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*Born 8. 1. 1919*

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*England*

*Army Number: 1887182*

*Reflections on My War Years*

*1939 - 1945*

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I left school at age 16 having obtained a good matriculation to various universities. Family circumstances made it necessary for me to get a job as soon as possible, so the outbreak of the war found me working as a railway clerk of three and a half years standing. I was also studying music and spent hours practising at the piano. I lived with my widowed mother and younger brother.

16. 10. 39 was the date I was conscripted into the Army as a 20 year old sapper in the Royal Engineers. After a month's training in an army camp in Liss, Hampshire, I was sent as a member of the B. E. F. to Le Havre, France. My unit was No 3 Docks Group, R. E. and I was employed as a "checker" of ships' cargos during the coldest weather for fifty years. I remember the harbour water was frozen over for weeks. Our quarters were a warehouse on the Quai d'Escale. Sleeping rough with primitive toilet facilities. It was easy to walk into town from there, in the evening if I was not on guard duty outside the docks group H. Q.

I was able to save enough money in the months we were at the Quai d'Escale to afford a piano lesson from a famous teacher in Le Havre, but the lesson was cut short by one of the frequent air-raids. When I got back to my quarters I was told that the French "Kléber" barracks on the Rue de Strasbourg was being vacated to accommodate our docks group and attached stevedore group. We had one good night in good beds in the barracks. The next night a huge bomb blew away half the building - the half the stevedores were in. Their bodies were piled up on top of one another such was the blast from the bomb. About 300 men were killed. There was no doubt that the attack was a result of information given to the enemy by "La cinquième colonne" ( the fifth column )

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## 2.

Apart from regular air-raids on the docks where we worked as “checkers” unloading ship after ship life was fairly quiet sometimes and there was time for organised recreation. Importantly as it turned out, a game of rugby was arranged against the local French team. I volunteered to play full-back but in tackling a huge forward he fell on my outstretched leg and tore the cartilage in my right knee. I was taken to hospital and kept there for a few days before returning to my unit. Thereafter the knee proved troublesome. It would sometimes slip sideways then lock so that I couldn’t walk.

This disability came to its climax when it was decided that my unit was moving out as the retreat from Dunkirk was happening. We were paraded in full marching order in Honfleur and told we were retreating south. The Colonel, Adjutant and Major were looking resplendent in clean new looking uniforms. The order was given “squad, in column of rout’ right turn” I did as ordered and ‘hey presto’ my knee was stuck. I ‘stood easy’ hoping someone in command would notice my predicament - but nobody did, so I watched my unit march out of sight round a hill which overlooked our camp. I couldn’t believe that no officer had seen me.

I dragged my back packs, rifle, tin hat, gas-cape etc to one of the huts just vacated and decided I’d wait there till the Germans caught up with stragglers. In fact Major Rigby my former C. O. had been detailed to pick up stragglers he spotted me and told me to stay on the 15-cwt open truck he was driving. Somehow we got down to Brest, I rejoined my unit and we boarded a coal boat leaving the harbour. It was then we realised we were probably going home. Our jubilation was short-lived however. Suddenly bullets were whizzing over our heads being fired by a boat-load of Aussies venting their frustration at not getting to land in France on flocks

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of sea-gulls flying over our little ship. We pressed ourselves flat on the open deck in fear of our lives! Someone on the boat had a radio and we heard some news- the famous Lord Haw Haw in Germany described how reports were being broadcast concerning the pouring out of Brest Harbour of small boats jam- packed with soldiers "Scurrying like rabbits" out of Brest harbour were his words. We reached Falmouth without further event and spent the night on Falmouth Castle lawns.

They were wet but we used our gas- capes as ground sheets. In the small hours we were ordered on parade again and marched into waiting trains and we found ourselves in Liverpool after a few hours. Our camping ground was Aintree Race Course but tents were pitched and blankets issued so we were able to make ourselves comfortable for the night.

Next day, back in the train and then we were marching up Central Drive, Blackpool and as squads of six or eight men were detached in turn from the marching column we realised we were being billeted! It was Sunday lunch time. We reckoned that the alacrity shown in serving a hot Sunday dinner was due to our new land-ladies sacrificing their own meals. Word came that we weren't due on parade until 9am the next morning and we had a great night's sleep in beds with sheets, something we hadn't known for nearly six months. Sheer luxury.

