

James McQuarrie private 5th KOSB

This story was told to his son Eric McQuarrie, who wrote an article for the BBC "WW2 People's War" Archive in 2003.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/96/a1107596.shtml>

What follows is a version that was edited by the BBC in 2004.

My father, James McQuarrie, told me the story that follows of his experiences of World War Two. A joiner by trade, he was a private in the 5th King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB), a territorial unit with a drill hall in Gatehouse, Scotland. He died in 1998, leaving a family of eight.

The King's Own Scottish Borderers evolved from Levens Regiment, raised to defend Edinburgh from Jacobite Viscount 'Bonnie' Dundee in March 1689. The 4th and 5th battalions were Territorial Army (TA) units that recruited in the south of Scotland, from Berwick on Tweed in the east to Stranraer in the west. These were part of the 52nd Lowland Division, 155th Infantry Brigade. The 4th (Border Battalion) had its HQ in Galashiels, and the 5th (Dumfries and Galloway) HQ was in Dumfries.

The 5th had evolved from the Dumfries Volunteers and the Galloway Rifles, with detachments in Dumfriesshire, A and D companies; B Company was in Wigtownshire and C Company in Kirkcudbright. C Company HQ was at the drill hall in Kirkcudbright. Detachments had drill halls at Castle Douglas, Dalbeattie and Gatehouse of Fleet.

James McQuarrie's war

Three days before war broke out, I was working at Lairdmannoch Loch with Jim Glover. We were painting and repairing the small rowing boats used for fishing on the loch.

At dinnertime we went down to the big house to eat our piece. While we were there we heard over the radio that all territorials were to report immediately to their drill hall. Out of the five of us who had joined two years earlier, I was the only one left.

I said cheerio to Jim and set off for home on my bike to Twynholm, near Kirkcudbright.

Joining the TA in 1937

I had joined the TA in 1937, because they were going to the Isle of Man for their annual summer camp. It was too good a chance to miss a free holiday. We got a boat at Stranraer harbour to the Isle of Man. As we were sailing down past the Mull of Galloway, it started to blow up a little bit.

It had got quite rough when lunch was announced, and there were not many takers. I too had started to feel a little queasy. I decided that if I were going to be sick I would be better to have something in me with which to be sick, so I went and had some tomato soup. I felt great after it and have never forgotten that lesson.

Reporting for duty

I reported to the drill hall in Gatehouse that afternoon along with the rest of the lads. We were told that a bus would pick us up on Sunday at 11am to take us to Dumfries. I played football for the Saints on the Saturday as usual and on the Sunday morning went to Gatehouse, where the bus picked us up as promised and off we went.

As the bus went by the Star Inn in Twynholm, Miss Carter, Mrs Lamont and my grandfather were standing outside wiping their eyes with their hankies. I wondered what was wrong with them.

Billeted at Rosefield Mills

We were billeted at Rosefield Mills in Dumfries for a week to get kitted out. The following week we were spread around the Forth Bridge. Two companies were in Winchburgh, with the other two in Kirkliston. HQ was in South Queensferry. I was with C Company in Winchburgh and billeted with Snub Hay in a Mr and Mrs Cherry's house — until Snub peed the bed. After that he slept in the guardroom.

Mr Cherry took me down the shale mines, where he worked. I was never as glad to get out of anywhere as out of there. If that was a low point, one of the high points was the time I met Wullie Thornton, who was just 17 and had just signed for Glasgow Rangers football club. Another highlight was watching the first air raid, on 16 October 1939, on the Forth Bridge. One of the pilots was Pat Gifford from Castle Douglas, who was later killed in action.

Breakfast with frost

We did different guard duties during the time we were there, the first at Pitreavie Castle, near Dunfermline, then the RAF station at Inverkeithing. We also erected barbed wire around Turnhouse Aerodrome, Edinburgh, where the Spitfires were stationed.

The last place we went was the ammo dump at Kincardine on the Forth. That was in the beginning of December, and we lived in tents. When we went for breakfast in the mornings the tables were set up outside in the open and were white with frost. On each table was a tin of pilchards. That was our breakfast. I don't think one tin was ever opened.

Back to Dumfries for Christmas

We moved back to Dumfries before Christmas and went on seven days' leave. In the New Year we had a very heavy snowfall, and I managed to stretch my leave to 14 days. I told them I couldn't get from Borgue to Kirkcudbright, because all the roads were blocked.

