

To James and Benjamin - started November 1996 - Your Dad asked me to write this.

Early in 1939 Leslie Hoare-Belisha the then Minister of War introduced National Service or Conscription for young men who would be 21 in the year for service in the armed forces on the basis of 6 months regular army and 3½ years on reserve. This did not apply if already in the Terriers (Territorial Army). Thus it gave the Army a large reserve in case war broke out, which at that time seemed likely.

May 39 I received my papers telling me to go for a medical and also which service I wished to serve in- I nominated the RAF.

25th June my 21st birthday had my Medical - passed A1.

End of July received my calling up papers with orders to report to the Royal Artillery Dept at Oswestry in Shropshire, complete with rail pass on the 15th September (so much for the RAF).

3rd September 1939 war was declared on Germany by the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, it was also announced that conscripts would now be in the services 'for the duration of hostilities'.

15th September reported as ordered to FA depot in Oswestry, a strange experience leaving home for one knew not what. Travelled with the son of a friend of your Great Grandma Gibbon named Clifford Worsley and when all formalities such as a medical and so on I was sent through a door marked Drivers and Clifford through a door marked Gunners, never really saw him again, he finished up in Singapore while I(Clifford as a POW).

After being directed into squads of 20 we were handed over to our Drill Sergeant, Sergeant Martin, who was to carry out the training of vastly different groups of young men, the first thing we did was to march (?) us to our barracks room, complete with 20 beds and a wardrobe 15" wide for each man. Secondly we were then shown how to make our beds, no sheets, just blankets, and the next morning we were instructed how to unmake our beds and fold up the blankets in the prescribed army manner. Our greatcoats had to be folded so that the 6 buttons showed the coat thus [:::], the rest of the coat folded behind. Training then started on the parade ground and for the next period of time this was our life, foot drill, rifle drill - how to handle but not shoot. This meant how to stand easy, at attention, slope arms, present arms and how to reverse these movements. Learning the history of the Royal Artillery played a big part in our training. Pride in the Regiment a very important necessity involving the attitude to your mates. As equipment started to arrive, such things as your housewife, a cloth roll containing needles, thread, buttons, etc, (Hussif) socks, another pair of boots these all had to be laid out on the bed in the morning and the boots became a way of life getting them polished on the toe caps to a very high shine (hence the phrase spit and polish). Towards the end we did a guard duty armed with pick axe handles - rifles not available. This consisted of 24 hrs duty, 2 hours standing guard and 4 hours off but restricted to the guard room. If the Colonel appeared then all the guard detail rushed outside to present arms, the highest form of salute. Church parade on Sunday was also an interesting feature of life, or how to dodge. C of E was the big one but me being Methodist it was an easier proposition to handle, there not being many of us and the service was held in an empty barrack room.

In mid November orders came for about 100 of our intake to pack up for transit to another unit, this turned out to be the 104th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery - Essex Yeomanry. We travelled by rail to Nottingham and there

we were sorted out to where we would join our future unit. About 50 of the draft were posted to 330 Battery and transferred to our billets, 6 of us to the local deli-post office where we lived in civilian surroundings when off duty. The proper training then started and after the very brief grounding in motor vehicles at Oswestry driving instruction started. Not as one could imagine on Army vehicles but on builders 3 ton trucks. Like the gunners who were training on 1914-18 field guns no modern equipment was available. The instructors were peace time soliders who had joined the Yeomanry before the war started so were not quite as regimental as the instructors we left behind in Oswestry, so learning to drive became a thing to look forward to, it enabled us to find one or two nice little coffee shops for an 11 a.m. break near Mansfield, Newark, Nottingham. I managed to obtain leave at Christmas and returned to a duty, along with everyone else of digging out a village which was snow bound, very cold but appreciated by the villagers. Time moved on and we started to be issued with the accoutrements that a soldier has to carry around like back pack, haversack, water bottle (1918) vintage straps and belt to hang everything on, took a lot of sorting out but we managed. Drilling, Driving, Church parades took up most of our time until in early February 1940 marching orders came along and we packed up for ????

We entrained at Nottingham and overnight travelled to Southampton where we boarded a ship called 'The Lady of Man', a very famous peace time ship that did the Liverpool/Douglas, Isle of Man as daily run taking holiday makers to Douglas. For wartime condition the ship had been painted battleship grey, as we boarded each man was given a tin of 'Meat Loaf' a very famous army dish? This was our dinner, supper and breakfast until we arrived at Cherbourg.

