



The Newsletter of the Royal Pioneer Corps Association

The Pioneer

OCTOBER 2009

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ON PATROL

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The Pioneer

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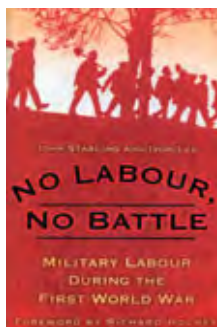
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The Pioneer



Front Cover

Operation Tosca, Cyprus

Picture: Paul Brown



Back Cover

Association Reunion Weekend

Picture: Paul Brown

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The Royal Pioneer Corps Association

c/o 23 Pnr Regiment RLC
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IT IS now over sixteen years since our Corps converged with the other Forming Corps' to form the Royal Logistic Corps, it is pleasing therefore to report that the Association is standing the test of time and still going strong.

So far this year we have recruited over eighty new members, some who served during World War 2, many from the National Service days of the Fifties and a great number from the Sixties and Seventies who for one reason or another failed to join when they were serving.

Another indicator of the strength of the Association was the fantastic number who attended this year's Reunion Weekend in July, even through the Weekend was billed as a small scale affair because of the operational deployments of 23 Pioneer Regiment. 285 sat down for a carvery meal in the Place2Be (Dining Room) and it is estimated that over 400 attended the Sergeants Mess afterwards. A total of 229 beds had to be booked, which, I believe, is a record.

During the Weekend, for the first time, we had a Veterans v Servers football match organised by Keith Burrows who still thinks he is as good as he was whilst serving! Thanks Keith, the match was a great success even though the Servers managed to win 9 v 2. It is hoped that this will now be a regular event at future Reunion Weekends so the Vets out there start your fitness programme now.

I know that there are many more out there

who are not members of the Association, if you have contact with former comrades please ask if they receive the Newsletters, if not please forward their details to me.

We now have ties in stock which show the second badge (crossed axes) as well as ties showing the first badge, details are shown on Page 2.

As usual with this Newsletter I am enclosing Christmas Draw tickets - unless you have previously indicated that you are unable to sell them. Please give the draw your fullest support as this is now the main source of income for the Association.

Once again I must request that all members inform me of change of address, following the distribution of the last Newsletter 48 were returned "Gone Away". Although since then a number have made contact and given their new address a large number have failed to do so and are therefore no longer on our distribution list.

In this Newsletter are details of the 23 Pnr Regt Medal Parade and March through Bicester on 28 November 2009, all members of the Association have been invited to spectate at these events, I hope to see you there.

Finally, on behalf of the Chairman and all members of the Council may I take this opportunity of wishing you all a very Happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Norman Brown

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PAST EVENTS



■ AFTER the disappointment of having to cancel the meeting of the Royal Pioneer 39/93 Club in Oct 08 it was of great delight to be visiting the Red Lion at Fareham again this year on 20 March 2009.

We arrived at different times during the afternoon of Friday and members and in some cases their wives travelling from Yorkshire, Leicestershire, Worcestershire, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, London and not forgetting our local lads from Hampshire.

A short meeting took place on Friday night in the reception room of the hotel where a presentation of a framed print of Pioneers on Sword Beach was made to hotel Manager Nick Miles as a mark of appreciation of the hotel's support to the Club.

Later a party was made very welcome at what used to be the Royal British Legion Club but is now a Social Club. Food was at hand for those that wanted it and, like memories of old after raising a kitty, no-one went thirsty. One poor soul Dennis from London, after arriving at the venue and bleary eyed after not much sleep due to overwork and quite a few drinks picked a joint of beef in the raffle but later thought he had chosen a bottle. The beef needless to say went to a needy home, the Chairman's partner Beryl!

Saturday was spent as an open day with members doing pretty much as they liked. Our party caught a bus to Gosport and then the ferry to Portsmouth and a sight-seeing walk-about, finishing off at the Maritime Club.

The main event took place at the Red Lion on Saturday night with fifteen sitting down to an excellent three-course meal with our statuette "Working Pioneers" taking pride of place centre table. The support of Mr Norman Brown and his wife representing the RPC Association was much appreciated, as was members of the Royal Signals and Royal Navy. In his absence, due to ill health, a Certificate of Appreciation was made available to be forwarded to Mr Dennis Reeves for his support and concern for the 39/93 Club and its membership.

Sunday morning brought to a close another memorable get together with many tales and escapades of times gone but there are always strangers that are fascinated and eager to listen especially to some of the skeletons that emerge from members past.

At each meeting our numbers get smaller. If you are reading this the probability is that you are a Pioneer and if so and you could use a good break with good company and pleasant surroundings give Les Rowley a call for more detailed information on 01628 890913.

■ ON 11 July 2009 the Royal Pioneer Corps Association Standard (South East London - Bromley and Kent Branch) was paraded at the Cenotaph in Whitehall for the Belgium National Day Parade by Mr D Turner.

Other standards on Parade were the Union Flag, British Army Association (Bexleyheath Branch) and the Royal West Kent's (Bromley Branch). Wreaths were also laid on behalf of the above Associations.

97 year Pioneer gets his badge

Magnus landed on D-Day with 75 Company



■ Maj Donnell being presented with the Veterans Badge by Councillor Michael Huscroft Picture: Supplied

MAJOR Magnus O'Donnell aged 97 a resident at Rosemount Care Home, West Monkseaton, North Tyneside who landed on the beaches of Normandy on 6th Jun 44 with 75 Company PC, being presented with the Veterans Badge by Councillor Michael Huscroft Chairman North Tyneside Council.

The presentation took place on Fri 26 Jun 09 during Armed Forces Week at a concert & buffet attended by veterans with their partner/carer organised by the Forest Hall Branch TRBL and North Tyneside

Veterans Committee at Forest Hall Ex-Servicemens' Institute Club.

The RAOC Association (Newcastle Branch) meets on the last Wednesday of each month at 2000 hrs (except December), at The Royal British Legion (Newcastle Central) Branch & Club, West Jesmond, near to the Metro Station. All members of the RLC and former Corps are most welcome to join the branch and 'keep' their own Corps Identity.

Further details can be obtained from Maj (Retd) EW Campbell (0191) 2680625 or annaecampbell@tiscali.co.uk

Spot the cuneo mouse

CUNEO painted 'Sword Beach' which shows the activities of the pioneers who were among the first British troops to land on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Sword Beach was the codename of one of the five main landing beaches in Operation Neptune, the initial assault phase of Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. By 1st August 1944 there were over 35,500 pioneers in Normandy. D-Day + 79 there were 231 Coys and over 68,000 men.

In most of his paintings Cuneo hid a small mouse (sometimes lifelike, sometimes cartoon-like) which was his trademark and somewhere in this newsletter we have hid a Cuneo mouse!

They can be difficult to detect, and many people enjoy scouring his paintings to find one.

Did you spot the Mouse in the April 2009 Newsletter? It was a fairly hard one to spot and was on page 29 inside a pint glass, in the top right photograph.

The winner was Phill Keech his prize will be in the post shortly. Phill says "it took ages to find but was good fun searching".

Can you spot the mouse in this issue of the newsletter? (and the one on this page and page 49 does not count!). We

will make it slightly easier for you this time.

The first person that emails me with the location of the mouse will win a prize!





■ Association members on parade on Saturday morning

Picture: Paul Brown

Pioneer reunion weekend

Over 400 members attended the reunion weekend at Bicester in July

ONCE again the weather stayed fine for the many Pioneers to return to what is now the home of the Pioneers, Bicester.

Although advertised as a small scale affair because of the operational deployments of 23 Pnr Regt RLC, more ex Pioneers attended than ever before, somehow we managed to find 229 beds.

As usual the weekend started with a "Bring a Boss" in the Cpls Club. Following this all moved down to the Sgts Mess for a fish and chips supper. Thankfully, the weather was warm which allowed everyone to use the lawns of the mess where 3 marquees had been erected. Tales of yesterday were told (and re-told!) and friendships were rekindled and new friends made. For many this was their first Reunion, these first-timers included a WW2 Veteran and many who had served in the National Service days of the fifties.

The Church Service on the Saturday morning had to be delayed until 1115 hrs as the Regimental Padre was deployed with the Regiment in Cyprus and we had to use the services of a Priest from Bicester. This was probably just as well as it gave everyone the opportunity of a lie in and a late breakfast after the festivities of

the night before. It was certainly a spectacular sight to see so many Veterans march to the War Memorial with Mr Ian Dewsnap giving the orders whilst Mr John Hatfield carried the Standard. Even the serving soldiers were impressed with the standard of drill! Mr George Pringle laid a wreath on behalf of all Association members whilst a young soldier from 23 Pnr Regt RLC laid a wreath on behalf of the Regiment.

This was followed by a chance for all Association members to view the new medal room in the Offrs Mess. At the Annual General Meeting, Maj J Hall, OC Rear Party 23 Pnr Regt RLC and Lt Col S Caldwell, CO 168 Regt RLC(V) both gave updates on their Regiments and Maj RB Corbey, Controller Benevolence RLC gave a report on the state of Benevolence for ex Pioneers.

The main event of the afternoon was a football match between the Servers and the Veterans. The Servers just managed to win (9-2) although it had been noted that they had been practising a great deal in the previous two weeks. They had also managed to sneak their star player back from Cyprus – WO2 Stephenson. It is hoped that this fixture will be a regular

event at future Reunions, the Veterans are already planning revenge for next year.

Saturday evening started with a carvery meal in the Place2B (unit dining room) for which 285 sat down. The Master Chef and his staff managed to feed everyone in a record time of 50 minutes. All agreed that it was a first class meal. This was followed by entertainment in the Sergeants Mess with either the Group or the Disco playing continuously from 2000 hrs to 0230 hrs. It is estimated that 400 attended this function, luckily it was another warm night and the lawns were again used.

A great number of letters and emails have already been received stating how enjoyable the weekend was and all are already looking forward to next years. It was nice to see our three WW2 Veterans from Liverpool with their personal chauffeur Mr Dave Nelson. Our sole In Pensioner at Chelsea, Mr Micky Hull, once again graced us with his scarlet jacket which proved to be a big hit with the ladies. Mr G Barrett travelled from Gibraltar and Mr T Simm from Denmark to attend, Mr F Lyle travelled from Dublin and Mr B MacDonald from Elgin. It is hoped that they and all others who attended enjoyed the weekend.

PAST EVENTS



■ THOUSANDS of people across the world paid tribute to the UK's past, present and future military personnel in the first ever Armed Forces Day, held on 27 June 2009.

Hundreds of events took place in many different communities around the world from London to Afghanistan and Edinburgh to Gibraltar.

Almost 200 events were held across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland along with military bases where UK Service personnel are deployed across the world celebrated in their own way.

More than 30,000 members of the public showed their support for Service personnel and veterans by attending the main national event taking place at Chatham's Historic Dockyard.

■ **ON SATURDAY 1 August 2009** four members of the British Army Association, which included Mr R Turner ex Royal Pioneer Corps, travelled to Ypres in Belgium to pay their respects to the thousands of British and Commonwealth troops who sacrificed their lives in the Great War 1914-1918 and have no known graves. Their names are carved with pride on the panels of the Menin Gate Memorial.

They arrived, un-invited, at 1930 hrs and paraded with the Standard of the Royal Pioneer Corps (South East London - Bromley and Kent Branch). The standard was carried by Mr D Turner and was given place of pride in the centre of the road.

All spectators were ushered to either side of the road to allow right of way for the wreath layers to lay their wreaths.

Six buglers from the Ypres Fire Brigade arrived to sound The Last Post and Reveille. The service commenced with the choir singing the hymn "Abide With Me". At the end of the singing, the Last Post sounded, standards dipped, wreaths laid (RPC, British Army Association, Rifle Regt and TRBL), exhortation spoken, 2 minutes silence, then Reveille.

The choir ending the Ceremony singing the National Anthem. Amongst the spectators there were three platoons from the 1st Rifles Regiment from Catterick, some who had just returned from Afghanistan and others ready to go.

We shook hands with them and wished them a safe return.

■ THE SAME four members from the above article travelled to the town of Nieupoort in Belgium on 2 August 2009 to attend The King of the Belgians Parade.

It was well supported. After the ceremony they paraded at the British Cenotaph in the presence of the British Consulate and many Belgian officials.

Wreaths were laid on behalf of the British Military Old Comrades Association present.

■ **ON SEPTEMBER 14 Sep 09** Lt Col John Starling and Mr Norman Brown were invited to the Emirates Stadium for the book launch of the book "From Dachau to D-Day" by the author Helen Fry (see book review on page 59).