Tragically, we were told on parade that our lance corporal that had sung songs and kept us cheerful in many a tight corner had shot himself in the middle of the night. An unaccountable suicide.

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The unit had nearly six months in Blackpool before being sent to the Middle East, but I was constantly having to go sick because of my knee playing up and this affected any promotion I might have had, but did not prevent my being sent to the Middle East where Rommel was winning battle after battle.

On rejoining my unit, now called 1000th Docks Maintenance Cor, I was doing the same job of "checking" the unloading of cargo of Military clothing, guns and truck after truck of motor transport. Mostly the job was ritualistic and monotonous except the day we were unloading two racing camels sent from Arabia to King Faruq the king of Egypt as a gift from some rich country. The method of unloading was by crane hoisting the animals in rope cradles intended for jeeps and the like, they were swung over the water from the ship to quayside, the first camel made it, the second one didn't and nose dived into the 'drink' and was never recovered. The crane driver a one time boxing sparring partner of mine, Dicky Richards, was charged with negligence and was soon after posted to Cairo, where he became a despatch rider and we were told he, on one occasion acted as an escort for the King's car. One wonders what King Faruq would have done or said if he had known what the soldier travelling a few feet away from him was responsible for slaying his prize racing camel.

When I got back to that unit, by now in Alexandria, I learned my docks group of some 500 men had been working the docks in Crete or Greece and had been practically wiped out by the advancing Germans. The knee still causes me trouble to this day but knowing the service it did me -probably saved my life, I do not complain.

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It took us all of six weeks to get to Suez by troopship owing to the zigzagging necessary for our convoy to avoid German u-boats and making stops at Freetown, Capetown and Durban. On board we washed clothes, played chess, did guard duty, boxed in the hammock room for exercise. I was a keen boxer despite my knee, but, inevitably, I caught my toe on the uneven hammock room floor and I had to go 'sick' again. As soon as we landed in Suez I was whisked off to hospital and then to the 63rd General Hospital Cairo where the cartilage was removed. (not very expertly) I needed a long convalescence in Palestine, about a month, I think, before I was able to walk reasonably again.

Having had nearly five months service in France I had acquired a good accent to my school boy French and a fluency that was readily understood by les Hauras. This was useful in pursuing my other hobby which was buying second-hand piano music which abounded in the local shops. I think largely belonging to Jewish musicians who had decided that Hitler was getting too close for comfort and it was time to sell up and leave. I was very proud of my music library which I tried out on any piano I could get to, I accompanied singers, violinists, played church organs as well as piano. The snag was the weight of this music which I had to carry crammed into backpacks and kit bag, my C/O, Major Rigby admired my fortitude and suggested I should put my music scores in the desk containing office papers. To which I had access being typist for the C/O of the Docks Group. The office papers would always accompany the Docks Group no matter where they went. I well remember my feelings when we were marched down to Brest harbour and I looked back to see a spiral of smoke as the papers (and my music) were burnt in the name of security.

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Years after I was demobbed I continued to buy up second-hand music. Eventually it helped me to gain a university degree and I still guard my music books carefully.

Strange the trivia one remembers. I have forgotten so much of importance, but I am conscious as I write of how little I knew about the progress of the war with Germany. We never seemed to hear any news. No access to radios, English newspapers or information from our officers ( was this deliberate to keep us in the dark ? ) Mail was severely censored if place name were mentioned. Very little real news trickled through to us in le Havre during January to June 1940. We got used to being a military target and survived frequent air-raids.

As the years went on the MEF at last began to push Rommel back and we all heard about El Alamein and Montgomery, and life became easier, we even qualified for 'leave of absence' after a year or so and I was able to visit Jerusalem, Beirut, Damascus, Alexandria and above all a trip to Cairo and then on to Luxor and Asswan. How I managed to save the money for all these trips I don't know. Perhaps it was because I never spent money on anything else and it was frequently possible to thumb a lift on Army transport when I went on leave.