Transferred from the ship to a train and into reasonable carriages (not the sort used in the 14/18 war which were goods vans labelled 20 men or 6 horses and were still around in 1939). Spent the day in the station but not allowed into the town, eventually moving out to we thought at first the front where the Germans were but instead travelling south. One town I remember was Lyon so I suppose we guessed the south coast of France was our destination. It turned out to be Marseilles where we boarded the troopship Dilwara, Peace time troopship with all mod cons for transporting large numbers of servicemen. Three days was spent tied up, the only break a route march through the town. The wind known as a Mistral started blowing and a most uncomfortable time was had by all. (This wind is like the Sirocco which blew in Malta when on our way to Aust - your Dad ^{may} remember.) The conditions on board were cramped and each man had a hammock which was slung over the table at night, each table had tin jugs, bowls, buckets etc, and 2 members of the table had at each meal time to collect the rations from the kitchens, in fact a fairly long hike up and down the stairs. Lifeboat drill took place and lectures on various subjects connected with the army at night. Crown and Anchor was played by usually the regular army people. This was strictly illegal and played in dark corners of the ship.

After 6 days the coast of Palestine appeared and we finally disembarked at Haifa. Put on buses we arrived at our camp, half way between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the name of the nearest town escapes me at this time. The camp was made up of tents known as EPI tents (Egypt, Palestine and India) and were quite roomy, 8 men to a tent, on arrival we each collected 3 boards and 2 supports to rest the boards on this complete with a straw filled palliase made up into quite reasonable beds. If rifles were kept in the tent they had to be chained to the tent poles as, so the story goes, the local Arabs at night would creep under the walls of the tent and slip off with them. At that time (as now) the Jews and Arabs were not friendly to one another.

Training started very quickly as we began to get the equipment needed, 25 pounder guns and limbers (limbers are a 2 wheel trailer and it lies in between the quad and gun - it was for carrying the 256 shells) the vehicles needed to tow the guns (4 wheel drive called Quads carried the crew) and the various 15 cwt, 30 cwt, 3 tonners and so on. Driving instruction was begun, driving on

the right hand side of the road, the gunners were learning how to load and lay the gun so that the shell went in the right direction. Nights were spent in the nearby town along with crowds of other soldiers who were part of the 1st Cavalry division, consisting of a lot of the famous cavalry regiments such as the Royal Scots Greys, Household Cavalry and various yeomanry. Our Regimental HQ was mounted but fortunately (for me) the horses did not come to the Batteries. The pattern of training with relaxation at the nearby town followed for a period of time until we were transferred to town on the coast Natanya, spelt differently these days and when we were there a quiet unspoilt place, mostly Jewish. This is where I passed my driving test on a 30 cwt Morris Commercial truck and driving on the right hand side of the road, this by the way is the only driving test I have ever taken so it has lasted me 56 years. The 30 cwt became my responsibility and drove for quite a period of time, covered quite a deal of the country from the Syrian border to Beersheba in the south, most desolate country. In between the exercises we were able to take advantage of trips organised for us by the officers to Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem and so on where the various religious sites were shown to us. On the exercises most of these were in the country but we did get at times into some of the smaller towns, one I well remember was Nablus where we stayed in requisitioned villas and where the CO got us all on parade to tell us Italy had entered the war and so any possibility of returning home was zero, heartening thoughts.

This form of life - exercise, day passes, eating and sleeping in some places carried on until December 1940 when orders came for us to move to the Western Desert, then followed 2 years of constant moving.

We left Natanya and travelled south towards Egypt, across the Sinai Desert, an arid sandy area punctuated here and there by signs of Egyptians (Bedouins) and an odd palm tree. The convoy of the regimental vehicles travelled at 20 miles in the hour and drivers tried to keep a set distance between vehicles, very difficult and caused a lot of concertinering due to the terrain and the weight carried slow up hills and an increase down hill. Arriving at the Suez Canal we crossed over at el Kantara and into Imailiha and then alongside the Sweetwater canal on the road leading to Cairo, (Sweetwater anything but) and used by the Egyptians for all the necessities of life, cooking, drinking, hygiene, etc. Into and through Cairo and out to the Pyramids at Mena and to the desert road to Alexandria passing a rest house half way along, did not stop and eventually arriving at the junction of the road leading west, bitumen for a while and then on to a road only just being built, consisting of limestone rocks, very hard driving. The regiment finished up at a place on the coast about 30 miles east of Mersah Matruh in conditions where the flies were just about in plague proportions, always a race as to who got the meal first. This was to our position until the beginning of January 1941 when we moved forward through Mersah Matru and up Hellfire pass, the scene of some heavy fighting just a little while before on over the Egypt/Libya border to Bardia which was being attacked by the troops of Britain and India, we dug in and our live action began.

The guns were placed in position and all the trucks, bar those servicing the guns such as the radio truck which received the information from the observation post to lay the guns in the direction of the enemy, remember the guns were well behind the front line and could not see where the Italians were and all the other vehicles were in the wagon lines some distance behind the guns. At that time I was driving a 15 cwt truck but unfortunately cannot remember what was on board, food probably. Captured tomato paste and large tins of cheroots. Everybody dug a slit trench for their bed roll which gave some protection if shelled. The battle for Bardia did not last long, the result was thousands of prisoners marching, (a motley crowd) back to Prisoner of war camps in Egypt, the war over for them. We were able to visit Bardia and to see what the effect of shelling was on a small town which was really a holiday resort on the Mediterranean, not a pretty picture with roads and houses damaged on palm tree lined streets. However, that's war.