The subject of the book Willy Field was a member of the Pioneer Corps before his transfer to the Royal Armoured Corps. He has been a season ticket holder for Arsenal for over fifty years! Willy and Helen are pictured on page 30.

We currently have vacancies

News update from 168 Pioneer Regiment

Personalities:

CO: Lt Col S J Caldwell
2IC: Maj J A Cattermull
Adj: Capt P J Metcalfe
RSM: WO1 (RSM) W McKenzie

OPERATION Entirety / Campaign Footing are two buzz phrases of the moment within the MOD. This is effecting how military units go about their training and 168 Pnr Regt are no different. We, like all TA Regts, have had our MTD budget cut and thus we have had to radically curtail our once very busy training programme, this said we have not rested on our laurels and we are still actively training to provide Pioneering capability for operations. In fact we currently have three soldiers, LCpl Welsh, Pte Clewer and Cfn Williams mobilised with the Joint Force EOD Gp in Afghanistan. They are primarily employed in the dangerous role of infantry escorts to the IEDD teams.

Despite the funding restrictions the Regiment has been busy. In February, 100 Pnr Sqn participated in Ex PIONEER WHEEL a vehicle borne map reading exercise that involved driving 200 kms between Newcastle and the Borders. Under the watchful eyes of Sgt Dury, the MT SNCO, two-man teams in Land Rovers followed by Sgt Derries with his LAD and supported by SSgt Walker, the SQMS, and Sgt Bradley with his team of chefs prepared for the road move. All safely navigated their way around the course and at the end it was Cpl Aitchison and LCpl Lynn who took the trophy as the most proficient drivers on the day.

SSgt Hutchinson, the Berwick Tp SNCO, organised an excellent weekend at Otterburn Training Area. The training involved basic skills including the use of pyrotechnics, moving across country, crossing obstacles, sentry duties and checking both live and dead enemy combatants. The exercise culminated in night time recce patrols led by the LCpls. Unfortunately we cannot show photos of the OC being swallowed waist deep in glutinous freezing mud or LCpl Smailes and Pte Stewart laid up for an hour in the cows manger; but one whiff was a constant reminder!

On a different note the officers, Warrant Officers and SNCOs within the Regiment formed up for an artisan weekend at Grantham in March. The opportunity was taken for an intimate fireside discussion between the CO, Comd 104 Log Sp Bde, Brig Alister Davis and our Hon Col, Maj Gen Tim Cross. The only difference being that there were 50 others listening in. The day ended with a Dinner Night where we were able to dine out Major Nick Parker, Maj Simon Hill, Capt Laurie Gomes and WO1 (RSM) John Hutchinson. It was a

fitting end to the great service that they have given to the Regiment. The following day football and hockey in the gym shook out any lingering cobwebs and the newly returned RSM, WO1 (RSM) Billy McKenzie, made his presence felt.

The shooting team, mentored by Major Alvin Ward but led by Cpl (now Sgt) Martin picked up Silverware from the Falling Plate at the national TA OSC – well done to them. The ski team, led by Lt Jessica Heathcote and assisted by WO2 Chas Chandler competed at the RLC Ski Championships for the first time in many years. Many thanks to 23 Pnr for lending us some much needed ski equipment.

We both assisted and competed at the annual UKFRA Mil Skills Competition held at Altcar. No silverware was collected but it was an excellent weekend in the sun with all ranks learning more about low level military skills and teamwork.

The first Regimental level weekend of the new training year in April enabled us to brush up on our OBUA skills at Whinny Hill in Catterick. Saturday saw the soldiers undergoing stands on basic tactics, booby trapping a location and house clearance drills, all organised by WO2 (SSM) Mick Headlam. The days training ended in a Regimental social evening with Maj Andrew Aitken organising one of his legendary quizzes, the CO's command group being narrowly beaten by an all ranks team from 104 Sqn. Sunday morning brought the first event in the CO's sporting challenge with a football competition, the final was hotly contested between 104 and 34 HQ Sqn, 104 Sqn being declared the victors. 104 Sqn returned to Whinny Hill in the summer where under the leadership of SSgt Roy Povey they undertook some much needed artisan repair to the facility including moving several hundred tonnes of soil using the new heavy plant equipment.

SSgt Mitch Mitchell was also hard at work after he built and, with the help of the TA Class 2 Pioneer Course, installed a new trim trail for Headley Court. It was specifically designed with those recovering from lower leg injuries in mind. The achievement is proudly recorded in the September issue of Soldier magazine. The RAF have already phoned to see if we can help them. It was nice to be able to host members of 23 Pnr at Grantham. They had the opportunity to practise some artisan skills and get some power tool skills signed off.

104 Pnr Sqn have been busy both socialising and studying. The Easter Extravaganza saw the children of families frantically searching for Easter eggs whilst parents enjoyed an excellent Coulby Carvery prepared by the Sqn chefs. April



■ Money raised on the Lands End to John O'Groats bike ride

Picture: 168 Regiment

saw a three hundred mile road trip to London for a study weekend facilitated by 210 Tpt Sqn, 151 Tpt Regt. The soldiers, many of whom had never been to the capital before, visited the Imperial War Museum, HMS Belfast and underwent a walking tour of the South Bank and Whitehall.

2Lt Keith Cahill represented the Regiment at a UKRFA selection weekend held in Chilwell. This saw him debating a wide range of military subjects with young officers from all three of the Reserve Forces. He impressed them so much that he has been selected to represent the UKRFA at an event in Norway in 2010; I hope the Norwegians can understand his Geordie twang.

Two MATTS weekends have been held at PWOG Bks in Grantham. Organised by Capt Pete Mitchener and SPSI WO2 Bob McInnes many of the soldiers are now well on the way to qualifying for their training bounty.

During the 2nd weekend an inter Sqn tug of war competition saw Cpl "Doc" Docherty and LCpl Patterson from 100 Pnr Sqn take on a 6 man team and were unlucky to lose after LCpl Patterson lost his footing when talking the strain, much to the very vocal dismay of Cpl Doc. The Regiment formed up on the Sunday for a medal presentation where Col Limb, Comd 2 LSG, presented WO2 Finemore, Sgt Thompson, LCpl Gibbons, Pte Gibb with their VRSMs. Pte Glen received his long overdue VRSM with clasp, Sgt Haynes his 2nd clasp and LCpl Dalton his 1st clasp, congratulations to them all. Also

SSgts Forrester, Guest and Mayers all received their much deserved promotions to WO2. At another weekend we were delighted to have Maj Gen Tim Cross, our Honorary Colonel, present WO2 Norman LeMarchel his framed warrant.

SSgt Bloom was the driving force behind an FTX at Beckingham which saw the national squadrons, 34 HQ Sqn and 101 Pnr Sqn train together. This was a resounding success which was followed up by a second exercise focussed on military skills training at the Dukeries Training Area.

The tenth anniversary of 104 Pnr Sqn reforming was celebrated by an all ranks dinner night in Coulby Newham TAC. The OC presented WO2 (SSM) Mick Headlam with a set of 4 silver port tumblers to commemorate the occasion.

Fund raising has continued apace. Maj Martin Collinson completed the Land's End to John O'Groats bike ride – more info to follow but to date he has raised over £1000 for Help for Heroes – if you wish to give visit the 168 Pnr ArmyNet website or go direct to www.justgiving.com/martincollinson 100 Pnr Sqn were once again collecting money for H4H. They supported the Northumberland County Show where they collected £1000 which when added to the money raised at the Scottish Volleyball Tournament came to £1200. Not to be outdone members of 101 Pnr Sqn and 34 HQ Sqn helped facilitate a charity cricket match at Aslockton with the local team playing a select 11 from the Emmerdale cast. A total of £10,500

was raised for Help For Heroes – a fantastic effort from all involved.

In July the Regiments Officers and Seniors attended Ex SILVER BEAVER, a 104 Log Sp Bde / 2 LSG study weekend in Driffield. The bonding session BBQ held on the evening where both Regulars and Territorial's came together for an evening of beer and food. Well done to all who followed the CO's lead and dressed in loud "Hula Hula" shirts, a cracking night was had by all.

In the end financial constraints stopped the Regiment's planned move north, however it is pleasing to welcome those from Brambles Farm who have transferred to the Regiment. Finally I could not end my report without mentioning the Pioneer Reunion at Bicester. It was well attended with soldiers from every squadron in the Regiment as well as some former members now retired but definitely not forgotten – sadly, and to the relief of others, there are no photos!! A great weekend and many thanks to 23 Pnr Regt and the RPC Association for hosting such an inclusive event.

We currently have vacancies across the Regt within a wide range of disciplines. The Regt is also quite unique within the TA in that we have regional Sqns based in Middlesbrough and Cramlington with outstations in Hartlepool, Washington, Berwick and Hexham and we also have two national Sqns based in Grantham which recruit UK wide. So wherever you live and if you still have that Pioneering spirit give our recruiting officer, Capt Alan Pickering, a call on 01642 597999.

FUTURE EVENTS



■ THE FIELD of Remembrance will open on Thursday 5 November 2009 at 1100 hours, when a short service will be given.

Members attending the planting of crosses at the Corps Plot (no 134) are asked to arrive by 1030 hrs.

All would be prudent to bring suitable identification as entrance to the Field will involve security checks.

All those attending must be prepared to stay until the reviewing party has departed the Field, the use of large 'intrusive' camera equipment is not allowed.

The Field will be open from 9am to 5.30pm until Saturday 7 November 2009.

Following the Field of Remembrance a 'London Lunch' is to be held.

■ A LONDON lunch will follow the Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey on Thursday 6 November 2009.

It will be held in the Marquis of Westminster, Warwick Road, London (approx 400 yards from Victoria Station).

Bookings can be made to Secretary, Royal Pioneer Corps Association, c/o 23 Pnr Regt Royal Logistic Corps, St David's Barracks, Graven Hill, Bicester, Oxon, OX26 6HF.

The cost will be £15 per head.

■ LAST year 4,000 service veterans marched at the Cenotaph Parade, Whitehall of which 27 members were from the RPC Association. This year, on 8th November, we have been allocated 30 tickets; these can be obtained on application to the Association on a first come first served basis (it should be noted that 26 tickets have already been requested). Please note that only ex service personnel are allowed to march, wives/girlfriends may only attend as spectators (unless they themselves served).

Did you know the original Cenotaph was first prepared as a temporary wood and plaster structure for use as a saluting base in Whitehall during the First World War Victory Parade, held on the 19th July 1919. A decision was taken to re-erect the Cenotaph in a permanent form on the same site. The unveiling of the stone structure on the 11th November 1920 was combined with a ceremony to mark the passing of the body of the Unknown Warrior for re-burial in Westminster Abbey. The first of the annual ceremonies of remembrance took place at the Cenotaph on the same date the following year.

Following the Parade it has become the custom for all marchers to have a meal and a drink in the Civil Service Club, Old Scotland Yard (located 250 yards from Whitehall).

■ THE 63rd Past and Present Officers Dinner will be held in the Officers' Mess, 23 Pioneer Regiment Royal Logistic Corps, Bicester on Friday 27 November 2009.

Bookings can be made at any time (by 10 Nov 09) to Secretary, Royal Pioneer Corps Association, c/o 23 Pioneer Regt Royal Logistic Corps, St David's Bks, Graven Hill, Bicester, Oxon, OX26 6HF.

The cost will remain at £20 per head.

Why not stay overnight and watch the Medal Parade and Freedom of Bicester Parade on Saturday 28 November 2009.

Busy times

Latest news from 23 Pioneer Regiment RLC



■ 206 Squadron in Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Squadron

JULY BEGAN with the annual Pioneer Weekend celebrations and even though the Regiment was spread from Bicester to Basra via Nicosia and Helmand, the members of the Regiment currently deployed on Op TOSCA, were able to organise (thanks to in no small part to Staff Sergeant Cheung and Sergeant Shillito) a celebration day at Ledra Palace Hotel. The day set aside for the festivities began with a games morning, followed by a Regimental barbeque. The games morning involved a team from the Officers mess, Sergeants mess, and the junior ranks taking part in football, volleyball, water polo and crazy golf against one another. But when the smoke had cleared and the debris of battle moved, it was the members of the Officers mess who emerged victorious.

Getting back to the nitty gritty (i.e. work), Private's Gibbs, Murray, Jobe, Charlton, Davies, Wisbey, Standing, Taylor and Carter were attached to 21 Squadron RE detachment, who are currently serving with the Regiment on Op TOSCA, to complete an essential task to secure a

vulnerable point on the United Nations Buffer Zone by completing important key point defence wiring. This work provided security for an area plagued by the illegal movement of foreign nationals through the UN Buffer zone across the border.