In the next three years my unit was well established in a tented camp named "Longmoor" after the "Longmoor " Camp, Liss where we did our first month in the army in 1939/ 40. We had a detachment at Port Said and I was sent there was some reason and I

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had special duties when we had air-raids. I had to start up a small motor boat and sail across the dock water to pick up an officer and two privates. Why I, as a mere sapper, was given this responsibility, I can't remember.

After a couple of months I got back to "Longmoor" and became the liaison between the entertainment officers on the occasions when we had visiting concerts in the camp. I suppose my musical bent was well-known. We acquired a good piano through one of our officers with influence and I gave several recitals and talks on music appreciation, which were well attended - but I was still a lowly "sapper". Someone suggested that I apply to Cairo Area Military band for a job as piano accompanist to singers who featured in the band concerts. I went up to Cairo to be auditioned and got the job and henceforth I lived in comparative luxury as a bandsman in Cairo Area Military band and performed in their frequent concerts and did quite a lot of travelling to other camps. The hardest work we did was rehearsal for these concerts and solo piano practice. We slept in comfortable beds in well kept barrack rooms. A far cry from living in tents and sleeping on planks of wood which had to be debugged by leaving them all day in the sun. If the mozzies didn't get you these bugs did.

Things were so good in Cairo, the war was drawing to an end and I was gaining valuable music experience with the members of the Middle East Symphony Orchestra which was full of brilliant musicians from various famous orchestras, Jewish refugees and Polish pianists. I was lucky enough to become a pupil of a Mr Tiegerman from Warsaw conservatoire. Small wonder that I volunteered to do an extra six months with the band despite the fact that I was entitled to be sent back to the UK after 4 1/2 years



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in Egypt. I had the impression the war was over for us. The Japanese part of the war didn't seem to effect us.

My mind was changed however when a letter from my mother told me my brother a Lieutenant in the Fleet Air Arm, was being sent to Japan and if I didn't get back soon he would be gone and I might never see him again. He actually left UK before I got back having been given compassionate leave - but suddenly the war was over - two huge atom bombs had finished off the Japs it was rumoured.

I spent two weeks in transit camp in Ismalia before boarding a ship for Marseilles, train across France to Dieppe. Two days later I was back at " Longmoor " Liss. In Dieppe I heard that everything seem to be on ration, even nylon stockings as well as most foods, soap and toothpaste was very rare and highly priced. I had bought two tablets of lux toilet soap in the NAAFI in Ismalia. I had no french money so I went into a music shop in Dieppe and asked what the lady who owned the shop would give me in exchange for the soap. She offered me Chopin's Opus 25 Etudes! I treasure it now amongst my music library and I play from it occasionally it bears the inscription " Dieppe 2nd Oct 1945 J L Wilson" so there is was date which is accurate. The next fairly accurate date is the 17th Feb 1946 my 'demob ' day when I collected my free suit to equip me for civvy street.

Back to " Longmoor " I was offered a "Personal Benefit" course on subjects of my choice. I chose English literature and of course music. (was it a month long?) I studied in Chiseldon, near Swindon. We performed Purcell's " Dido and Aeneas ". I sang the male lead and an ATS girl who was a student soprano at the Royal Academy of Music, London sang the part of Dido Her name was

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Sylvia Nicholson. To our credit it was all performed from memory and our audience received it rapturously. Back to Longmoor once more and then things moved rapidly to demobilisation leave and I was home in Newcastle -upon -Tyne England. Arrived on Saturday went to church on Sunday promised myself a lie-in on Monday but at 8am the Headmaster of the very good school at which I had been educated was standing on my doorstep asking me to come and teach French for a month. How he knew I was capable of this I don't know, but it turned out I was a great success and I really enjoyed the experience.

I went back to the railway job which had been kept open for me but put in an application to do a teacher's course. During the interview I was advised to apply for a grant to study for a degree in French. I took a B.A. Hons. Music and French and six years later took an M.A. degree by dissertation.

I began teaching Music and French in September 1950, in 1958 I became Principal Teacher of Music at Aberdeen Grammar School. 31/2 years latter I became Music Adviser for Aberdeenshire and in 1975 I emigrated to Australia to lecture in the Teacher's College in Perth. Nine years later aged 65 I retired, but for the next 5 years was external examiner for Trinity College of Music, London. This involved travelling all over Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The End