So ended our first engagement under active service conditions and we left Bardia and moved on to Tobruk, another town on the Mediterranean and a fairly decent port. Again we placed the guns in position and again moved to wagon lines, but this time not on a flat desert area but in country which had a series of wadi's (dried up water run off's generally running down an escarpment which parallels the coast down to a flat between it and the sea. The weather at this time was getting cooler, we got an occasional sandstorm which are not the most pleasant of experiences. The resistance from the Italians did not last very long and the Western Desert Forces soon occupied the town. Again prisoners bound for Egypt were to be seen and when the opportunity arose to see the town and port with a couple of sunken vessels lying there, one navy ship, on its side. From what we learnt we must have captured an awful lot of equipment and stores because once again tomato paste loomed large on the horizon. One particular source of enjoyment obtained was cheroots and cognac, one old soldier in our troop obtained a large tin, filled it with cognac, cheroots and sealed the lid. Some weeks later when the lid was removed we had the most marvellous smokes. Our usual smoke was a ration of a tin of fifty cigarettes, Victor 'V' was the most regular and the other Cape to Cairo, both of which were said to be sweepings from some Egyptian Cig factory. If anyone did not smoke they became useful currency. Food was still mainly bully beef (tinned corned beef flavoured with tomato paste, bully can be treated or cooked in several different ways, fried probably the favourite. As the battery became split into various sections, guns, wagon lines and forward positions the method of preparing the food became the responsibility of each gun crew or group of trucks, the method of cooking was over an open fire constructed from an empty 4 gallon petrol tin called a flimsy, about 10" square and 14" or 15" long, cut down to 10' square by 7" deep, 3/4 filled with sand, a good application of petrol and it was ready for use. A billy can of tea could be made in 2 minutes, tasted good as the sun rose - called "Gunfire". Tobruk itself was perched at the bottom of a cliff face with caves dug into it, one of which turned out to be a fully equipped hospital (more of this later) and we understood a considerable amount of stores were found in the caves, which along with captured vehicles were very helpful.

After the action at Tobruk the next action was at Derna again a coastal town and the centre of Mussolini's attempt to colonise North Africa with Italian migrants. Derna was at the foot of a high escarpment. The action did not last long and for a day or so able to have a look around. One of the vehicles found by our battery was a vehicle nicknamed Victoria because of similarity to carriages of that name. The unusual feature of this c/truck was the 4 wheel steering (shades of Honda 1995) but it proved to be not much use to us so it was tipped down the escarpment. On to the next large town via several smaller towns including Barce all of which were between the escarpment and the sea, on to Benghazi, the capital of Cyrenaica which fell quite quickly and allowed us to see the town with its promenade and white buildings, etc.

The army soon pushed on down the coast of the Gulf of Sirte, through Beda Fomm, Agadabia and on to El Agheila where a line was established, due to the German army arriving on the scene, build up occurred I suppose on both sides and this took place between the 9th February and 24th March 1941 (these dates obtained from a book your Dad gave me on 25.6.84 and he wrote Clickety click!! Back to El Agheila where in that period General Rommel took over the opposing forces and he proved a different sort of C.O. Soon after we dug in the German air force came into action and whereas the Italians bombed from 20000/30000 feet the Luftwaffe had Stuka dive bombers which dived from not a great height and then on to targets they could see, and fitted with sirens which created a loud piercing scream as they dived - made a very unpleasant sound. Bombs landed quite close to where we were (under the truck) the nearest I experienced was about 15 yards away, happily. This was the pattern of life for a lot of the time at Elagheila. So no one was surprised when the order to withdraw came, and then it was back to Agadabia, but instead of following the coast road our particular unit with others cut across country to a town called

Msus and on to Mechili. It was in this area that orders came through that any equipment which broke down had to be left behind but first putting them beyond repair. The withdrawal continued and we dropped back towards Tobruk. It was about this time we heard that our Commanding Officer of the Regiment had been taken prisoner and also General O'Connor, one of the popular generals of this time, was a POW. By the 10 April 1941 we were inside the perimeter of Tobruk and completely cut off from the rest of the forces on the desert.