A number of individuals have had the chance this month to escape Ledra Palace Hotel and life on the Buffer zone in favour of the United Nations Roulement Adventure Training Team (UNRATT) centre in Dhekelia Garrison. The UNRATT centre offers a number of activities which force the individuals out of their comfort zone, whether it be through horse riding, rock climbing, mountain biking, snorkelling or cliff jumping.

Another course offered at the UNRATT centre in Dhekelia is Freefall Parachuting, which has been a highlight for strange individuals who enjoy jumping out of a perfectly serviceable aircraft. SSgt Cheung was one such individual, at least until he reached the door of the plane on his first jump, when he quickly re-evaluated his decision. The good news is



■ Mobile Force Reserve practice riot control, Cyprus.

Picture: Paul Brown

that they were able to finally loosen his grip on the door of the plane once it landed.

The Regimental Colonel PJ McCall and the Corps RSM WO1 Lowe visited the Regiment in Ledra Palace Hotel midway through the month where they had the opportunity to conduct a tour of the UN buffer zone while also spending time with the RLC soldiers who patrol it on a daily basis. Each troop had the opportunity to show Colonel McCall and RSM Lowe their particular area of Buffer Zone. The visit was a great success with both being suitably impressed with the professionalism and determination shown by the soldiers and officers of the Regiment in conducting the work in Cyprus.

September has seen the regiment begin to prepare for their handover takeover with 27 Regiment and their subsequent return to Bicester at the end of the month. This began with a two week range package which saw a 98% pass rate in both APWT CI and LSW APWT CI. Once this was finished the soldiers turned their attention to preparing for 27 Regiment RLC by sending a training team back to the UK in order to evaluate the pre-deployment training undertaken by 27 Regiment.

Even though the Regiment's attention was on the arrival of the new unit, there was still time for the regimental football team to travel to RAF Akritiri in order to compete for the Carter Cup, the British forces completion on island. After a long day of competition the team was

triumphant after beating teams such as RAF Akritiri (current British forces Cyprus champions) and 2nd Battalion Lancashire Regiment who won the competition last year.

Aside from the fun and military training the focus has remained on the UN Buffer Zone, and in true Pioneer spirit the soldiers are determined to finish the tour in the same manner they began it, and to coin a phrase 'it's our buffer zone and until we hand it over to 27 regiment we will control whatever happens there. And on that note, the fact is that this UN Sector 2 Buffer Zone has had the least number of incidents ever on record because of the dominance and professionalism of the Pioneers.

206 Sqn have said their fond farewells to Helmand Province as they leave their role as the MASTIFF Group for 19 Light Brigade after a hard 6 months. A short stopover in Cyprus was enough to reacquaint themselves with home comforts and whet their appetite for the real thing. They finally arrived in Bicester to a warm welcome from friends and family.

The prayers and the best wishes of Pioneers past and present are with Pte Josh Campbell and his family in Selly Oak Hospital.

206 Pnr Sqn (Mastiff Group) by Major Mowle, OC Mastiff Group

The Squadron has been involved in many different tasks which have required flexibility, adaptability and more than a degree of patience. Operation MAR

LEWE, designed to push the insurgents out of Yatinchay (a long term haven for them) and permit the return of owners and farmers to the area saw the Mastiff Group in BG(NW) contributing to almost every aspect in some form including providing the initial Fix of the Taliban forward positions alongside the Recce Platoon from 2 RRF to give B Coy 2 RRF and A Coy 2 R Welsh to push to the south of Yatinchay; protection for Battle Group Tac Headquarters; escort of the logistic support, IEDD, Afghanistan Security Forces and Brigade Recce Force and subsequent overwatch to the south of Yatinchay before proving and clearing safe routes for the sustainment of the new patrol bases and checkpoints. Reports on the internet and newspapers seemed to mention everyone involved less the Pioneers, but I can assure you that we were there! Elements of the Sqn now find themselves back down south to stand the gap since the departure of the 2 R Welsh Warrior Armoured Fighting Vehicles.

In the south of Helmand Province, 5 Troop have been supporting the major brigade operation designed to set conditions for the forthcoming elections and the new variant of Mastiff is still a source of debate. "They've got no guts!" is a phrase often heard from the drivers but the protection afforded to the crews is still unmatched.

I am shortly due to be succeeded in the appointment as OC 206 Sqn and Mastiff Group by Maj Nathan Smith. When I took over command I told everyone in the Sqn that being in command at whatever level,

FUTURE EVENTS



■ **23 Pioneer Regiment RLC is to hold a Medal Parade and Freedom of Bicester Parade on Saturday 28 November 2009.**

The Medal Parade is to be held in the morning when members of the Regiment will be presented with their operational medals from their various deployments in 2009. (Iraq, Afghanistan and with the UN in Cyprus).

In the afternoon the Regiment will march through Bicester Town with 'Bands playing and bayonets fixed'.

The Regiment have kindly invited all Association members to watch these events.

To ascertain numbers of spectators at the Medal Parade it would be appreciated if you could inform RPC Association if you intend to attend.

■ **WARRANT Officers and SNCO's Ladies Dinner** night will once again be held in the WOs' and Sgts' Mess, 23 Pioneer Regt Royal Logistic Corps on Saturday 28 November 2009. Full details have been circulated to members in the Club's Newsletter.

Once again this event will be a joint Ladies and Generation Dinner Night as this proved so popular last year. This gives members the opportunity to bring their parents, grand-parents or children (if they are over the age of 18).

For those who attended last year's event and would like a CD containing photographs of the evening should contact the Club Secretary, c/o RPC Association. This will be provided at no cost.

Why not attend early on the Saturday morning and watch both the Medal Parade and Freedom of Bicester Parade.

■ **SOME former Officer Cadets from Intake 28 of the RMS Sandhurst in 1960-61 are arranging a 50th Anniversary Reunion for the members of that intake, to include former Cadets, Instructors and Staff with their wives or partners.**

This is to take place at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst on Saturday 23rd January 2010 at 1200-1600 hours.

The former Cadets of Intake 28 will now be aged between 67 and 69

Further details and a booking form can be obtained from RPC Association.

■ **RPC ASSOCIATION Reunion Weekend** is to be held, once again, at St David's Barracks, Bicester on the 2nd-4th July 2010.

The Veterans v Servers football match at the last Reunion proved so successful that it is intended to hold another next year. As the Servers won the match 9 v 2 it would be appreciated therefore if you Veterans out there would practice prior to the weekend.

The programme for the weekend together with a booking form will be issued in the April 2010 Newsletter.

Accommodation will be supplied, as usual, on a first come first served basis, it is likely that some members will have to be accommodated in St George's Barracks at Arncott (some six miles from the camp), however, transport will be provided.

A CD containing photographs of this year's Reunion can be obtained from RPC Association at a cost of £2.



■ **Regimental rugby team practising for the Akrotiri 10's, Cyprus.**

Picture: Paul Brown

is the ultimate privilege, and particularly so when on operations. Although rank brings with it authority, I am under no illusion that I have a personal right to be followed by those under my command. I am therefore grateful to all those, regardless of rank or trade, who have worked their socks off and done everything that I have asked of them since I have been in command of the Sqn. The wives, parents, siblings and girlfriends of the officers and soldiers under my command should be proud of them – I certainly am. Afghanistan is a harsh and hazardous operational theatre to work in and places great demands on a daily basis on the soldiers who operate here. I could not have asked for more and will remain ever grateful for the loyalty I have received from the Sqn and the support that families and friends at home have provided to their loved ones; the effect of which can never be underestimated. I also thank the Sqn for their continuous good humour .. and

of course, Cpl Greaves, for his very tall tales which are a constant source of amusement for all!

Op Tosca - Military Skills Competition

The bi-annual United Nations Forces in Cyprus (UNFICYP) Military Skills Competition took place on 27 May 09. The competition drew entries from 9 teams from the contributing Sector nations plus a HQ UNFOCYP team, a UN Police (UNPOL) team and of our course a 23 Regiment MFR Team. The competition held within the UNPA is considered one of the key events of the year and requires an enormous amount of work to facilitate. As well as entering a team the soldiers of the MFR were required to run stands and officiate events as well as providing route markers and refreshments along the way. Special mention must go to the Senior PTI, Sgt Andy Tibbs, who as well as coordinating the 5km endurance race was seen bounding around the assault course



■ Sgt Andy Tibbs gives a lesson on riot control techniques to the Mobile Force Reserve, Cyprus.

Picture: Paul Brown

no less than 6 times! The competition comprised of 8 events which included Map Reading, Shooting and Weapons Skills, Command Tasks, Operational Info, Incident Reaction, Driving, the Endurance race and, of course, the Assault Course final.

The competition commenced at 0600 hrs and concluded at 1800 hrs so it was a long and draining day for staff and competitors alike. The event was extremely well supported with many spectators making the trips from their Sectors to support their respective teams and as always the Sector 1 (Argentinean) band were particularly vociferous in their support.

The final stand of a long, exhausting day was the dreaded Assault Course. The course, littered with challenging obstacles had to be negotiated carrying a full 'jerry can' weighing approx 20 Kg and a full ammunition container. The obstacles included a 12ft high wall and several extremely small tunnels! Historically many previous competitions have been decided over the assault course so each team were determined to be the fastest through the course. As the crows swelled and the Argentine band kicked into full swing each team took their turn to negotiate the course. It was fair to say that no single team left anything out there and congratulations must go to the Sector 4 team and also Sector 2 team, led by Capt Pascoe. In the end it was left to the Force Commander to announce the winning teams which were as follows:

1st - Sector 4 (Argentine)

2nd - Sector 2 (23 Regt RLC)

3rd - MFR (Mobile Force Reserve)

23 Pioneer Regt RLC Rugby Team

Over and above their operational commitments, the members of the Regimental Rugby team have also been putting in the hard hours of training and the performances that they have delivered have been nothing short of outstanding. Following a good win in a warm-up game against the Kyrenia Pumas in the North, the team travelled to Paphos. An undefeated side who boasted thirteen of the Cypriot National Squad in their side, the Paphos Tigers had every intention of teaching the new boys on the island a lesson. Unfortunately (for them) once the red and green of 23 had scored fifty unanswered points before conceding a few at the end of the game, the reverse had been done, and the Pioneers had put down a marker for the Akrotiri Tens a month later. Following a month of hard work on conditioning, acclimatisation and skills, the team arrived in Akrotiri champing at the bit. Their pool games were a master class in running rugby, with RAF Akrotiri, BRNC Dartmouth and RAF Benson going down 31-0, 69-0 and 42-0 respectively. The quarter finals saw RAF CCU battered 45-0 before a sterner test appeared in the semi-finals, in the form of the Tigers of 2 PWRR. A close fought contest saw the Pioneers eventually run out winners 5-0, but this was a step-change in the level of competition. Further, through they had reached the final without conceding a single point, the

other semi-final had ominous portent. A team of professionally contracted rugby players, the Public School Wanderers (PSW), all with international caps to their names, including three of the current England Sevens Team, put 7 RHA to the sword with a display of fast, fluid and aggressive rugby.

There was a long break between semis and final, owing to a player being knocked unconscious in the Plate Final (thankfully it was reported that he was fine), and this did nothing to ease the tension for the players. Eventually, at 2230 hrs, 23 Pnr Regt took the field to face PSW with every player, and spectator, with adrenalin coursing through their veins. The final was scrappy for the first five minutes before the PSW winger, with a blazing turn of pace, scored in the corner, to be followed shortly thereafter by another. The Pioneers almost struck back immediately, a charge for the line being stopped inches short by a last gasp effort by the PSW. After that, while they fought valiantly and to the end, the Pioneers were unable to prevent the PSW scoring three more tries and finishing the eventual Tournament victors. In a tribute to our boys, the PSW coach asked if three of the Pioneers would be permitted to play for his team on an upcoming Russia tour, and LCpl Kava was awarded Player of the Tournament. In the bar afterwards, one of the PSW players summed it up; after being told that the Pioneers trained an average of 6 or 7 hours per week, he replied. "You're pretty good for that - we do that much each day".



■ **AS USUAL** I am enclosing with this Newsletter Association Christmas Draw tickets unless you have already indicated that you are unable to sell them or do not wish to receive them.

Like me you probably receive many requests to purchase prize draw tickets, especially at Christmas, and I know it is impossible to respond to every one of them, but you need to be in it to win it as they say. I hope you will look favourable upon our draw as the income from this helps us to run the Association.

Please return your counterfoils, together with your remittance to the RPC Association by 15 Dec 09, cheques should be made payable to RPC Association.

Your generous support in the past has been invaluable and I look forward to an even better response to our 2009 Christmas Draw - thank you in anticipation.