I got away with it as most of the battalion had been clearing snow from the railway between Dalbeattie and Dumfries. The snowdrifts were so high that the diggers had hung their jackets on top of the telegraph poles.

Reorganised battalion

The battalion was undergoing reorganisation. A new unit, S Company, was set up, and all the tradesmen were brought into it from the pioneer platoon. Under its umbrella was the mortar platoon, the carrier platoon (no carriers), signals platoon and so on. We also got two or three new intakes, one from the Edinburgh area, one from Glasgow and a lot from Yorkshire. I think the Yorkshire men were wondering what had hit them. I don't think they had heard bagpipes before, but they soon settled in and made friends.

One of the new men was a plumber called Bill Hall. He'd been nearly 40 when he volunteered so he wasn't fussy about which regiment he joined. He looked just like a cartoon character of the day 'Old Bill', so he was called that during the whole war. He and I were good friends.

Porridge with syrup

We stayed at Dumfries for three months then moved to Dorset, to Milburn Port, a small village near Sherbourne. The English regiment before us had left us their cooks to make our breakfast. It was the first and last time I tasted porridge made with syrup. Where we were stationed there was a big house, possibly Vern House, with a hutted camp all around it. It was all lit by a carbide-gas plant that must have used tons of carbide. A man by the name of Stewart was put in charge, because he used to work in the gas works at Castle Douglas. For ever after he was called 'Stinky'.

A rainy night

One night Paddy Downs, a blacksmith from Dalbeattie, went with me to look around the village. There wasn't much to see except a pub. The beer there was sixpence a pint, but the scrumpy was only thrupence, so we each had two pints of scrumpy.

About one o'clock in the morning the whole hut was awakened by someone complaining of a soaking. A window must have been left open, he thought, and the rain had come in. He went back to sleep soon enough, but when he went to put his boots on in the morning, they were full of water.

Of course, what had happened was that Paddy had got up in the night, bursting for a pee. He'd gone to what he believed to be the door and urinated. But it wasn't a door — it was a window, the one beneath which the fellow who'd got the soaking was sleeping. Paddy had peed over him and filled his boots.

There were other amusing moments, such as happened one Sunday morning. On going to church parade the battalion was being led along the road by the second in command. Major Johnston (from Amsfield Towers, Dumfries), when it came to a Y-junction. The left fork went to the church, the right to Sherbourne. The major went to the right, and the pipe band and the battalion to the left. The major was on his own.

Post-Dunkirk turmoil

About the beginning of May we moved to Kingsclere, near Newbury, where we were billeted in racing stables. We didn't know what was going on at the time, but it was just after Dunkirk, and the army was regrouping. Everything was in turmoil. It soon became clear that we were going to France.

We were each issued with five rounds of ammunition, though, for some reason, the officers got seven rounds apiece. We arrived at Southampton one evening and boarded one of the requisitioned Isle of Man ferries. Most of us lay on the deck waiting for darkness and trying to get some sleep.

On sailing after dark we joined up with another convoy off the Isle of Wight. We heard a rumour going round that Churchill was on a ship in our convoy, going to France to see Pétain. I'm sure he had better accommodation than ours.

On guard with no ammo

We disembarked at St Malo on 13 June and started marching. We had no idea where we were going and were never told anything. We marched along those long, straight roads. It was always a relief to see a corner coming up, until we were round it only to find another great, long straight.

We stopped in a field that was surrounded by the trees of Domfort Forest, where we were to set up a bivouac that night. When we had settled in, a chap from Castle Douglas, Joe Fletcher (a bookmaker in later life), and I were taken to a crossroads and given an anti-tank rifle. We were told anything coming down the road was to be fired on.

After a while Joe asked if I had ever fired the thing, because he hadn't. I said I'd never seen it before and had no idea how it worked, but not to worry because we had no ammunition for it. However, we survived the night without needing it.

No training in map reading

We were there for two or three days before we left by train. We had no idea of where we were, or where we had been, and knew only that the train was going to Paris. It stopped at a small village station, where civilians were hanging around. We tried to scrounge cigarettes from them, and I remember those fags tasted awful.