Soon after the siege started the Germans/Italians made an attack from the south and succeeded in breaking through the outer defences, our Regiment went to the aid of other artillery and we and the infantry recovered the ground lost. This sort of life went on and I suppose one got used to the siege idea, living conditions were rough, gunners slept by their gun in slit trenches, the guns having been dug into gun pits of a big enough size to allow the 25 pounders to swing round in any direction. The drivers and their vehicles were again living in wadis and I guess fairly safe from anything other than a direct hit from Stukas. At this time I had a 3 ton Chevrolet truck, no windscreen, only a canvas screen, no doors but a delight to drive, made in India. On the run back from El Agheila I drove a gun towing "Quad" complete with gun, limber and crew. Being in a wadi meant we were not very far from the sea so occasionally permission was given to walk down to the sea and have a swim/lie in the water which of course was very pleasant. My duty with the Chev was to maintain water supplies to the various positions which meant going to a water point and filling up a 100 gallon tank, called logically enough a Camel tank, the ration per man averaged 3 or 4 pints per man per day. This had to cover everything, cooking, washing dishes and washing and shaving and this usually occurred every 4 or 5 days and was generally a billy can of water per man, as you can imagine the water in the billy can at the end was fairly thick! Washing clothes was a different proposition petrol was used, there being strangely enough a good supply. The clothes came out clean and smelled strongly but this soon went away when laid in the sun. During August several of us went down with Jaundice and were sent to hospital in the caves behind Tobruk. Australian run they fed us like lords with plenty of dairy foods, eggs and the like which we did not see at the front. After 2/3 days we were evacuated to Alexandria travelling by destroyer HMS Kandahar, an 8 hour overnight journey along the coast of North Africa. The Germans were dug in at Mersah Matruh and as we passed they attempted to shell the vessel, we felt the captain put it into top gear and we went like the clappers.

The hospital at Alexandria was run by British Sisters and Nurses and were most upset when we said we had been fed dairy foods in Tobruk, apparently this is the worst one can have when suffering from jaundice. We survived and after about 10 days we were discharged from the hospital to a convalescent camp on the sea front at Alex. The first night we were bitten very severely by bed bugs which lived in the mattresses, the next night everybody slept on the verandah - free from bed bugs. The stay at this camp was in effect a staging post where we waited for a destroyer to take us back to Tobruk - about 3 weeks but in that time we enjoyed ourselves.

The run back to Tobruk was uneventful so we soon met up with the 339 Battery people. The main change was that the Australian Division had been withdrawn and replaced by British Troops, Gurkhas, Polish troops, etc. Action followed and eventually orders came for a move to the south eastern part of the perimeter in preparation for a break out and to meet up with units of the 8th Army (as it was now called) intensive shelling from the opposing forces. Mainly 75 mm but also frequently from 78 mm the shell always arrived before mm sound. (Last sentence - Harry wrote this and not very clear.)

One or two memories of the siege - we had no air support after the first few weeks so consequently the Luftwaffe had complete control of the air. As a result the Anti Aircraft Regiments were used as artillery. By that I mean instead of shooting into the air they laid their guns to attack the enemy

on the ground, they could shoot quite long distances.

The shelling lasted some days. One feature however was that we started to see RAF planes flying in from advanced airfields as the 8th Army started to advance towards us and eventually the besieged garrison and the 8th army broke the encircling German army and so the siege was over, except that Rommel succeeded in closing the gap for a few days. However this was changed and on the 10 December Tobruk was finally relieved.

The Regiment went back as far as Mersah Matruh and was then split into 2 halves for leave. We travelled back to Alexandria where 6 of us had decided to stay instead of going on to Cairo, travelling by train was a pleasant change except for losing 10/- playing Pontoon. The 6 of us stayed at the Toc H hostel and a very good time was had by all. Shampoo and haircut was high on the list closely followed by food and drink, such as lemonade - ha ha. After each half of the Regiment had their leave it was back up the desert to catch up with the 8th army and the advance forward. Several actions followed and I seem to remember going forward and then back and forward again. This occupied the first half of 1942 and perhaps the event that sticks out in my mind was the fact that the South African garrison in Tobruk were surrounded by the Germans and as we retreated east they surrendered and we shot at the German positions from south of where they were (we were south again of the Germans). Not for long though when we took off east again and in early June 1942 arrived at El Alamein, a railway station and a few huts. On the way back everybody ran out of cigarettes. This was overcome when we met a solitary Arab with a sack over his shoulder which when he stopped we found was full of Cigs which he sold to us at a grossly inflated price. Everyone paid of course. We all got a ration of cigs. 50 per week as part of our rations and varied from good quality British to those which were said to be sweepings from Indian cinemas. Did not really believe this, but sometimes -