■ **MAY** we take this opportunity to thank all who purchased Derby Draw tickets. Congratulations to the winners. Results:-

- 1st Prize £1000 - Mr R McWilliams
Ticket No 16091
- 2nd Prize £500 - B Raynor
Ticket No 07321
- 3rd Prize - Mr Lake
Ticket No 16727
- 4th Prize - Mr P Ennis
Ticket No 06570
- 5th Prize - Mr L H Augustin
Ticket No 25169

■ **DURING** a recent visit to Malta Mr Peter Linford presented the National War Museum, Valletta with a collection of Royal Pioneer Corps memorabilia. This included Corps tie, cap badges, shoulder titles, plaque and copies of the Association Newsletter.

Although Pioneers served on the island for only a short period in 1943 they did have 87 Group PC and 4 Mauritian Companies (1501,1502, 1505 and 1507), 4 Basuto Companies (1921, 1923, 1949 and 1950) and 1 Arab Smoke Company (612 Palestine) Company. In the Church of St Paul in Malta there is a memorial to 87 Group Pioneer Corps.

■ **EACH YEAR** the Carrington Drum is presented to the unit (Regular and Territorial) who raises most for the ABF.

This year was the most successful yet raising £250,000 from 15 entries. The winning unit was 47th Regiment Royal Artillery from Thorney Island in Hampshire who raised over £26,000. Runners up were 23 Pioneer Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps who raised over £24,000.

■ **THOUSANDS** of World War 2 vets will benefit from a Lottery-funded scheme, enabling them to revisit the places where they served their country.

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) has pledged to fund veterans, spouses, widows and carers resident in the UK and Ireland to make commemorative trips to mark anniversaries throughout 2009 and 2010.

The Heroes Return programme will fund trips to theatres of war around the globe. Applicants can apply for a fixed amount grant of between £150 and £5,500 depending on the number of people taking part and the chosen destination.

Further details can be obtained on Helpline on 0845 00 00 121.

Aden Pioneer

Bombed on the beaches by Italian bombers



■ Mr Ahmed Saleh Amiri with our resident historian Lt Col John Starling

Picture: Norman Brown

ON 18 August 2009, Lt Col John Starling and Mr Norman Brown visited the Bordesley Muslim Centre in Birmingham to interview Mr Ali. He had served in the Aden Pioneers from 39 to 46. This was a unique opportunity to interview a Native Pioneer about his War Service. The War History records the formation of 3 Companies and the involvement of the first two units as part of the Aden Striking Force in the invasion of Italian occupied Somalia in Mar 1941.

Mr Ali came to the notice of the Association as the MOD had no records of his service and luckily the nominal roll of Aden Pioneers is held in the Association Archives. The roll lists some 2,260 men who served as Aden Pioneers.

He was born in Aden on 31 Dec 1917. His date of birth may not be accurate and generally only the year was recorded. He was a very alert and sprightly 92 year old man who had a very good memory. Unfortunately his English was limited and an interpreter, Mr Abid Quasim, attended the interview.

Although the nominal roll and his military driving license shows his name as AMIRI it transpired that this was a tribal name and the name of the head of his tribe. Other personnel in the unit are shown as YAFAI, which was the area of ADEN in which they resided.

In 1939 ADEN was a key coaling station and of strategic importance as it controlled access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. There were many troops stationed in the Protectorate from South Africa, India, Pakistan, Africa etc. Some of these were Pioneers.

In Oc 1939 the tribal head announced that Britain was at War and needed assistance and asked for volunteers. The 'volunteers' went into Aden and enlisted at the local barracks. They were accommodated in the barracks and undertook basic training. Three uniforms were issued as well as a rifle. This is

interesting as at this stage in the BEF only one uniform and no rifles were issued to the British soldiers.

It seems that the basic unit was the Pioneer section of 27 men and 1 cook under an Arab Sergeant. He was proud to state they were fed meat every day. Work consisted of guarding key installations and dock work although ammunition was not handled by the Arab units. Mr Ali commented on the routine inspections which could result in extra drill and CB (Confined to Barracks). Inspections were undertaken by 'white' officers. He commented that although the Arabs volunteered for active service on many occasions it was not accepted and he found it ironic that the white officers went off to be 'killed' whilst the Arab labourers and other support personnel got 'rich.' He was earning 15 Rupees a month.

Mr Ali volunteered to serve in Somaliland and he embarked on 'el haqual Amin' (Justice & Truth) and sailed from Aden. They landed on the beach adjacent to BARBARQ. The company landed in small boats and waded ashore. He was carrying his full equipment and rifle. On arrival on the beaches it seemed to be in complete chaos with many troops milling around with nothing to do. The War Diaries suggest that the infantry advanced and captured the nearby port taking the Italian Garrison prisoners. They were escorted back to Aden by a different Pioneer unit. Mr Ali remembers sitting in the sand dunes under air attack from Italian Bombers dropping high explosives on the beaches. After two day he re-embarked on the 'Regal' and sailed back to Aden. On return to Aden he trained to be a driver with 212 Group. This enabled him to receive a skilled wage of 50 Rupees a month. Following his discharged to was employed as a civilian driver by the RAF until 1956 when he moved to Birmingham where he worked as a driver until retirement in 1992.



After the Battle

The grisly task of grave registration

Report: Maj M Wilson
Picture: Maj M Wilson

WHEN reading my story I would like you to bear in mind the uniqueness of this particular task and the background against which it was set. I have attempted to combine the official with the personal - in other words, whilst giving you the necessary detailed information you require, I will also try to describe the experience as a whole, in more personal terms. I hope you find it of some interest.

Even now, it is difficult to grasp the enormity of what happened. In this, the last quarter of the 20th century, we went to war and fought on a scale and in a manner not seen by our country since the Second World War. A naval task force of 100 ships sailed 8,000 miles to the South Atlantic to engage an enemy invasion force on the last outpost of a forgotten empire.

Planes, helicopters and missiles, many never deployed in combat before, were thrown into a battle which tested them to the limit of their ability, and in the course of this conflict over 1,000 men lost their lives. The whole incident, from the invasion of the Falkland Islands by Argentina on 2 Apr 82 to the day she surrendered them on 14 Jun 82 was watched avidly on television throughout the world, but particularly in the UK, as though it were some large sporting contest.

Throughout this period the whole of the UK was in a state of "Falklands Mania" and I am sure that you, like all members of the unit I was serving with at the time, tuned in to every news broadcast, radio or TV, read every newspaper report and spoke of little else but the progress of the Task Force. Most of us, for whatever reason, were desperately keen to get down there, especially when 5 Brigade was being prepared. I know I was, although I certainly do not purport to be a hero.

I was actually stood by twice to go down. Once to organise labour to assist the Sappers in building an airstrip somewhere

in Chile to enable us to get more aircraft in, but this fell through apparently for political reasons. Pity! I was then warned off to go down with 5 Brigade to provide labour to clear up the mess, particularly the airstrip, afterwards. Again this fell through.

So when eventually, one day in early Jul 82 I was summoned to Group HQ and asked whether I would like to undertake a "special" task in the Falklands, I somewhat sceptically said "Yes", although I could not imagine what "special" tasks could be left since the conflict had been over for a month. I was rather taken aback when the task was explained to me, but in accepting it I thought of nothing else but getting down there and it was only on the return journey to my unit that I began to think in depth about what I had taken on.

One of the most common topics of heated discussion and comment at that time in the media and no doubt in households, pubs and British Legion Clubs throughout the country was the question of repatriation of the British dead from their original burial sites in the Falkland Islands, culminating in the Prime Minister's decision on 8 Jul 82 to offer next of kin the option of repatriation. I had naturally followed the progress of this emotive subject and had formed my own conclusions, little thinking that I was to become directly involved.

And here it was, I was to be the Second in Command of an Army Graves Registration Team (AGRT), which was to undertake the recovery of the British servicemen from their temporary burial sites on the Islands. All this was racing through my mind during the return journey to Long Marston and my feelings were a mixture of great excitement and anxiety.

Excitement at the thought of actually getting to the Falklands and seeing all for myself and anxiety over the nature of the task. Although I had had dealings with death in the past it had never been of the close and prolonged nature that my forthcoming duties were likely to entail.

As it was, over the next couple of months I had little time to dwell on such matters as I was to be kept rather busy in preparation and planning.

The initial MOD planning conference was held on 15 Jul when responsibility for the task was given to the Director of Army Pioneers and Labour, who selected Major John Robb to command the team and myself to be his second in command Registration Officer. In addition to Major Robb and myself, a team of a CSM and 9 junior ranks was chosen, from volunteers, from the UK Royal Pioneer companies. As well as my Registration duties I was to photograph all stages of the operation in colour whilst the CSM, in addition to his admin duties, was responsible for black and white photography. I was rather surprised at this, as neither the CSM nor I had any qualifications or experience, except for holiday snapshots, that fitted us for such a task. Still, be that as it may, we were told to get on with it! Also contracted to accompany the team were two civilian funeral directors for the specialist duties in preparing the bodies for coffining.

During the ensuing weeks diverse personalities, MOD branches and RN, Army and RAF organisations were contacted for advice and assistance in formulating the Operation Order and researching post records of such tasks.

This latter proved to be the most difficult undertaking as records of similar duties carried out in the past were scanty and those that did exist dated from the first and second world wars. With helpful advice from several sources, however, and most particularly from Mr Stewart Campbell MC, Director of Information Services with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, a plan of action was finally evolved as the basis for the Operation Order and the terms of reference were formulated. Briefly, these were: "The location, exhumation and identification of the bodies, the preparation and coffining of the bodies, the re-burial in the Falkland Islands of those remaining



there and the repatriation to the United Kingdom of the remainder."

At the end of July the Team drew Extreme Cold Weather clothing and equipment from 29 Mov Regt RCT at South Cerney and throughout August various other items necessary for the task were obtained. These included Foul Weather Clothing and rubber boots, which were to be used as protective clothing, not only against the elements but also for the task itself, surgical face masks, body bags, Union Flags, cameras, rolls of film, rolls of Hessian and a documentation pack complete with typewriter.

Concurrently, Messrs Mills and Jones, the Funeral Directors, were preparing their own equipment which included all the items necessary to set up a temporary embalming theatre and which, together with 90 coffins, were packed into two containers for shipping.

During the period of preparation John Robb and myself attended briefings by a number of officers, Army and RM, who were 'there' at the time, at which we were given details on the locations of the various temporary burial sites and other relevant information. The finishing touches were then put to the Operation Order and by mid-August the AGRT was ready to go and awaited only confirmation of date and method of movement.

On 2 September the 'HQ' element of the team, i.e. OC, 2IC, CSM, Clerk and the two Funeral Directors boarded MV STRATHEWE, a Merchant Navy vessel of some 12,000 tons which was to be our transport down, at Teesside. Also on board were the two containers and ancillary equipment. Whilst our journey was to be wholly by sea and to take three weeks, the remainder of the Team, led by Cpl Straw, departed by air from Brize Norton on 3 September, landed at Ascension Island on 4 September, transferred to MC NORLAND and finally arrived at Port Stanley eleven days later. For me, the journey down was one of great interest and happy memories.

The ship's Master, Captain Sam Household, was quite a character and thought nothing of sailing close-in and circumnavigating Madeira to afford us 'pongos' a good look, or of changing course in mid-ocean to follow a school of killer whales. The rest of the crew was equally as friendly, the bar was open 24 hours each day to cater for the watches and we had plenty of light reading.

Apart from two days out from the

Falklands, the weather was invariably good. Major Robb ensured that the good life didn't have too telling an effect on us by taking daily morning PT on the Monkey Deck, sessions which some of the crew soon joined, and this, together with our sun tans, enabled us to arrive at Port Stanley not only feeling, but looking, fit. Mind you, the weather for the last two days did its best to undo our healthy condition but by then we had our 'sea legs' and even the Force 9 gales were weathered without too much discomfort. We arrived at Port Stanley, on the evening of 25 September, getting our first look at Stanley in a glorious sunset with the peaks of Two Sisters, Tumbledown and Longdon visible.

Throughout the following week we established contact with HQ Land Forces Falkland Islands and learnt that the ship that had been dedicated to our task was the Royal Fleet Auxiliary SIR BEDIVERE, an LSL and sister ship to the SIR GALAHAD and SIR TRISTRAM of the Bluff Cove incident. SIR BELIVERE was presently out and about the Islands engaged in the collection and re-distribution of the vast amounts of ammunition, weapons and other paraphernalia still strewn about the Islands.