We got off the train not long after that stop and set out marching in our company. We were each to go a different way, and the plan was to meet up again at a certain map reference on a specific day. We all made it except A Company, who got lost after being misdirected by fifth columnists and then got caught in a German ambush. Some were killed and wounded, and the rest taken prisoner. None of the officers had been trained in map reading, only in finding unpolished brasses, something at which they were good.

Last unit out of France

We were told that the division was to be evacuated. Our battalion had been given the honour of fighting a rearguard action — some honour. We made our way to Cherbourg and arrived at the height of the evacuation. The harbour was littered with hundreds of

lorries, trucks and ambulances, all ablaze in an attempt to stop the Germans using them. Our quartermaster's moaning about the loss of good ground sheets became a standing joke after that.

Only one ship, the SS *Manxman*, was left in the harbour. This was the ship that would take us to Southampton. We were the last unit to leave France in 1940, on 18 June.

We learnt later that the divisional commander had been ordered to stay and fight to the last man. Considering it suicide to do so, he had refused. The order had been part of an attempt to reinforce a French line of defence between the Somme and the Aisne rivers with two divisions, but the line had fallen before they could reach it.

Real and dummy airfields

Arriving back in England, we took the train for Chatteris in Cambridgeshire, where we stayed for about six weeks. After that we moved to Norfolk, to Cockley Cley, just outside Swaffham. Airfields, some real, some dummy, surrounded the place. This was a ploy to mislead the Germans, who visited us regularly on bombing missions.

We lived in tents sunk some two-thirds of a metre (two feet) into the ground and sandbagged to the same height above to give us some protection. Most of our time was spent taking bus rides to airfields, real and dummy, so that the bombers wouldn't know which was which. It was very boring.

Birth of my first daughter

In November, the battalion transferred from Norfolk to Kirkintilloch. The move was just to keep us quiet. I don't think they knew what to do with us. In Dunbar, where we went next for a while, six of our men were killed on the beach by a mine that we were guarding. We moved on to Longniddry on the Firth of Forth. Here I got a telegram to say Sandra, my first daughter, had been born, so I got 48 hours' leave to go and see her. I borrowed 10/- from the padre and set out. I got a lift into Edinburgh, took a tram to the outskirts and started hitchhiking.

There were few cars on the roads, because of the petrol rationing. What lifts I got didn't go far, but I managed to get to Dumfries before the last train to Kirkcudbright left. I spent the night at Borgue and the next morning set off back to my unit, this time by bus. I still owe that padre ten shillings.

A stay at Duff House

In the summer of 1942 it was decided that we, along with the 4th Battalion, would convert to a mountain role, and so our next move was to Banff in north-east Scotland. On the way we stopped for the night at Crieff Hydro.

At Banff, the HQ was in the drill hall, while the company was accommodated in the spacious and elegant confines of Duff House. The last occupants of Duff House had been German POWs. There was a huge barbed wire fence around it, with only one gate in and out. It was none the less quite comfortable.

The rest of the battalion was located in a distillery that had been closed for the duration. The whisky was still in bond, though I don't think anyone tried to get into it.

Becoming a mountain division

It was while we were in Banff that we were to change into a mountain division. We had therefore to learn how to ski, and to fight and survive in the arctic mountain conditions. To this end, there was a snow school at Ben Alder, a mountain-warfare school at Glenfeshie, a battle school at Dunphail and a hardening camp at Aultmore.

We were all looking forward to the change, but when it happened the one part of it we didn't enjoy was the physical training (PT) in the winter mornings. We had to run about three-quarters of a mile down to the sea shore, dive in and then run back again. It made us fit.

We were there for 14 months before the move to Banchory, just outside Aberdeen, where we were billeted in a rat-infested isolation hospital.

Ski training with Norwegian instructors

It was in Aberdeen proper that the mountain training really started. Each company was taken up to Braemar, a Deeside village, for a month at a time. Braemar had one big hotel and a shop that was baker, grocer and post office all in one.

On good days we were taken up into the mountains for ski training with experienced Norwegian instructors. It was really fun, and, what with the fine weather, we could get a suntan. Bad days were a route march for about six or seven miles and a night spent in a snow house before the march back again the next day.

Exercise Goliath

After a month in Braemar, we returned to Aberdeen. There was a big exercise in the Cairngorms called Goliath, in which the whole division was involved. We were near Ben MacDui, where two sections had to find the easiest route to the top. The route I went up was already chosen, so I had to do it all again.