The line at El Alamein had been prepared as the last line of defence before Alexandria and so we quickly took up positions somewhere in the centre, I say centre because the southern end was formed by the Qattara depression which was impassable. Action started quickly and Rommel broke through on one or two occasions but was quickly repelled. During our time at El Alamein we were visited by Winston Churchill and the Commander of the 8th Army, General Montgomery. We all lined the track they were driving along, Churchill smoking his cigar and I suppose we were pleased to see them. The Commander in Chief was General Alexander - the troops favourite - and although Monty took the praise for the subsequent defeat of Rommel, Alexander laid the plans. The action continued until the 23 October 1942 when a barrage provided by 1000 guns opened up on the enemy. Two things had occurred in the meantime, we had rejoined the original division (we came out with namely the 1st Cavalry Div, which had become the 10th Armoured Div, and secondly I was given the the B Troop Commander car to drive, which happened to be a Ford V8 armoured car. This meant driving up to the front each morning after sunrise alongside the infantry and tanks and returning at sunset. The B troop commander was Capt Ellis and the crew consisted of a specialist (assistant to Capt Ellis), a Signaller (radio Op) and me the driver. I was down in the bottom right hand corner and drove the car with my heel on the throttle as there was not room for the sole of my boot. Half inch armour protected us and I had a hole about 15" x 12" with a lid that dropped down to cover the space, and in that was a little hole about 6" x 1½" for driving under nasty conditions. The car had no turret so the others generally had to stand (and duck if necessary). On one occasion Capt. Ellis wanted to have a look at a German tank which had been damaged in the battle. He got permission from the commander of nearby tanks and off we went through an opening in the minefield which had been cleared. We got to the tank only to be surprised by 3 Germans in a slit trench alongside who promptly opened up with a Spandau machine gun. The armour saved us and as we could not return fire, we took off. All our weapons on board - Spandau MG (captured), tommy gun, rifles,

revolvers were all in canvas cases to protect them from the sand. We got back safely!

Action continued as I said earlier until the 23 October when the guns gave the Germans and Italians what for. The period when we had been static, at least our guns were, but the armoured car was kept on the move as Capt. Ellis tried to obtain better sight of the enemy. The rations were still issued to each gun crew, trucks, etc to prepare as they fancied. One man was detailed each day to carry out this duty. As the driver it became my job to cook for the crew - very handy at it. Rations at that time were fairly good with bacon, tinned butter, tinned fish, meat and so on. Bread was delivered daily from the rear - always tasty but complete with weavils. One of the favourite was hard biscuits soaked in water, boiled up over a fire until soft, covered with evaporated milk and with plenty of sugar, a very tasty dish and called Biscuit Burgoo - try it if you can get army bikkies.

This heavy fighting went on until the 4 November when the G & I armies started to withdraw. This carried on for a couple of days and at Mersah Matruh our stint on the desert came to an end after nearly 2 years of action. The trek back to Cairo started and we finished up at Mena, overlooked by the Pyramids. An end of an era.

Mena is only a few miles on the western side of Cairo so evenings on leave were most welcome. The first time taken up haircut, shampoo and shave with hot towels afterwards. Very enjoyable after the way we had lived for close on 2 years. The other feature of Cairo was eating, Jackies bar for 4 eggs and chips, Groppis for ice cream, this is a very well known name but, of course, do not know if it is still around. This is where the blue rinse set of Cairo met up with the scruff of the British army. The main hotel was Shepherds, but out of bounds to other ranks; in other words officers only. Cinemas were available showing lots of Betty Grable type films, in other words musicals with plenty of dancing girls. There were several Caberet shows which were open to other ranks, sold beer generally and the caberet show was mainly Belly Dancers of various sizes. Battles erupted from time to time usually between Scottish Regiments and Australians, many a can of beer was thrown through the air, but don't get me wrong, English regiments joined in as required. The friends I knocked around with usually got out of the building before the Military Police came - very brave artillery men, but the infantry were tough.

Christmas 1942 was spent in Cairo and 3 of us celebrated in style at a nice little bar in the city. As is the tradition in the army Christmas lunch was served to the other ranks by the officers, and as usual, quite a different meal to other days.

Training continued in the same manner as always until the news came that the other Battery was to be split away from the 104th Regiment and they - 414 Battery was to be made into a full Regiment, as we were but they were being posted to the far east, not an enjoyable proposition, but orders are orders. This meant that a large new intake of troops straight out from Britain would be joining us and 339 Battery would form the nucleus of the new Regiment. This meant of course that mates who had been together for 3 years were divided to form the new battery - forgotten its number. When the new recruits arrived they had to be brought up to scratch to our standards in desert warfare. So the gunners worked the new people and the drivers had to train young fellows in the art of driving in sand, no easy task, but we helped by taking them on to desert nearby - actually the start of the western desert complete with large sandhills. We got a lot of pleasure in getting them stuck in the sand especially if we had the guns with us. Terrible thing to do but at that time it was necessary as many of the young drivers had only had a short spell of instruction before coming to Egypt. Another spot for training was the road up to the Pyramids, a long bend and quite a hill to climb. So they were stopped half way up to learn hill start - quite difficult

especially if a gun and limber was hitched behind you. I suppose this is where I started Driver Instruction. Your Dad will tell you how patient I am!!

1943 - The next two years comprised a lot of moving around and I may not get them in the correct order but the places will show the movements. The first one was from Mena to Syria, a long drive where the order of march was 20 miles in the hour so all the time there was a constant caterpillar effect. So through Cairo on to Ismailaya across the Suez and over the Sinai desert and it hadn't changed from 2 years previously, into Palestine and across Syria and to a camp on the snowline of mountains, this was the Bekaa valley, well known these days.