This gave the HQ element of the Team the opportunity to attend detailed planning conferences with the staff at HQ and of course to see the sites of Port Stanley itself, all of which necessitated our going ashore daily. I shall never forget the heart stopping moments of clambering up and down the rope ladder thrown over the side of the STRATHEWE, into or out of the Combat Support Boats or 'Kiwi' launches bobbing about on the waves below. Grief! How steep and high the STRATHEWE's sides were and how small the boats below appeared! And all with umpteen layers of clothing but no Life Jackets!

Our efforts to look relaxed and undeterred whilst our white knuckled fingers clung for dear life to the rope ladder and our pale faces were contorted into what we fondly imagined were smiles never fooled the ship's crew, who seemed to be attracted to this daily demonstration like hungry vultures.

Winching up and down from ship to helicopter wasn't much more enjoyable either! My most abiding memory of that phase, however, is that of visiting the rest of our Team which, while awaiting our arrival, had been kept occupied by Major Daryl Ingle in assisting the Gurka and Royal

Engineers in ammunition and trench clearance along the Moody Brook Road and the Argentine entrenchments along Wireless Ridge. The sight of those trenches, still littered with countless rounds of ammunition, grenades, weapons, items of uniform, personal clothing, rosaries, diaries, letters and even 'dinky toys' was fascinating, and I could not help but feel some sympathy towards those, mostly, young men who had been virtually abandoned in this desolate and harsh environment for the best part of three months. Especially when we found the odd body.

We, the AGRT, were given strict orders not to touch Argentine bodies as the question of their repatriation was still under discussion at government level. As it turned out they were ultimately buried on the islands by a team of contracted civilians from UK. The Sapper Sergeant with us, an impressive and most helpful man, soon brought me back to earth through, when he described some of the 'booby traps' that had been left behind. He added emphasis to his description by removing various items from a trench, under which he found grenades I wonder if he noticed my rapid 'step back three paces'?

We transferred on board the SIR BEDIVERE on 2 October even though she was still involved in her ammunition collection and re-distribution.

So, while the ship stopped at various ports of call, which included Teal Inlet, Port San Carlos, Fox Bay and Roy Cove, the Team was given the benefit of a tour of both East and West Falklands and at the same time was able to make preliminary reconnaissance of the various temporary grave sites and to carry out partial excavation. We travelled by helicopter.

During this period we and the team were also prepared for the forthcoming climax of the whole operation - the actual exhumation of the bodies. We were given a series of lectures by one of the funeral directors and by Major Robb who had spent some time before leaving UK in visiting and working in mortuaries and undertakers' establishments. It was to prove to be time well spent.

On 11 October the HQ element of the Team was flown by Sea King helicopter to Estancia House, where Cpl Straw and the remainder of the Team were waiting, having been flown in from Port Stanley earlier that morning. At last the Team was





united and ready to commence the Task in earnest. Of the 255 British servicemen killed during the conflict, 81 had been temporarily buried on the Islands. 44 of these were at Ajax Bay near the old Refrigeration Plant that had been used as a Field Hospital (the Red and Green Life Machine as they called it) and that still had the infamous Argentine bombs lodged in it's ceiling. 29 bodies were at Teal Inlet, 4 at Estancia House and one at San Carlos Settlement.

The three remaining single graves were Goose Green, Port Howard and Darwin and were left undisturbed in accordance with the wishes of the next of kin. OK - that is the background - now the task itself.

As I mentioned, the SIR BEDIVERE was dedicated to the task and all of its facilities were at our disposal - you would not, of course, always have such facilities in a combat environment. For this phase of the operation various responsibilities were allocated to members of the Team. Major Robb took care of overall command and coordination; I undertook identification, registration and colour photography; CSM Downey provided the 'Q' and administrative support, as well as photographing all aspects of the operation in black and white; 5 Pioneers were to carry out most of the excavation, although all members helped out when not otherwise occupied; 2 to assist me in I.D. and registration, and 2 to remain on board the SIR BEDIVERE to assist the two morticians, who had set up their embalming theatre on the Tank Deck.

As for documentation, because we had found that the little documentation we came across of World War 2 Graves Registration, (we could find nothing relating to Korea) was not suitable for use today. I had to devise our own. I drew up 3 forms kept as simple as possible and called them "Exhumation Report", "Reburial Report" and "Repatriation Report", giving of course each individual's full details in each case, cross referencing between all three and with the Funeral Directors' contract numbers. They had a contract number for each body as they were paid by the body.

These home-made forms served the purpose as they subsequently satisfied the MOD and the Coroner on arrival in UK.

Numerous modes of transport were used for conveying the team and the dead to and from the SIR BEDIVERE, ranging from

helicopters, to Mexeflotes or the dedicated Combat Support Boat complete with Sapper crew. The method of transportation used usually depended on how near to the shore the Captain of the SIR BEDIVERE was able to anchor his ship, though on occasion the weather had its part to play. It was, to say the least, variable.

The majority of the dead had been buried in body bags, although a small number were wrapped in sleeping bags or blankets. Whichever the case, on exhumation each body was identified, registered and photographed; placed in a fresh body bag and then enclosed in a Mountain Rescue Bag for transportation to the ship where the Funeral Directors prepared the bodies for final coffining.

The funeral Directors, with the assistance of the ever helpful and efficient ship's engineering staff, set up modified ISO containers, to which power and water had been connected, for use as a workshop. Access to the shore was through the stern door. As each body was brought to the ship, it was transported along the Tank Deck by stretcher to the 'theatre' where Messrs Mills and Jones prepared the body to prevent further decay and to maintain stability for transportation. As each burial site was cleared and tidied up, the SIR BEDIVERE would sail on to the next location. Now, if all aspects of the operation had been quite enjoyable this phase was most certainly not.

As I mentioned, we had done our best to prepare ourselves for the actual moment of truth and it was as well that we had. But nothing can prepare you for the real thing and when at Estancia House, I opened up the first sleeping bag with the body of a young Royal Marine inside, it still came as shock to us all, not least of all, me! (Blue on Blue). The corpses were buried in mainly clay soil at depths varying between 3 and 6 feet. The bodies were at various stages of putrefaction and skin slip and it was not noticeable that those bodies that had been buried in sleeping bags or blankets or were fully clothed, were much better preserved than those buried naked in body bags. It was the opening of these plastic, non-porous body bags that was the most unpleasant part of the task.

The bodies were generally in a more advanced state of putrefaction and the smell on first opening the bags was unbearable - one had to make the slit with the scalpel and then step quickly away -

thereafter completely opening the bags was equally unpleasant as all the body fluids and rotting flesh, including, in some cases, dismembered limbs, in one case a head and in another just an unrecognisable mass of bits of flesh, were contained inside.

The bodies were then identified by comparison with the details on the identity disc, when found, the details on the outside of the body bag, where applicable, and with the list I held giving the position of each body in each grave.

Some difficulties were experienced in reconciling Field Records with body locations and in identifying some corpses but positive identification was eventually made in EVERY case. Some of the difficulties encountered were:

- a. Incorrect record of burial location.
- b. Incorrect marking of body bags, i.e. a different body in the bag to that recorded on the outside, but we were able to positively identify by the ID discs, luckily still attached to each body.
- c. Lack of ID discs in some cases.
- d. Difficulty in reading the RM bakelite discs which had deteriorated through contact with soil and human matter, i.e. body gasses. They now have metal discs.
- e. Difficulty in finding ID discs because of the combustion of the nylon cord used to secure discs to the body. This led to extremely unpleasant searches of body bags! Metal chain is now used in place of nylon cord.

I have already described the procedure thereafter for transporting the bodies to the SIR BEDIVERE, but I should say here that our task was not made any easier by the poor design of the body bags. The plastic material ripped easily, the plastic zips did not function properly and therefore we frequently had spillage of body fluids.

Furthermore, it was difficult to get some of the larger bodies into the bags and we literally had to lever them in my "flexing" the knees - which caused some distress to the Team. It is difficult to make detailed observations on the types of injury because of the deterioration of the bodies but it is worthy of note that there were a disproportionate amount of head injuries. There were two cases of partial cremation through direct missile hits on helicopters, two bodies that had been operated on and one that had a post mortem examination.

We wore protective foul weather clothing throughout the whole of this work



together with rubber boats, industrial gloves and surgical face masks. The latter, in all honesty, was more psychological as they did little to dispel the smell. At no time did we touch the bodies, body bags or any of the contents with our bare hands. The digging was carried out manually except for the initial excavation of the mass grave of 12 Para at Ajax Bay.

It had been originally forecast that the whole task of recovery and preparation for re-burial would take some 4 to 6 weeks, embalming four bodies a day - but in fact we completed it in 14 days. This was because the funeral directors had originally intended to follow the normal practice of embalming fresh corpses which usually takes about 2 hours and involves arterial injection into 3 sites. But because of skin slip and putrefaction the directors decided to carry out a much easier and short method to achieve a salvage and sanitary operation to prevent further decay and to maintain stability for transportation.

Once the bodies had been brought aboard they were placed on a trolley in the modified ISO container, stripped and identified. The head was wrapped in cotton wool and formaldehyde solution poured over. It was then covered by a plastic bag with the ID disc or other means of identity placed inside. The funeral directors fixed up a pump feeding pressure into bottles containing a formaldehyde solution which was pumped directly through the heart into the thorax, the abdomen and all limbs.

Thereafter, formaldehyde crystals were placed around the corpse as a dehydrating agent and this was then covered with clean wood shavings as an absorbing and stabilising agent and for packaging material. The body was then put back into its fresh body bag and placed in a PVC lined, oak veneered coffin. The coffin was sealed, a name plate fitted and covered in Hessian before being stored in a container.

To prevent any infected material, such as body fluids, soil etc being brought into the ship itself, the tank deck was sealed and access to the ship accommodation was possible only through one entrance.

The Tank deck was placed out of bounds to all personnel not involved in the operation. AGRT members had to wash their boots in trays of antiseptic on boarding the stern ramp, remove outer clothing in "outer" changing rooms and inner clothing in "inner" changing rooms and shower before entering the ship proper. Actually we also had an outer showering facility under which we showered in full protective clothing before removing it - thereby keeping it from getting too dirty or smelly as the operation went on.

Sea water hoses were used to wash the tank deck down several times a day and the effluent was drained out directly into the sea via one way valve scuppers. The concentration of formaldehyde on the tank deck was very high due to spillage and drainage and the documents of the 2 Pioneers working permanently were annotated accordingly because of the controversy at the time over the danger of such fumes.

This period of constant contact with the dead, in some cases badly mutilated, bodies was a sad and emotional time for all of us. Although our moral was high throughout and we endeavoured at all times not to become too morbid. It was noticeable as time passed, that the Team collectively grew increasingly serious and quiet, we completed the task in 14 days non-stop, so it is difficult for me to gauge what effects long term exposure to such dreadful sights would have on men.

I would imagine that one would soon discover whether one was suited for such duties and that in the case of those that were, there would be a gradual levelling off after an initial drop in moral and that one would eventually become hardened to it all in the manner of doctors, morticians, undertakers and the like.

Although, as previously mentioned, our behaviour sobered somewhat, none of the team suffered any short or long term psychological effects, except one nightmare by the youngest member of the team, Pte Leslie, just 18 years old, I myself felt no physical effects, except for one instance towards the end when, just for a moment the smell got the better of me and I started to retch. But a quick walk to the nearby sea shore soon put me to rights.

I did suffer one or two moments of the emotional kind. Once when I uncovered the remains of Lt Col H Jones, whom you will all no doubt know of and who I worked under for a while back in 1971, and once when I had to read a letter found on one of the bodies. It was from his wife telling him how much she missed him and of all the plans she and their families had for his return. As far as any long term physical effects go, only our team leader, Maj Robb, suffered any ill effects in that he developed a hepatitis/jaundice type infection afterwards in the UK. Rather strange as John, being in command and having numerous other things to worry about, probably had less contact with the dead than anybody else.

As an aside and a further injection into the question or repatriation of the dead, it was interesting to see the reaction of a number of the islanders who lived near the temporary burial sites, some of whom had tended the graves. Quite a few were visibly upset and one old lady in particular asked, tearfully, why we were moving "the boys" as they were resting in perfect peace where they lay. As we were at Teal Inlet, one of the most beautiful and peaceful spots in the Islands, we could not argue this logic.

At the end of this phase, on 28 October we tidied up the now empty temporary burial sites and burnt all out protective clothing. The site chosen for the military cemetery for those dead who were to remain in the Falklands was named "Blue Beach Military Cemetery" as it was located on one of the main British landing sites at San Carlos Settlement. October 25 was selected as the date for the remembrance and re-burial ceremony, chiefly because the then Secretary of State for Defence, Mr John Nott, was visiting the Islands at that time and would be able to attend.