We spent the night up there. In the morning it was fine and clear, and we could see right down and over central Scotland. What a view that was. Although it was in mid-June, we were throwing snowballs at each other.

The first Allied airborne army

In Aberdeen another training project got under way that involved loading and unloading a mock-up of a glider. This went on for weeks. We must have been the best-trained division in the British Army. In July 1944 the 52nd Lowland Mountaineer Division became air transportable and part of the first Allied airborne army.

The day before Arnhem we were moved to Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire, from where Guy Gibson's 617th Squadron had taken off in the dambusters' raid. It was here that I met Harold Johnstone, who used to be a bus driver with Campbell's buses from Kirkcudbright. He was in the rear party of the 7th Battalion KOSB and flying out the next day to join up with the rest of his battalion at Arnhem. It didn't take much figuring out where we were going.

The weather intervened, however, and our move (52nd Division) to Arnhem was cancelled, for which we were thankful. We were supposed to have flown to Delleen airstrip, seven miles north of Arnhem, which should have been captured and held by the paratroops, but it wasn't.

Daily flying bombs

Our next base was Chalfont St Giles, just outside London. Flying bombs came over nearly every day. They were safe enough as long as you could hear them. It was time to take cover when the engine cut out. The sky was often black with bombers going to Germany almost daily.

About the end of October we went down to Dover and crossed the Channel to Ostend, where we were billeted in a transit camp run by Canadians. The first thing we got with our meals was pure white bread, something we hadn't seen since before the war started.

Occupation of Flushing

On 1 November we moved to Breskens in Holland, from where we were to take the Isles of Walcheren. This was the area that lay beside the Scheldt, up which ships had to pass to get to Antwerp Docks. Our task was to occupy Flushing, the main town on the island. It was typical that a Mountaineer Air Transportable Division was to assault a place that lay below sea level.

About three miles lay between Breskens and Flushing, and we went in on landing craft with Canadian Artillery backing us up from Breskens. The 5th Battalion had two attempts at landing, the first called back by the naval commander because of the heavy German shelling.

We could see that a lot of the island was under water, because the RAF had blown up the sea dykes to hinder the Germans. We moved forward into the town with very little opposition until we reached the centre. There we met a huge pillbox barring our way. We took cover in a large department store, much like Woolworth's, where the stuff in it was rubbish.

A missed opportunity

In the store there were heaps of guilders, just lying around. Somebody said that they were worthless and that we wouldn't get them changed, so we left them. We found out later that they were worth something, and that we could have got them changed, no bother.

On that very subject, in January 1945, when General Horrocks visited the Gordon Highlanders he told them about a German field cashier who was captured and robbed at Walcheren by a Jock from the 52nd Division. The German had waved a piece of paper, which he thought was his receipt for the money he had surrendered, on which was written, however, 'This bastard had 11,000 guilders. He hasn't got them now.'

Quicklime pits in Vought

The next day was spent mopping up, before leaving for Middelburg to get the Germans out of there. It was no bother, because they were only too glad to surrender. Our next task was to hold the line between Bergen op Zoom and Hertogenbosch. In Vought, a small village near by, there had been a concentration camp. The quicklime pits, beside which the prisoners had been lined up and shot, were still there.

In the middle of December we moved along the River Maas to Neiderheide, near Maastricht, in the Gorzett and Geilenkirchen area. It was nicknamed Dorset Wood after the Dorset Regiment who had been there before us. They had made the trenches and dugouts, so it was just a case of moving in and taking over, no digging.

The benefits of penicillin

We were here for a three-day spell then we went out of line for a break and back in after the New Year. The Germans were about a mile in front of us. We were being continually plastered with mortar and artillery shells, which would hit the branches of the trees above us, explode and shower us with shrapnel. That caused quite a few casualties, mostly head wounds.

One chap from Leeds, Tommy Smith, got hit on the head. When I saw him I thought he wouldn't be back for quite a while. But he was in Dorset Wood ten days later in January 1945. They'd started treating the wounded with penicillin, which meant you'd be back in action in no time.

Learning the hard way about booby traps

Another casualty was Jocky Scott from Preston Pans. We were coming back from an observation post (OP) through a minefield laid by the Germans. There was a fenced-off path running through it. Jocky had seen a German rifle lying just inside the fence and wanted it. The last thing to do was to touch anything like that, because it was usually booby-trapped. Sure enough it was the last thing Jocky did. He was killed instantly.