This was winter in Syria and we experienced bitterly cold nights, the days not much better. By this time I had been promoted to Lance Bombardier and as a result moved into the NCO's sleeping quarters, total 6/7. The heating was by way of a Valor Paraffin Stove and obtaining hot water for shaving in the morning was by way of a billy can of water placed on the stove at lights out. BY morning it was warm enough for all of us to use for shaving, a bit thick when finished with. Training of course continued but on week ends we were able to survey the land and on one occasion walked up the valley to a small village where the headman invited us in for something to eat and drink, don't really know what was offered, sheeps eyes we think for one course, and the coffee needed a knife and fork to drink. On the other side of the mountains was Beirut which at that time was a lovely city. One leave of a few days was spent in a hotel on the beach front of Beirut and to the best of my recollection no black out existed. Another place we visited was on the edge of the Syrian Desert, unfortunately the name escapes me (Baalbeck - Mum found the name for me) but it is the remains of a lovely old temple complete with tall columns, etc. You may come across these in your school work. As duty driver I had to take an officer into Damascus, a very crowded old city but as it was only a short stay could not take everything in. One of the places/sights in that area are the Cedars of Lebanon which could well be living from Biblical times. This provided the officers with the idea that we should hike over the mountains to have a look at them. We all started off together but soon broke off into small groups. I am not sure how many made it but our party certainly didn't. The slopes were quite steep and after a couple of hours we returned to base.

We stayed in the valley some time and then moved to Latakia in the northern Lebanon, centre of a tobacco growing area and our bivouac was among the valleys behind. It was said that we were testing antimalarial procedures and we took all precautions, long sleeve shirts, bombay bloomers tucked into stocking and A/M cream on exposed parts. I do not remember much happening here except for a visit to the border with Turkey where because of the height we were at had a good view of the Turkish countryside, very hilly. The other place I remember is Aleppo, an Arab town quite busy with traffic and coffee houses. Really, I suppose, worthwhile visiting. From here we went on to the Syrian desert for more exercise, a different sort of place, for instead of sand at that time of the year it was covered with a sort of grass, suitable for playing football on, and also basketball, which was quite a popular game. As a matter of fact we had a game of soccer between 2 troops A & B, so as everybody played it was somewhat unusual with probably 40 or 50 each side, and because of that game I was never invited to play for Manchester City. In this period of time we also had a drive to Amman, the capital of Transjordan (now Jordan), lovely countryside fairly hilly. As a point of interest their army was commanded by General Glubb Pasha, an honour bestowed by the then King. Glubb was British, seconded to the Transjordanian army.

In all these movements training went on as usual with inspections, maintenance of the vehicles and guns, etc. But in the end as usual we were on the move again - back to Egypt. So once again over the border to Palestine, down to Sinai desert and over the Suez and alongside the Sweetwater Canal (anything


but) to Cairo. While in Syria due to the very cold weather Capt Ellis had the artificers weld on the armoured car an arrangement of steel framework so that a tarpaulin could cover us and keep some cold out. We also fitted a celluloid window to my driving window but unfortunately not a success when driving into the setting sun. We did manage to drive with signaller working the pedals and I stood over him with some of the tarp over the window and steered. We got to Cairo —

I think our station in Cairo was in the old part near what is called the Citadel, and this is in the southern portion of the city. One thing I do remember is going to Cairo station to pick up a leave party using 30cwt and 3 ton trucks, with the train due in at 6 a.m. It meant an early start and as the train was late we decided to sample the wares in the station cafe, and as there were no restrictions on hours it meant we could quaff a glass or two, and a very merry drive back to camp followed.

From my recollections I believe it was here that all the OP drivers were introduced to the Honey Stuart Tank, about 15 tons in weight, no turret but had a 50mm machine in a position next to the driver. The steering was by tiller bars set about body width apart, the gear change lever was set near the right shoulder at about the height of the ear, not comfortable to drive but very fast. Before starting the engine, a 7 cyl radial, had to be turned over by winding the starting handle 6 times for each cyl, 42 turns in total, also in this camp several of us were sent on a signallers course where we were taught how to use wireless sets (sending and receiving) the Morse code Di dah di dah!!! Semaphore by flags and able to send and receive morse code at 12 words per minute. Interesting couple of weeks at the Royal Artillery depot at Al Maza outside Cairo (opposite side to the Pyramids). The other course the tank driver went on was at the American Base camp in Cairo run on vastly different lines to a British Army camp. Discipline was, according to our standards, very easy going, but the big difference was in the Mess Hall where Officers and men all ate together, unheard of in the British Army. The food was good and plentiful, but bacon and jam and potatoes with syrup take some getting used to,. The main reason for the course was to learn all about the 125mm Self Propelled gun carriers. The bottom part was the lower half of a Sherman tank, no superstructure, the drive in the lower half left hand side and the gun poking out the front on the RH side. We learnt how to lay and fire the gun, but it never appealed to me as a permanent career.

The next move was to Al Maza, as I mentioned the base depot for the Royal Artillery. Al Maza was on the outskirts of Cairo and at the end of the tram line into the city so you can imagine this was fairly well used by the troops.

