was spent there, and I managed to find a place where my fiancé Wyn, could stay. On Xmas day we collected our goose from the place where we arranged for it to be cooked, and Wyn held the cooked goose between her knees in the truck on the way back to our billet where she spent Xmas day with me and the boys

We also visited Lincoln Cathedral during the holiday period and were able to hear the choir practicing Handel's Messiah. A very moving experience.

Then another move to Sleaford where we spent another period of re-drilling and getting used to First World War 4.5 inch howitzers. We spent several months in this town and had settled in very well. It was here I was awarded my second stripe and my pay must have gone up to 4/6d a day. Twenty two and one half pence in new money.

I was then sent on a P.T. Instructor's course at the Army School of P.T. in York. This was a very tough course but I survived it and was classified as a P.T. instructor from then on.

We were not allowed to get really settled in any place for very long, and we were then moved up to Redesdale, a firing camp, near Scotland. I was working in the office at that time and as the N.C.O. in charge seemed indifferent to the fact that I had made arrangements to get married on the 8th of August 1942, he had not made out the pass or travelling warrant required, so I took it upon myself to make out the required documents, and took them into the O.C. for him to sign. He asked me what I had intended to do on leave, and when I told him I intended to get married he said "Best of luck" and "Have a good time" he signed forthwith and I was on my way.

It was a long journey to get to London from Redesdale but I made it and everything went according to plan. Both families had worked very hard to make the necessary preparations.

Our Big day arrived. There was an air raid alert just as we were about to set off for the church. The weather was wet but we did not worry about that. The wedding ceremony over and photos taken we went to the Church hall near my parent's house in Gospel Oak where I trust everyone enjoyed themselves. We had a honeymoon, staying with my grandmother in Cornwall, then back to my unit in Sleaford to where they had then returned

We were not allowed to settle again and were then moved up to a place called Wiseton Hall, and stationed in the stables there. Shortly after that we moved to Woodhall Spa, from where I was put on a draft to go abroad and to an active service unit wherever that might be.

Down to Woolwich into the stables there. "Reveille" over the Tannoy at 6.30 a.m. on a cold and frosty December morning. Not nice. Embarkation leave. Then on a train going north. Eventually arriving by a grey looking stretch of water which I was told by someone who knew the area was the Clyde and the place was Guroch.

We were then taken by tender out to a large ship anchored in the river and went aboard through an opening in the side. It was not long before we found out that the ship onto which we had been loaded was the famous "Queen Mary". For about five days we helped load various supplies. Our cabin was on "D" Deck and nine of us were put into a cabin which had a notice on the door "For 2 Seamen" There were three bunks of three tiers and although it was crowded, we were not uncomfortable.

One morning we awoke to find the engines were throbbing and the ship was on the move. Going on deck, there was nothing but water all around us. We were on our way. It was evident we were heading West and wondered for where we were bound, but within a few hours we turned South so we guessed it would either be the Middle East or the Far East. We had an air escort for a short time to guard against submarines but after the first day I imagine that we were out of range of the air cover and in any case we were too fast for submarines and would have been very unlucky to have crossed the path of one.

According to the news bulletin which was published each day we were covering in excess of seven hundred miles a day. Within a couple of days we were enjoying sunshine in the tropics, and I'm afraid to say several of the lads got quite badly sunburnt in addition to suffering from sea-sickness.

I fortunately, did not suffer too badly from sea-sickness and although I did feel a bit queasy for a day or two, I spent a fair amount of time on deck munching my way through Cadbury's nut and milk chocolate which I think helped me forget the sea-sickness.

It was hot down in the cabin, probably over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, as well as being very humid. and I'm sure that the ship was not designed to carry the number of people aboard and many of us found relief by having a salt water shower, but by the time we had returned to our cabin, only a matter of yards away, we were bathed in perspiration again.

We whiled away the time by playing cards or listening to the band which played every evening, or took a stroll around the deck during the hours of daylight. At night, of course, everything was blacked out and a friend of mine who took a walk around the fore part of the promenade deck said to me "Don't go up there, you can't move for arses going like fiddler's elbows".

I didn't mention previously that there was A. T .S. and W.AA.Fs. aboard, but you see what I mean. We called in at Freetown and took on several thousand tons of fresh water and several thousand tons of oil from tenders and then on to Simonstown where replenishment was repeated, also by tenders. We were not allowed ashore, presumably for security reasons. It was a glorious summer's day lying offshore there and I recall several of the lads and lassies singing to the accompaniment of a guitar "Sarais Marais" which I believe is a South African song. It was very touching and nostalgic in the semi tropical dusk...

Up the Indian Ocean, where the water looked like molten lead under the tropical sun. A long swell made the ship rise and fall by quite a few feet and it was strange to see everyone on the stairs, come to a full stop on the rise of the ship and then a few seconds later, there was a rush as the ship started the downward movement. It was the first time I had seen flying fish there, and spent quite a long time appreciating the view and wondering what was in store for myself and the thousands of service personnel aboard.