The original, temporary cemetery (it has now been re-built) was constructed by men of 3 Sqn RE and 206 and 518 Coys RPC. It was fitting, therefore, that men from these units were to form the bearer parties, whilst the Queen's Own Highlanders provided the firing party, bugler and piper.

Rehearsals for the ceremony were carried out on 23 and 24 October and finally, on 25 October at about 0730 hours on a grey, raining morning, a Mexeflote slowly eased its way from the stern of the SIR BEDIVERE, which was anchored in San Carlos Water, and sailed for the jetty at San Carlos Settlement. On board were the fourteen dead who were to be re-buried in their final resting place that day, their coffins draped in Union Flags and guarded by members of the Team.

The ceremony, which was televised in the UK and world wide, was a moving and fitting farewell to the brave men who had given their lives for those Islands and amongst the many wreaths laid was one by

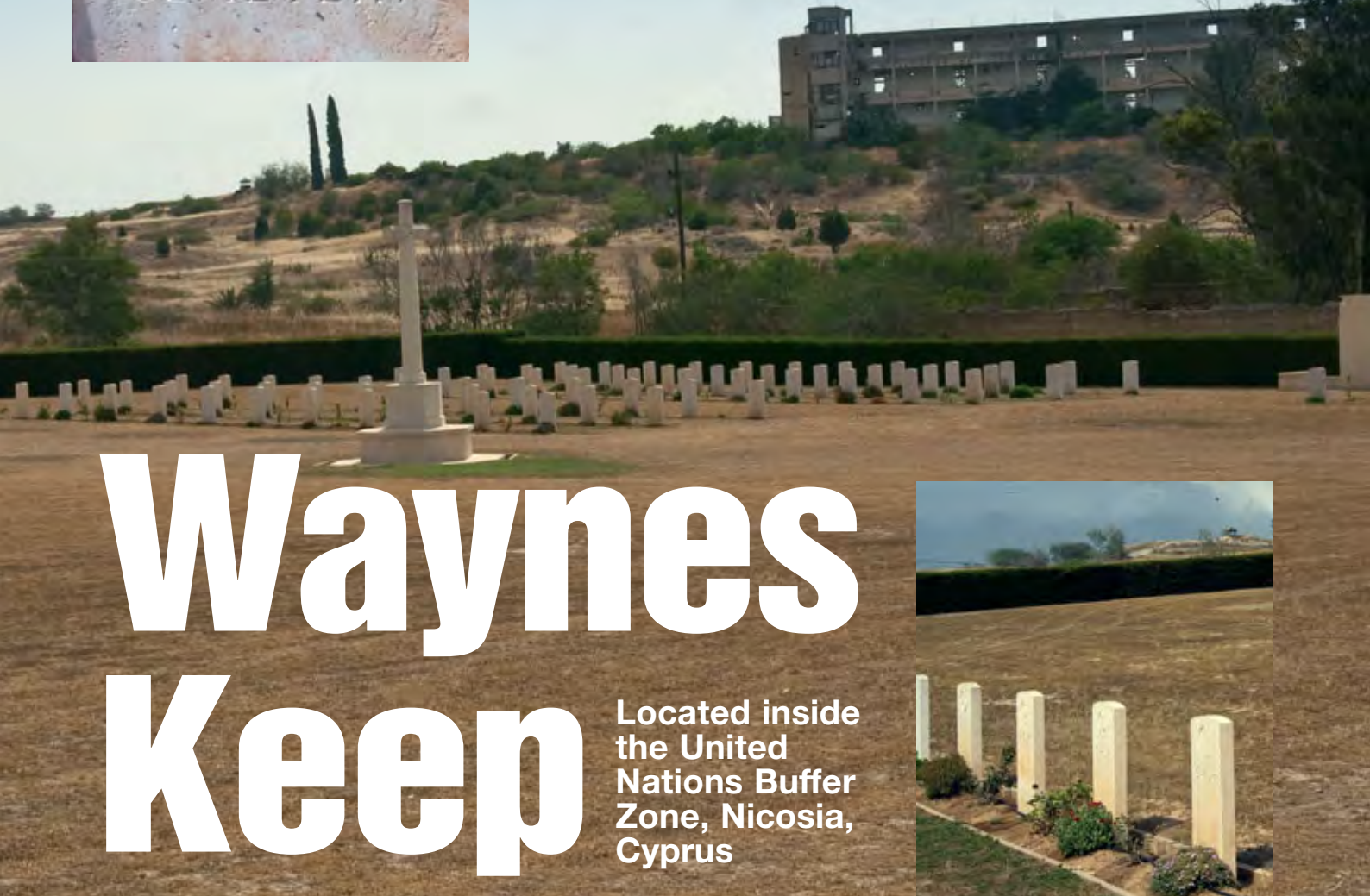
Pte Leslie on behalf of our Corps.

After the ceremony the Team was paraded before the Commander Land Forces Falkland Islands, Major General David Thorne, and in turn was introduced to Mr John Nott. The Team was then heli-lifted back to the SIR BEDIVERE, which, for the sake of the TV cameras, had already started off on the long return journey to the UK, bearing the 64 dead that were to be repatriated. We bade farewell to the Islands with mixed feelings as we sailed out of the Falkland sound and continued northwards. Although we were all happy to be going home, most of us had grown a soft spot in our hearts for the rugged, desolate, but nevertheless endearing Islands.

The journey back took 22 days through mainly calm seas and pleasant weather, which was a relief to us all as the flat bottomed LSL is notorious for rolling in the calmest of seas, as we found to our cost a couple of days out from UK when we again hit particularly rough seas. The Team kept itself occupied during this time with daily sessions of PT, runs around the Tank Deck, weapon training, lecturettes, shooting, quizzes (mainly "Give us a Clue") and innumerable games of volleyball against the Royal Navy party on board. We were well fed and looked after by the predominantly Chinese crew. We reached England's southern shores on 16 November and at dawn on that day a piper played the lament "Flowers of the Forest" as the SIR BEDIVERE slowly eased into Marchwood Military Port at Southampton, the Vehicle Deck lined by the AGRT and the gloomy darkness broken only by the flashlights of the waiting press cameras. It was most appropriate that the dignitary who was to welcome the dead home and who was to greet the AGRT was General Sir George Cooper the Adjutant General and Colonel Commandant of the Royal Pioneer Corps.

The dead servicemen were then off-loaded from the SIR BEDIVERE in two containers draped in Union Flags, again to the accompaniment of the lament "Flowers of the Forest", and were conveyed to a nearby Customs shed. Here the coffins were unloaded, draped in individual Union Flags and laid out pending the local coroner's release. That afternoon I gave evidence at a preliminary inquest held at Southampton Crown Court to establish the identify and cause of death of each servicemen. Once the coroner was satisfied that all was correct he signed the order for the release of the bodies, thus relieving the AGRT of any further responsibility for them. By this time most of the AGRT were already off on the last stage of their own journeys home, but for those who remained it was with a strange sense of sadness that we watched the numerous contracted undertakers collect the bodies of the servicemen to convey them to their final resting places. For their parts in carrying out this operation, Major Robb was awarded the MBE, Cpl Straw and LCpl Stewart each the BEM and LCpl Stewart and Pte Riley the Commander Land Forces Falkland Islands Commendation. I got nothing, not even hepatitis!

In look back now, many memories prevail. Memories of BBQ's in mid ocean in the tropics, fishing for 'piranha' off Ascension Island, of the delicious hot mutton (what else) pie prepared for us by Tony and Alisa Heathman at Estancia House, but, above all, of the high standards of self discipline, morale and companionship of the Team throughout. These are the happy memories. There are other memories, of course, less happy, private memories that will always be with me. ■



Waynes Keep

Located inside the United Nations Buffer Zone, Nicosia, Cyprus



Report: Sgt Donaghue
Pictures: Sgt Donaghue

NICOSIA which was originally known as Ledra then latterly Lefkosia, is an old fortified town near the centre of the island of Cyprus, which as you know, is now divided.

The War Cemetery is 4 kilometres west of Nicosia City which itself is divided. It lies on the Myrtou Road near to Wayne's Keep, which is now located in the United Nations Controlled Buffer Zone that separates the North and South of Cyprus.

The military authorities established the Cemetery during the 1939-1945 War for the burial of servicemen who died whilst on duty in Cyprus.

Two Pioneers who died during World War 2 are buried at this cemetery, they are:

Captain Francis Angel ATTARD-MONTALTO, 191273 who died on 29 Mar 43 (Grave Ref 1.A.8)

Private Paul SINGER, PAL/11838 who died on 9 Jul 42 (Grave Ref 3.A.12)

The cemetery contains 3 memorials. The first is the Cross of Sacrifices common to all Commonwealth War Cemeteries around the world. The second commemorates 58 Cypriots of the Cyprus Regiment and the Cyprus Volunteers buried in village

cemeteries in various parts of the island. Some lie in family graves and others in collective graves where commemoration by the usual commission headstone and permanent maintenance of the graves were not possible.

The memorial takes the form of a pylon of local stone 2 metres high with 2 dwarf walls. The names of those commemorated are carved on the memorial with an appropriate inscription.

The third is the Nicosia Cremation Memorial that honours 73 soldiers of undivided India who remains were accorded the last rights requested by their religion – committal to fire. The memorial takes the form of a stone pylon, winged and surmounted by an urn.

On it are engraved the names of those whom it honours and a suitable inscription in English, Hindu and Gurmukhi.

Within the Cemetery lie 409 Navy, Army and RAF personnel and 167 dependants of Army, RAF and service employed civilians. In addition there are 6 Germans, from a bomber crew that crashed on the island during the Second World War.

This brings a total of 582 within the cemetery. Since 1974 the Cemetery has been within the confines of the United Nations Buffer Zone. This creates a certain

degree of difficulty for families and visitors. However, there is an established communication between the British High Commission, Commonwealth War Graves and the United Nations in Nicosia to ensure that those who wish to visit are helped in every way possible. Over the past years there has been extensive refurbishment to the Cemetery which is still continuing at present.

There are 2 gardeners employed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to maintain the upkeep of the Cemetery.

The major concern within the cemetery has always been the lack of water. A shallow well feeds the Cemetery. However, in the summer this well dries-up. A main water system has been installed to meet the Cemetery requirements and with the aid of a computerised watering system it will provide the cemetery with water all year round.

Due to the location of Wayne's Keep in the United Nations Buffer Zone many people have had trouble visiting over the years. However, due to negotiation through the British High Commission it can now be visited with relative ease as long as the rules are kept i.e. 2 weeks notice, between 0900-1200 hrs Mon to Fri, only UN personnel to operate cameras. ■



Preparations for Battle

Final Part of George Pringle's Wartime Experiences

Report: George Pringle
Pictures: George Pringle

THE NEXT 3 to 4 months were spent under canvas on Bizerta beach, thinking of the success of operation "TORCH" and how we had managed to accomplish the victory over the Germans, and thankful we had come through alive and thought of our comrades who had not been so lucky.

Luck plays a large part in one's survival. One of our jobs while awaiting fresh orders was to help the Royal Army Medical Corps to scout the area for bodies and gather them together for the 'medics' to collect their identity discs which were worn around the neck. There were two tags with the Name & Number identified on them. One tag was collected and passed to records the other tag was left with the body for burial identification purposes. Rather grim, but essential work. Another job was moving equipment down to the docks area where no doubt it will be required to be shipped to the next country where the next campaign will take place. Of course, there will have to be units left behind in Algeria and Tunisia to occupy the countries and maintain discipline amongst the natives. Who knows it might be our Company! A cushy job!

The battle for Tunisia was at an end

And we now had time to spare
Time to write letters and to home we could send

Our love to our families who lived there
But to us in BIZERTE it was only a phase
As we prepared for the next campaign
Though at times on the beaches we could often laze

We still had our total fitness to maintain
But soon came the time we all did indeed dread

It was full pack marching and invasion of the beaches
I think I would rather go back and bury the dead
'cause the Commandos and Marines were our teachers

While we were resting on the beach at

Bizerta awaiting fresh orders there was another invasion taking place. I did not know about this until the year 2003 but let Hughie Rooney tell you his own story about Operation Corkscrew.

"On the 14 May 1943, our present Officer Commanding, Major HT Kent, of 296 Coy Pioneer Corps was struck off strength and Maj WP Dickie who had previously commanded 175 Coy was taken on strength. I believe Maj Kent was promoted to Lt Col and commanded 10 Group PC at Sousse. I, of course, do not know of any special reason for this except to say we were informed that we were to take part in Operation Corkscrew.