Another time, in this same minefield, we had to put down more mines to extend it. These were anti-personnel mines with antennae sticking up out of the ground that exploded about stomach height when triggered. The NCO was a Sergeant Craigie from Newcastle, who was a nice chap but brainless.

Because we had to submit a plan for future reference, the sergeant was making notes about where we were putting these mines. In the process he lost his pencil and started to wander round hunting for it. He didn't half get a rollicking from us — he could have killed us all.

There were deaths. On 7 January 1945, 17 men of the 4th Battalion KOSB and 30 Royal Engineers (RE) sappers were killed while laying an anti-tank minefield. Another four KOSBs died the same night in another incident in the same minefield. In the two blasts, 2,400 mines exploded.

Advance through Broederbosch wood

In mid-February we were on the move again, this time to Hunsberg, then across the River Maas to Gennep and Afferden. The Germans had withdrawn to Goch. After we cleared Gennep, we started to advance through Broederbosch wood, near Afferden. This was a huge forest, miles wide and miles long, with dirt roads running all through it.

The 4th Battalion was on our left with the Royal Scots left in reserve. We started out about three in the afternoon. Progress was slow, because our artillery wasn't quick enough in lifting the barrage, which caused casualties. Jock Johnstone from Kirkcudbright was one and another was Major A. D. McDonald, the second in command, a nice bloke who cared for his men.

In one incident a dugout received a direct hit and killed six stretcher-bearers. These were bandsmen, the men who recovered the injured during action. Two came from Wigtown, two from the Whithorn area and two from Dumfries.

Digging in for the night

At six o'clock it was getting dark, so we started to dig in for the night. We dug down about a foot or so then we hit water. The deeper we went, the more water poured into the hole. We decided to fill the trench with branches so we could stand on them to try and keep ourselves dry. A major came along and made us dig deeper, so we had to spend the night up to our behinds in water. In the morning we moved about 185m (200 yards) to our right and made dugouts. As everybody else was doing the same, it looked as if we were going to be there for a while. We were there for a fortnight. We got out for a day to have a bath but went straight back in.

Held up by stiff resistance

The reason for the hold-up was a fortified castle (Kassel Blijenbeek) between Goch and us. It was heavily fortified, and the resistance very stiff, which was holding up the advance of the 4th Battalion.

We were there to contain the Germans and stop them breaking out. The shelling from the castle started the first day we got there and continued for about ten days. It went on daily for hours on end. Quite a few were taken away bomb-happy.

In a foxhole for 48 hours

I was in a foxhole for about 48 hours in very hard frost, under constant mortar fire the whole time. The mortars exploded as soon as they hit the frozen ground, so we just had to keep our heads down when we heard them coming.

On good days they sent in the rocket-firing Typhoons to try and sort out the Germans. We used to watch them in action and see the rockets leaving the planes. The explosions seemed quite near.

One time Bobby Barnfather and I were sent out to dig a slit trench for a forward-observation post. We were half way through when a sniper opened up on us. We moved back a bit, got under cover and watched to see if we could spot him. We couldn't. He must have had good cover, because we never did get that trench finished. We never saw the castle either because we bypassed it on our way to Goch.

Full English breakfast

We came out of the wood on 2 March to the task of clearing the Xanten and Wesel area prior to making the Rhine crossing. We were in the Rhine Valley, which was good farming country.

We were living in a farmhouse with cows and hens, and there were sides of bacon hanging from the rafters. We put the hens upstairs in the bedrooms. Just in case we were shelled or mortared, it was safer to go up there to gather the eggs than hunt around outside for them. We had eggs and bacon for breakfast every morning.

It was here that I was reminded of home when I met G. Campbell ('Turnip') from Kirkcudbright, who was in the Royal Artillery (RA).

Lying on the banks of the Rhine

It was on to Xanten to get ready for the crossing of the Rhine. On 23 March we lay on the banks all night waiting for the word to start. The gliders came over first of all, towed by bombers and Dakotas filled with paratroops. Their aim was to establish a bridgehead to facilitate our taking the town of Hammelhin [sic].

When the Dakotas started to come back, some of them were on fire. The crews were jumping out. Many, though, seemed to be OK. We learnt subsequently that a lot of the gliders had landed on an anti-aircraft battery.