From here we went on several exercises into the desert south of Cairo. A feature of that was the remnants of trees which had been turned into a stone like material, forgotten the name - so there is a question for you, what do I mean? ANSWER - Petrified forest.

Life at the camp, other than training, was not unpleasant. One feature was a mirror at the guardhouse at which we had to look as we went out to see if we were properly dressed. The tents we lived in were ridge tents, 8 men to a tent and dug into the ground about 18". The sand removed was heaped around the tent, smoothed down and then whitewashed together with the guy ropes of the tent. From here we went south to a camp on the Gulf of Suez several miles south of the port of Suez. By this time the Honey tanks had been replaced by Sherman tanks. I seem to remember that there were 6 tanks in the Regiment which brings back a memory of an additional Battery being made up. My tank had tracks which had large rubber pads on the tracks a wonderful machine to drive, steering again was by tiller bars about a hand width apart and the gear lever in reasonable position.  The power train was made up of 5 - 6 cylinder engines all mounted above parallel and equidistant from each other. By the way, they were Chrysler engines. The

armaments was a 35mm gun mounted in the turret together with a 50mm machine gun and another 50mm MG alongside the driver. Maintenance and some drills took up a lot of time but when this finished 4 table tops were borrowed from the dining area and these became the batting area about 12'0 by 6'0. Very enthusiastic games were played, a little dangerous at times when the ball hit a join between the tables.

At that time Egypt was a Monarchy - King Farouk and Queen Farida were on the throne. Farouk was very anti-British and very much pro German so much so that the British army at one time surrounded his palace so that he could not go over to the German. Our guns were part of this exercise, but the tanks did not go. No action was taken, and the King did as he was told.

A big exercise was arranged to be carried out near Jerico in Palestine - Jordan Valley area. For the purposes of the exercise it was decided that the tanks would be put on railway wagons from I think Ismailaya, the rest of the regiment to travel by road. This took place and for several days we lived in the open on the flat top trucks with our own tank. This was for security purposes. The train stopped frequently and more often than ^{out} of the desert arrived Egyptians selling or bartering eggs and tomatoes, so for the duration of the trip these were staple diet. On arrival at Sarafand we drove off the wagons and started the drive to Jerico and this took us through the outskirts of Jerusalem and then to the Seven Sisters road down to the Jerico road. The Seven Sisters are a series of hairpin bends down the face of an escarpment and well below sea level, a bit difficult but as I said my tank had rubber pads so held the road on the very fierce bends, other drivers with steel pads did slip and slide on the bends. The exercise was carried out in atrocious conditions, very heavy rain for most of the days we were there. We did however manage to see Allenby Bridge named after a very famous General of the 1914-18 war. At the conclusion the tanks were put on tank transporters for the trip back up the escarpment and an overnight stop in Jerusalem just outside the British War Cemetery, again from the 1914-18 war but with additions from the troubles that existed in Palestine for long periods between the wars and subsequently since that time, although the British got out of the country as quickly as possible after the war. As a result of the overnight stay in Jerusalem a group of us went into the city that night and had a little drinkie. Back at the tanks we unrolled our bedrolls and slept by the side of the tanks only to find next morning we were surrounded by Arabs of all shapes and sizes.

We travelled back to Al Mazza on transporters and for the next period of time we were the Garrison Regiment and one of the features of this time was an Inspection by the Master Gunner - General - and top boy in the Royal Regiment of Artillery. A lot of preparations went into the parade including laying 3 lines of tape so that when on parade everybody was in a straight line. A lot of time was spent in preparing uniforms and polishing everything that could be polished. The Regimental Band for the March Past, and I suppose everybody was quite proud of achievements over the last 4½ years and we suspected a lot of us felt that the time going back to Blighty was approaching.

This was the middle of 1944 and sure enough the Regiment was sorted out into time served and newcomers to the Regiment. The old boys stayed in Al Mazza and all the others went to serve in Italy; a lot of good friends parted that day.

One other place we stayed was one the side of the Great Bitter Lake through which the Suez canal passes. Not able to pin point exactly when this was, I think fairly early on after El Alamein. I do remember however being able to go swimming in the lake very frequently. By this time we had to buy bathers because the Women's Army chose to come to the same place as the troops.