This was to be an assault landing on the island of Pantelleria which was apparently occupied by the Italian and German forces and the airfield used as a base for the Luftwaffe. This island is about a third of the size of the Isle of Wight and is approximately 52 miles from the coast of Tunisia. Pantelleria, whose ancient name was Cossyra, had been subjected to daily bombing raids by the Allied air forces from 1 to 9 June 1943.

In 10 Jun 43, the First British Division embarked on their landing ships and steered a course for the island. As the air forces were still bombing Pantelleria, the invasion ships cruised around the local waters awaiting the signal to land.

The landing took place on 11 Jun as the air forces gave covering curtain fire and the Germans and Italians surrendered on that day. The assault troops were infantry of the First British Division, composed of Coldstream Guards, KOYLLs and Sherwood Foresters. 296 Coy PC taking part had been detached, section by section, to various landing parties of the infantry units and were acting as support troops to Sherwood Foresters. 296 Coy had the honour to be the only Pioneer Coy to land on the island fortress and were, therefore, the first Pioneer Coy to set foot in Europe since Dunkirk. A Dutch Navy boat called, I think the Princess Beatrix, carried landing craft and was used to convey us over to the island off the South West coast of Sicily. The boat had been used in the Norway campaign and carried four barges. Some of

the Pioneers had landed and avoided getting their feet wet by being carried ashore on Bren gun carriers. One humorous incident occurred during the landing as a Sgt Parkinson from Manchester, who was in charge of one section, took ill - probably sea sickness - and was returned to North Africa. Unfortunately, he was carrying the rum ration for the company - a coincidence?

The RAF bombed the beaches of the island before the first wave of the British infantry went into land. After they had advanced about one mile, the RAF bombed again in advance of the infantry. After the second bombing raid, the 580 or so Italian soldiers surrendered and were later joined by the 58 Germans. It was exactly 12 noon. All prisoners were ordered to report to the harbour and await further instructions. The land on the island was divided by dry walling and it was comical to see the Axis prisoners jumping the walls with their hands held high. The Pioneers had the distinction of capturing one Field Ambulance and two U-boats, the latter were in for repair and the crews were taken prisoner.

It was now 13 June and as the prisoners were taken on board our ships to sail to North Africa, the Luftwaffe paid us a visit and, amidst the machine gunning, the Italians jumped overboard. We had to rescue them and take them back on board. It was noticeable that the Germans, however, remained calmly on board and looked at the Italians with disdain. Cpl McNally, who incidentally was a Geordie, and six Pioneers including myself were sent on the boat to ensure the prisoners arrived at Sfax, their destination. During the voyage, one prisoner popped his head up from the hatch for a breath of fresh air and I engaged him in conversation. He told me he had just returned from leave the day before we invaded. However, if our forces had landed twenty-four hours earlier, the island would have been occupied by an army of Infantry and Luftwaffe staff. As the battles in North Africa had ceased, 90% of them had been sent back to Germany on leave for seven days. I felt very lucky.

The infantry troops of the British Division

had meanwhile been returned to their bases in North Africa, their objective having been executed with distinction. The occupying force now consisted of 296 Coy PC, Royal Engineers and Royal Artillery. The latter were two batteries who manned the two light AA guns. The rest of the forces were to proceed to the airfield and render it incapable of being used. The huge mountain on the island was an extinct volcano and the Germans had split this in half and made an airfield, whilst hangers had been dug out of the other half.

It was now 18 June and the journey had taken five days. We landed at Sfax and contacted the authorities to ascertain where they wanted the prisoners interned. The authorities would not accept them as they had no knowledge of the shipment. We tuned about and made our way to Bizerta on 21 June where arrangements were made to accept and intern the prisoners. All this had taken us some time and we hurriedly returned and reported to our OC in case we were charged with AWOL as it was now 23 June.

The next ten days on the island were a living hell as, without any warning, the Stukas and bombers paid us frequent visits and their raids always meant casualties amongst the Italian civilians, who sheltered in the warehouses which were targeted. The civilians lived mostly on fish and were expert at making the drink Muscatel from the prickly pear grown on the island. This had evidently been their only export. The shortage of water was a problem to us and patrols were sent out to find supplies. Often this meant ten men would wash and shave in the same helmet of water.

On 3 July after ten days, 296 Company were returned to North Africa and their place was taken by a relief party of New York Rangers. On return to their bases, the Pioneers were put on repairing the broken bridges or guarding the occupants of POW Camps. The Pioneer Company were now part of 10 Group PC and finally received a message of congratulations from the GOC of the First British Division for their good work and tenacity during Operation Corkscrew." After that humour interlude we now return to the real war - sorry Hughie!!!!

175 Company has been bivouacking on the beach of Bizerta for several weeks now after our success in Operation "Torch" and apart from the general "bull" and the water shortage for drinking (one water bottle approx 1 pint per day) we were beginning to get browned off in more ways than one (temperature 30 to 35 Degrees Celsius). The hot sun seemed to shine perpetually and our only cover was our gas cape sued as a tent. The only consolation was as were on the beach we could go swimming during stand down time.

However, towards the end of July 1943 activities seem to be the order of the day and route marches (10 miles) in full kit (approx 40 lbs) seemed to be the only pleasure our Sergeant Major enjoyed. As the days went on we were really suntanned, brown (nearly all over) fit and tough. Incidentally, if you got sun burnt and you blistered you were put on a charge using Army Form B252 if you failed to go on parade, it was named as a self-afflicted wound which was a serious offence. We were all wondering with all this activity, what was going on for we were only generally used as support troops to consolidate or assist the infantry after the initial attack. Still we were earning our pay of 12/6 per week and as people pay hundreds of pounds sterling to come here in the summer for a holiday we were on a

'cheapie'. When however, we commenced training for beach landings by assault craft (LCI) we knew that our peaceful, though active period was over. By now we were able to crash ashore from the landing crafts in approx 20 seconds carrying our battle light packs of about 20 lbs. Still no hint of where we were going as security was 100% tight, and we thought after a while things had cooled off and we maybe stood down. At the end of August 1943 we were issued with our battle insignia - Combined Operations. We were so proud as we thought it meant at last all our endeavours in North Africa and all our success in training had been recognised. We were soon to be denuded of all those flighty thoughts as we saw Brigades of Commandos and Royal Marines bivouacking in our area. Of course, Combined Operations - sea, air, land operations of the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force and Army.

We were getting worried as it seemed no one had mentioned to the War Office that we were support troops to infantry not to the mad "buggers" like Commandos and Royal Marines. We were finally mustered on parade and given our battle orders. I can still remember them to this day. "You are all going on a special mission - our British and American forces have already landed and captured Sicily and are shortly to cross into Italy. We will be landing at Salerno on 9 September 1943, and our aim is to capture Naples after Salerno and so have the use of two ports to land very many ships and stores. We do not expect much opposition as the Italian forces are even more demoralised so remember once you hit the beach at 0300 hours head straight inland - do not stop for anything. The infantry will be relying on you to supply and support them so take your place with them side by side. Dump your equipment and return to the boats. Your job as Pioneers and I know I can rely upon you is to - Supply, Supply, Supply then Fight, Fight, Fight - Kill, Kill, Kill". The words were ringing in our ears, it was the most terrifying but, also exhilarating time of our lives.

It was 5 September 1943 as we collected our 48 hour food pack, our ammunition and our foxhole trenching tools. We were all told to ensure all our rifles were clean and covered with canvas breech covers to keep out the sand. Then rest or sleep for a couple of hours. Rest or sleep was out of the question as most of us made out our Wills or wrote a last letter to our wives, sweethearts or parents. These would be given to HQ to action if we did not return. Later in the day we marched to the harbour of Bizerta and trooped aboard our troop carrier (sorry, I do not remember the name) to embark on our destination.

To put you more in the picture, I will give a précis of the happenings and lead up to the present time which were taking place elsewhere.

Although at first sight the invasion of Italy would appear to have been a continuation of the North African campaign coupled with the Sicilian campaign, this was not the case. Sicily was the closing stage of the campaign to drive the Germans out of the African zone and to open up the "Meddy" to the Allied shipping. The Italian campaign was the first step in the major attack on Nazi dominated Europe since 1939 and was planned to eliminate Italy from the war and divert the maximum number of German Army divisions to a

theatre of war as far removed as possible from the English Channel.

It had been accepted by the War Office that Operation Overlord (the code name for the Allied invasion of Northern France) could not be launched before mid 1944 and our Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "We have to fight the Germans somewhere, we cannot merely sit and watch the Russians do it all". The apathy of the Italian acceptance of Mussolini's downfall and imprisonment on 25 July 1943 gave every indication that the time

'We were issued with our Battle Insignia - Combined Operations'

was ripe for an assault on Italy. Thus the invasion of Italy was planned in two phases - a landing by General Montgomery's Eighth Army on the toe of Italy and another by the Allied Fifth Army under the American General Mark Clark just south of Salerno. No American or British air cover could be promised to help the latter invasion as the nearest airfields were 150 miles away.

Italy surrendered to the Allies on 3 September 1943 as they thought by changing sides at this junction they could claim a place among the victorious Allies. However the news of the surrender on 3 September was not announced until 8 September, a significant date as you will see later on. As I was not on the invasion of the toe of Italy by Montgomery, the happenings there do not involve me until later.

The Allied Fifth Army which was to carry out the landings at Salerno consisted of the British X (10th) Corps and the USA 6th Corps. News of the Italian surrender (3 September) was made public on 8 September and by the time the ships carrying the Fifth Army arrived at the beaches to the south of Salerno on 9 September, the German elite 16th Panzer Division had disarmed the Italian troops (our new Allies) and taken over the defences. For the first time in Italy, the Allies would meet fierce resistance (as the 8th Army in the toe of Italy had only met Italians) including the German Tanks actually on the beach and the fighting that followed was the fiercest of the whole Italian campaign. In this the following Pioneer Companies played a worthy part and suffered many casualties: 11, 68, 79, 119, 140, 151, 175, 187, 191 and 242, these all comprised the first part of the assault attack on the beaches. 79 Company landed at 0300 hrs and were quickly into action losing its No 3 Section which had been so decimated by the large number of killed or wounded that they became inoperative. No 4 Section captured an enemy pill-box in the ensuing fighting and took the Germans prisoners. These prisoners were caged on the beach, but, unfortunately lost their lives when German Stuka planes gunned the beach. 140 Company landed at San Vanero with 231st Brigade, but suffered two killed and nine others wounded as they unloaded their landing craft under intense enemy fire.

In quick succession all other Companies came ashore at different points of the beach.

We go to Hell

Bravely we stormed the beaches of Salerno All we hear was shouts of Go-Go-Go And the noise of the guns as they sprayed death on the shore

Killing your comrades more and more We knew that Salerno was to be a Gulf of Hell

As the men lay wounded or dead as they fell

Twisted in agony there the bodies lay
To be buried as gallant Soldiers on the
following day

But let's go back to my Company (175) when I transgressed we were aboard our troop ship at BIZERTA. As we set off the sea was calm, but, very soon it was very rough and most of the soldiers were beginning to feel sea-sick. After hours of sailing covering about 720 miles we landed at Palermo in Sicily at approx mid-night on 7 September. We clambered down the rope ladders and nets which were hung over the side of the ship and clung for dear life to our rifles - bren guns - light packs which unfortunately impeded our progress. We finally were able to wade ashore in about 2 or 3 feet of water with our rifles and guns held high over our heads. No doubt you are thinking all soldiers must be stupid as we do every thing we are ordered to do. That is called discipline and helping others is 'comeradie' which is more than friendship

Having got ashore we formed up and marched and squelched to a building which I think was a school where we were given a hot meal and a flea bitten mattress which we immediately slung outside and here we spent the night or what was left of it. One of our officers (no names and so no pack drill), (but he would have been a decent Chap if he had been a Man!) he ordered hit batman to carry his bed roll ashore. After struggling down the side of the ship some of us waded back to "help" him. Unfortunately our efforts only succeeded in tipping the bedroll into the water where it got soaking and finally sank. Oh dear! What a catastrophe!! No other officers asked for our help - I wonder why? In a few hours time we once again mustered and proceeded to clamber once more on board our troopship and commenced our sea voyage to SALERNO as mentioned before approx 200 miles away. Our flagship containing the HQ Officers was USS ANCON. Where all future orders were made and passed on to the officers who would be on the beach landings. It was here that we learned much to our delight that the USA Rangers, British Commandos and The Royal Marines would make their own beach invasion. Their landings were north at Salerno at Maiori and Victri and their object was to seize the mountain passes leading to the highway to Naples. We would be landing at Red Beach (Uncle) south of Salerno with the 46th Division. Our object was to capture Salerno and then Naples and its port which General Clark said would be ours in 3 days. Our convoy now consisted of destroyers, corvettes, mine sweepers, cruisers and landing crafts, two battleships and one aircraft carrier which comprised the biggest amphibian landing in history totalling 650 vessels. We now heard that a second convoy had left Bizerta 7 hours after us as our support troops, but had been bombed with 22 men killed. Such comforting news! We now knew we would not get immediate RAF or USA air cover until an airfield had been taken and made ready for our planes to land.