'Thank god you're here'

We crossed over in amphibious-armoured carriers or Buffaloes, which held about a dozen of us. We met the airborne troops about two miles in on the far bank. I remember one of them, an Enniskillen fusilier, saying, 'Thank god you're here.'

We reached the town that night before it got dark. The German army had a habit of counterattacking just before dark or daybreak. The first thing we did was to round up the local civilians and get them into one building. This saved a lot of manpower that would otherwise be allocated to guarding them.

We had an Italian POW here who was a great singer and entertained us every day with his singing. I don't know how he got there, though, because he was living with the civilians, it was likely that he was a deserter from the Italian army.

The bunker under a haystack

We left Hammelheim [sic] after about a week and headed for Rheine on the way to the Dortmund-Ems Canal. Near Rheine, we were held up by the enemy, holed up in a bunker that they had build under a huge square haystack.

The only way to move them was to use flame-throwers and burn them out. A lot of them came out on fire, but they were still armed and firing at us, so we had no choice but to fire back. There must have been about 50 of them, and their bodies were strewn about all over the place.

Ronnie takes his leave

We pressed on through Rheine. It was vital to take it to ensure a crossing of the canal, and there was stiff opposition as it was an important waterway for the Germans. They didn't want to give it up easily.

It was about now that we joined the 4th Armoured Brigade, and we were living in some farm buildings. One night I was speaking to Ronnie, a carrier driver. He told me he was going home the next morning for seven days' leave. His last leave had been cancelled because he had contracted VD. Now that he was cured he had been given the all clear and was about to take his missed leave. When I got up the next morning and went outside the tent, I saw a body lying by the first-aid shelter, wrapped in a blanket. I went over and looked at the label. It was Ronnie. After he had left me he had run over a landmine with his Bren-gun carrier and been killed instantly.

Held up by Hitler Youth

We were now heading for the Weser. On the road to Diepholz we were held up again by troops, this time occupying a large farmhouse. It was decided to give them two or three rounds of HE or high explosives, after which they decided to surrender. There wasn't one of them over 16. They had been forced into the Hitler Youth, but they were all fanatics.

After that it was on to Verden. Here we went into action behind Flail tanks. These were Sherman crab tanks with great, big revolving drums with heavy chains attached. They exploded the mines, which saved us the bother of digging them up. The tracks they left were easy to follow.

Weakening of German resistance

German resistance was getting very weak. By the time we got to Aachen, except for some small pockets, it was practically non-existent.

And, so, it was on to Bremen, the last major city to be taken by British forces. It had been bombed relentlessly by the RAF and was flattened. There were a surprising number of people around amid all the ruins. They had obviously used their cellars as air-raid shelters with some success.

Little organised opposition

There was very little organised resistance. The 4th Battalion even captured a U-boat intact, although it is also claimed that it was seized by 30AU unit. This was the unit that went in front of the troops to capture German secrets before they were destroyed. In any case I went down to the harbour to see it.

One day we went to the main hospital for a bath. It was full of Jews just released from concentration camps. What a pitiful sight they were, their arms and legs no thicker than brush shafts.

Signing of the Armistice

After two days we had cleared the city. We were billeted in houses in the outskirts. Some of them had no roofs, others no walls, so we picked the best of what there was.

We pressed on out into the countryside, clearing the small towns and villages surrounding Bremen. While we were doing this, we heard that the Armistice had been signed and was to take effect from midnight on 8 May, which happens to be my birthday. We moved to another town outside Bremen, where the population were required to surrender their weapons, which we then had to destroy. There were some nice shotguns and sporting rifles that would have cost a fortune to buy. We had a lot of firing practice with them before they were destroyed.

Not told the war was over

Next was Lauenburg, a town on the River Elbe. There, every night, the Russians on the other side of the river would fire on us with their machine guns. I don't think anyone had told them that the war was over.

The non-fraternising order was announced while we were here. This meant that we couldn't speak to any of the Germans or help them in any way. It was an order that must have come from some civil servant in London, and one that the officers and men ignored.

We were told that we were pulling back. The Russians were coming to take over, because the town was within their zone. Some of the Germans were in tears, because they were scared of what the Russians might do to them. It turned out they had every reason to be so.

Starving children

Our next port of call was Neuenrade, near Wuppertal. As usual we arrived at night and had to wait until the morning for something to eat.