Back to Al Mazza - the time after the split up of the Regiment was spent

in a different part of the Camp and time passed slowly waiting for the boat. Leave in Ismailaya was given to us and then the big day when we were told to pack and move out to Port Said where we boarded the peace time cruise ship, now troopship, SS Empress of Bermuda. Conditions on board were much the same as when we came to Palestine nearly five years before, hammocks, mess tables, etc. Leaving Port Said we sailed down the Medi and the Straits of Gibraltar and way out into the Atlantic. "U" boats were still roaming around in packs. We got through OK and finally after about 16/20 days anchored in Liverpool Bay. We could see the city but it was 2 days before we finally got ashore and straight onto a train which finally ended up at Woolwich. One night was spent there. On the next day 28 day leave passes were issued to us together with our pay which was fairly good in those days - 6 shillings per day and it was for several weeks. Everybody was taken to the various railway stations, Euston in my case, and finally I arrived at London Road station (now Piccadilly) in Manchester at 1.30 a.m. Walked down to Victoria station complete with haversack, back pack, water bottle, ammo pouches and kit bag. Somewhat different than going to Oswestry with a little suit case and civvy gas mask. I've forgotten, I also had an Army gas mask hung on me. Fortunately Manchester had all night buses running to Eccles where I arrived about 3 a.m. and having to wake your Great Grandma Gibbon and your Uncle Jack. There was not much sleep that night.

The ensuing 4 weeks passed very quickly, meeting up with friends and relations among them your Great Grandfather Webb and daughter, Betty, whom I met at Church where we all attended. The leave was due to expire between Christmas and New Year but a telegram arrived extending the leave until after New Year. One incident I remember was in Manchester where I had gone with my mother (G/Grandma Gibbon) where I was stopped by a Military Policeman for having white belt and gaiters. Let me explain - In the Middle East everybody scrubbed their belts, gaiters, and the bag straps, etc so that in due course they became white by scrubbing, drying in the sun with sand covering the various parts and in due course they became white with the brass parts looking very smart. However the only units allowed to wear white belts, etc in the U.K. were the M.Ps (Military Police) so I was lectured on this and told to blanco the offending items, which of course we had to do when in base depot at Woolwich.

The stay in Woolwich was only 2/3 weeks fortunately as we were living in the stables (in double decker bunks) which were built in, I think, Queen Victoria's reign and had cobble stone floors and complete with hay racks for the horses. It was very cold, but we were able to go into London on day leave and Woolwich at night. This is where we also experienced flying bombs and V2 rockets sent from Germany. The next posting was to Larkhill on Salisbury Plain, another depot for the Royal Artillery, proper barrack rooms but the food was lousy and working conditions prehistoric after being in the sun for nearly five years. In March 45 we moved to Watford awaiting a posting to a holding unit in Belgium. The feature I remember about Watford was going to the railway station for breakfast where we could buy a decent feed of scrambled eggs made from dried egg powder - very tasty after army food.

Early April we finally got on the move to Belgium. By this time the war was in its last stages and so we finished up at Malines which is a small agricultural town half way between Brussels and Antwerp on the railway line to both cities. It was possible to go to either town on half day passes and each town was appealing in its own way, both had plenty of entertainment and bars plus in Brussels a very good canteen run by, I think, a Canadian organisation. They served a very good eggs and chips. The war finished in May 45 and we celebrated in a bar in the nearby village. Soon after we were on our way to join a Field Regiment of Royal Artillery. By this time the men I had served with for 5 years had been dispersed to other Regiments and so when we arrived in Bremen we were a small number of Gunners who had served in the desert, among a Regiment who had fought from Normandy with the 51st Highland Division so when we were issued with divi. flashes to wear

some ill feeling was apparent. It did not matter that we also had defeated the enemy. However that was soon resolved when the new chums were allocated vehicles. I got a Quad complete with Gun, Limber and Gun crew. This meant that any feelings had to be dispersed living in close proximity.

The next move was to the Hartz Mountains passing through the towns which suffered the bombing by the Allied Air Forces, most awful sight. Duisberg, Osnabruck, Hanover, Brunswick, Magdeberg and Halle were some of the devastated towns I remember (with aid of a map). Getting to the Hartz mountains was like entering a new world. Lovely little town whose name has long since been forgotten, but the lake and mountains were very beautiful, like all good things it did not last and soon we were on the move again (the Russians took over) where we finished up in a small town in the south French speaking part of Belgium called Geraardsbreen. Some weeks were spent there but in that time we all managed to get a leave to England, just a week but enjoyable as you can imagine. Returned to find the Battery had moved and was now in the coal mining area of the Flemish speaking area of Belgium. Billeted in civilian house for a change, 6 of us in one house. This did not last long then we were on the move again, this time to the Black Forest area, a town called Warburg. Set in the hills and forest of that area and living in requisitioned hotels, life was quite good. The town was the site of a concentration camp now holding German P.O.W.s and among our duties was the guarding of these people. We got on very well with the local people which helped us considerably.

From the move to Belgium all the above took place between early May and November 1945 until our final posting to Paderborne where we encountered the worst living conditions of the time spent in the army. Bitterly cold and on guard duty 24 hours on and 24 hours off at a Civilian Internment Camp where the worst people of the 3rd Reich were confined. Tough did not adequately describe the inmates, particularly the female prisoners. However the end was in sight and February 1946 discharge from the army came along, having been in the army 6½ years our group was one of the early discharges. Sent to Oldham in Lancashire I went in a Lt/Bombadier and came out Mr Gibbon, a lot older and a lot wiser!

Harry finished this on the 1.2.1997.