After breakfast we went out to the swill bins to throw away what was left on our plates and were nearly knocked over in the rush of kids. They were diving into the bins and grabbing what they could and gulping it down. They were starving. We told them to go and get cups or plates, and we would give them whatever was left. Before we left we had them sitting at our tables with us sharing our meals.

One day, excitement was high because they'd been told food was coming into the shop across the road. Sure enough a lorry with high sides arrived loaded with cabbages, and to say the locals were pleased to see it would be an understatement.

No men between 12 and 65

One thing we noticed in this place was that there were no males aged between 12 and 65. The people there didn't know if their men folk were dead or alive, but they believed the worse, that they had all been killed on the Eastern Front.

We soon moved again, this time to the Möhne and Eider dams. Both of these had been breached by bouncing bombs, and a right good job they had made of it. You could see the mark the floods had made right down the valley, and they must have killed a lot of people.

This area was used as a rest camp for wounded troops. It was a nice and quiet place in which to be. We were here to protect local people from the gangs of displaced persons living in the woods. They'd emerge at night to raid local farms and houses in search of food and anything else that they wanted. They were armed with rifles and revolvers, and we had to be careful in our handling of them.

Minden Day

On 1 August, Minden Day, we found ourselves in Minden. This was where the KOSBs had won their first battle honour, thereafter celebrated on the day by wearing a rose.

While we were here someone cleaned out the ammunitions store and made a bonfire of the rubbish. What he'd failed to do was to gather up the loose rounds of 303 ammo. He had just thrown everything on the fire. It was like the war starting up again.

Demob begins

Demob was beginning. It was carried out according to two classifications. In A class you were allowed eight weeks' pay and ration money, but you found your own job at the end of it. In B class you got three weeks' pay and ration money, but you were released right away and directed to work on a farm for at least six months.

I got a week's home leave. I travelled from Minden to Calais on an old German train that had wooden slatted seats. It was a long journey, what with the temporary wooden bridges over the rivers and tracks that had been destroyed and hurriedly rebuilt a few times.

Leave didn't start until you got to Dover. If your home was on an island you'd get an extra day's leave, so the boys from the Isle of Whithorn all put in for this extra day and got it.

Back to the land of LSD

When we got to Calais we had to change our money into pounds, shillings and pence or LSD as we called it. The exchange limit was £50, but very few had that amount in credit, even though we'd never drawn any pay while in Europe. I went through and got £40 changed, and they stamped my pay book.

A Scots Guardsman wanted me to go back through and get £50 worth of guilders changed for him. I said I'd already been through, but he said to try again, and if it didn't work it wouldn't matter. He gave me the guilders, and I went through again and got away with it, but I couldn't find him when I came out.

I hunted high and low for him and eventually found him and gave him the £50. He gave me £10 for my trouble, but I should have walked away with the lot.

Lugers as war souvenirs

When we left our unit we were warned about taking guns into the UK. A few of us had held on to Lugers as souvenirs, but we knew that if we were caught with them we would be returned to our units and lose our leave. As the boat arrived in Dover harbour, there were a lot of splashes as souvenirs were thrown overboard.

One fellow walked down the gangplank pushing a brand new pram with a wireless set in it. The Customs men just ignored him and seemed to concentrate on the officers.

When I got home to Borgue, I spread all my money on the kitchen table. It was £48, and your mother had never seen so much money in all her life.

Released on a Monday morning

When I got back to my unit I found some of the lads had been demobbed already, while others had been posted to other units.

Feeling a bit fed up, I decided to go for class-B release on the following Monday morning.

Things started to move then. First was a very strict medical, which I thought was ironic, as I'd never needed a medical to get into the TA. It seemed, though, that I needed one to get out.

Playing again with the Saints

On Thursday I was on my way back to Calais on that awful train again, heading to Edinburgh for demob. I arrived in Kirkcudbright Station on the Friday at five o'clock at night.

I was met at the station by two committee members of the St Cuthbert's Wanderers, the Saints. They wanted to know if I would play for them on the Saturday. I knew then that things were back to normal.

Postscript

My father later re-joined the TA when it was the 4/5th Battalion. He was at its 1948 King George's review, in which they paraded through the streets of London and slept in the deep air-raid shelters in Hyde Park. They had a whale of a time.