It was now 1830 hrs on 8 September only 9 hours away for our landing as "H" hour was 0330 hrs. We were then told the Italian Government had surrendered its Armed Forces. Was this a reprieve from the prospect of a long hard war? Surely as we

expected to fight the Italians it would now be the Germans so it could be a long and hard war. Sixty miles from Salerno we were ordered to man the Battle Stations and as the sky turned crimson we realised that it must be a Luftwaffe air attack. Flares from the German Focke Wulfs were lighting up the whole armada of ships. Oerliken guns, machine guns including our Bren gun opened up shooting desperately at the bombers. The Junkers roared in dropping their heavy calibre bombs about a mile off the flagship Ancon's port side where our flotilla of landing craft carrying LCI boats was moving in line ahead. Crowded with soldiers the order came to "ceasefire" and we were ordered below and the hatches battened down - it was like being in a steel prison. If our ship carrying craft was hit we would have no chance of escaping. This raid lasted for 40 minutes as we waited tensely in the darkness we heard luckily only one landing craft was hit and sunk. Were the Germans expecting us? All our training in Combined Operations, an intricate form of warfare was soon to be put to the test. In the corner of Tunisia near Bizewrta where our final training took place fifteen men of the Hampshire Regiment (Black Cats) were killed and thirty men injured when a mine exploded during training - oh yes, our training was the real thing and we would need all our experience now. We were now 12 miles off the beaches of Salerno, as ahead of us were mines which had to be cleared and all ships were blackened out - the time 2300 hrs. All was quiet expect for the low throb of the assault ships engines carrying 100,000 British and 75,000 American soldiers. Other ships carried 20,000 vehicles - guns and ammunition, but, we were silent and frightened. Our thoughts were all for what lies ahead. Would we be met by bursts of machine gun fire or shells from batteries hidden in the hills? Would search lights make us standing targets? Would screaming shells suddenly transform the stillness into a living hell? We crouched down in the launches awaiting our next order. Our coxswain (Royal Navy) had been given his special orders to land us on Red Beach Uncle and the RN guns would give us covering fire as we made for our objective. Our support troops would land shortly afterwards. Wait a minute we are the support troops. What's going on? We had shaken hands with each other and

'The beach was littered with dead and wounded men'

slapped each other on the back, we were no longer afraid only tense. Check your rifle and ammunition - have I got my bayonet handy? Stop it, you have checked all that a dozen times - keep calm and await orders. Our assault boats were lowered over the side of the troopships as we scrambled down the scrambling nets to board our landing craft. The coxswain spoke to me to keep under cover as best as possible, he was an American sailor, but where was our Royal Navy Coxswain? At 0200 hrs the Germans commenced their bombardment of our ships, almost immediately the crew and soldiers on one LCI were killed or wounded. The guns of our Royal Navy replied as shell after shell roared over our heads to burst on the enemy gun positions in the hills. Only the darkness saved our LCI as we waited for our final orders. It was 0225 hrs before the firing ceased.

At 0825 hrs our LCI commenced to move though we would not be leaving until 0915 hrs about 50 minutes after the first assault by the Hampshire's. We could see

and hear the carnage that was taking place on the beach and knew it would soon be our turn. The nightmare of pain and fear was about to begin as we slowly neared the beach and heard the German 88mm guns erupting without warning. Red killer tracers from machine guns criss-crossed the beach, the savagery of their reception shocked and halted the trained infantry men of the Hampshire regiment. Still our sea craft edged slowly nearer and nearer, we could now see the second wave of the infantry men of the Hampshire Regiment. They were face to face with death but still crawling and stumbling, falling and dying beneath the German shells and bullets. My thoughts were what had I done to deserve this as I gazed around at my comrades all wearing sickly grins, but, giving each other the thumbs up sign with shaking hands, not fear only tension in our stomachs. The rocket ships were still firing over our heads and our Sergeant Edwards - a dour Scot received the order and passed it on "Follow the rockets - not the plan". The 2nd Battalion of Royal Hampshires had now landed - 800 yards ahead of us - and were met with withering fire from enemy gunners lurking in ditches and behind walls. Casualties were high, but, we knew in about 10 minutes it would be our turn to land.

Suddenly our assault ship veered to the right and parallel to the beach, had new orders been given to the American coxswain or our Sergeant? We were all amazed and of course ignorant as to the reason. In about 5 or 10 minutes or so it seemed we turned towards the beach. As we ran down the ramps of the LCI carrying light kit (25 lbs) a Bren gun, ammunition we seemed to lose our moment of fear. We found out we were on the wrong beach as the American coxswain would not land us on Red Beach, but had landed us on Uncle Green Beach two miles away. The coxswain had seen the shells etc landing on Red Beach and would not land there, maybe he saved our lives - I don't know.

As we ran down the ramp and hit the beach it was littered with dead and wounded men, ammunition boxes, crates of medical supplies, cases of rations and spare parts which had been unloaded by the Pioneers who had landed before us on this beach. The coxswain then turned his craft and made for the troopships 10 miles away instead of collecting the wounded from the beaches and transporting them to the hospital ship. Meanwhile the sea tide was carrying the limp bodies of the Tommie's ashore as their boats were still burning. As we were 2 miles away from our objective our OC decided that the best thing to do was to clear the debris off the beach to enable the oncoming assault boats to lower their ramps and allow the next regiment of infantry to come ashore. We toiled for the next 3 or 4 hours and finally the beach was clear. The Royal Engineers had left steel matting so we laid this out on the beach to enable tanks and vehicles to come ashore from their landing crafts (LCT). The conditions were appalling and many on the beach were dying from the enemy crossfire and it was good news to us when our OC had received orders for our Company to evacuate the beach and make our way inland. We advanced about 400 yards inland and took cover in the ditches along the coast road. Meantime our Lt Hope had "borrowed" a bicycle and had ridden along the coast road for approximately 11/2 miles. He reported back to the OC that the way was clear, "and with caution we could proceed to our rendezvous on Uncle Red Beach". The roll-

call which was taken revealed that we had lost 5 of our lads and had 13 casualties. We then scrambled out of the ditch and formed two lines of troops - one on each side of the road. We noticed a large wood on the right hand side and hoped no Germans were taking cover there. I, like many others was not afraid, but very tense - ready to jump in the ditch and open fire on anyone who came along the road. The Bren Gun seemed to get heavier, but in about half an hour we reached our rendezvous safely to be greeted by the Sergeant Major Beach Master with "Where the f...g hell have you been". We commenced digging our foxholes in a vine yard where the leaves would act as cover and shade from the sun. Our next orders were to leave our kit and return to the Uncle Red Beach to keep the beaches clear of debris and move the stores etc inland. That night 50% of our Company were doing beach work and the other 50% were keeping guard in case of attacks. Our Beach Master Sgt Major then told us that the Hampshire's had attacked a regiment (300 men approx) of German soldiers in the wood alongside the coastal road we had just come from and a fierce battle had taken place. We were lucky or maybe we looked tough? Later we were told to accompany the Medical Corps back along the coastal road and bring in the wounded for transshipping by boat to the Hospital Ship which was lying 10 miles off the beach.

Though we had carried out this type of work before in North Africa it's so tragic to see lads 18 or 19 years lying there dead and the wounded screaming for help. We carried on with our job and soon the medics had all the names of the casualties on record. As we turned along a coastal track to return to our bivouac (fox hole) area keeping under cover as much as possible we were met by the same Hampshire's who told us not to go any further as 100 yards ahead enemy tanks had come rolling down the coastal track and some of their comrades had been quickly overwhelmed. There was some falling dead or wounded as the tanks had fired at close range and others had been crushed by the tracks of the tanks. It was just carnage. The Hampshire's made their way back to Magazzeno while we returned to the beach making our way through thick vines and low trees. Our progress was slow as enemy snipers kept up their bursts of fire. We fortunately had the cover of a low wall as we stooped very low. It was decided to wait by the wall and then section by section we would dash to the beach head. From our shelter we could hear the crack of the 88mm guns in the distant hills and would count five seconds to the crump of the shells landing on the beach. We waited and waited for the order to move.

At that moment all hell broke loose around us as German tanks, using the trees as cover, fired point blank at the assault troops coming ashore. We saw men stagger and fall and lie motionless. Swooping low, JU 87 strafed the beaches and from somewhere a 210mm gun pumped round after round onto the beach. Soon it was all quiet and we made our way to the beach to once again "gather up the debris". Only 10 minutes waiting by the wall had saved us from the chaotic onslaught on the beach. Would our good luck hold..?

Today is 10 September 1943 it is nearly dark and 50% of the Company would soon be going on the beach to begin the moving of equipment from the ships inland and under cover of darkness. It was safer to work at night as only the occasional shell

came over. Tonight 3 or 4 of the boxes contained spirits for the officers of the troops who had landed. The top of the cases were soon loose and a bottle is easily fitted into the sleeves of our denim battledress as we carried them on our shoulders as we calmly passed the Military Police. Arriving back to our foxholes at dawn we buried the bottles until a later date and then made our way up to the infantry who were holding the line 200 yards ahead. Our visit, though dangerous was welcomed by the lads. While we were there we heard the signals sending back information to the SS Ancon our HQ (12 miles away at sea). An LST had struck a mine and breached, LST 375 hit by shelling while beaching, ten wounded, LST 357 hit by shelling when beaching 4 dead and 48 wounded. Things were not going too well it seemed after a long 48 hours.

Due to the vagaries of the tide reinforcements of 167 Brigade of 56th Division (Black Cats) were landed further down the coast. The forward elements of the 8th and 9th Fusiliers and the 7th Ox and Bucks were landed where the Germans had not laid mines and as they considered themselves lucky they hurriedly took advantage and advanced forward rapidly. Their target was the key rail centre at Battipaglia. Progress was through marshy land and the troops were knee-deep in water. However, due to the marshy land 3 Panzer tanks advancing towards the British Troops found themselves stuck and easy targets for our troops. We were ordered off the beach as other Companies of Pioneers landed and took over the beach clearing - "good we thought let them have a go for a change". As we moved off the beach and made our way inland, the Luftwaffe returned and straddled the beach with machine-gun fire - several of the newly landed Pioneers were killed. Once again we were lucky but will it hold out?

On 11 September we heard that the Commandos and Royal Marines led by their Captain the Duke of Wellington had occupied the northern part of the town of Salerno. It was there the Germans were in full strength and had many Panzers and if the British Forces could hold the enemy at bay we would have a chance of making our way inland. The American Rangers who had landed on the north side of Salerno had a terrible bashing and could not reach the main road to Naples. It was down this road the Germans were bringing their reinforcements and so it was vital the Yanks keep up the attack and drive the Germans back and so relieve our position.

As there had been many trucks landed on the beach we were ordered once again to return to the beach and help to unload the ships and clear the way for Landing Craft Tanks (LCT) to arrive and discharge their loads. The beaches were under heavy shell fire from the hills surrounding the area and the Luftwaffe was again having a field day. Because of the distance from the airfields in Sicily our RAF planes could only operate over Salerno for 20 minutes and then had to return. We struggled that day to unload the ships as they came in and carried the ammunition boxes and stores as far in shore as possible. I remember how tired and hungry I was, but we had no time to rest as the Germans holding the beach perimeter were only one mile away. We supported our forward troops until our backs ached and our legs felt like lead.

Our only respite came when we were

ordered forward to assist our infantry as the German counter attacked. We knew a break-through would have to be stopped at all costs or we would be driven off the beaches and either killed or taken prisoner.

Gradually the counter attack was held and the Germans withdrew to consolidate their position and collect their dead and wounded. More British reinforcements

were landing on the beaches and as they made their way inland so we were able to return to our foxholes in the vineyard. That night we were ordered once again down to the beach but only in parties of 2 sections (60 men) and

only to work for 2 hours - it was our rest period of 6 hours. During the darkness we were able to unload in relative peace as apart from the odd volley of shell fire we were undisturbed. Two more sections were to act as mules or donkeys to carry the stores etc further inland as no vehicles had as yet been landed. The infantry were glad of our Company and knew our job in supporting them was very important.

The next day, 12 September, our lads were still holding the bridge head as the Royal Navy was shelling the German positions with accuracy. The noise was terrific (no wonder I like peace and quietness now). A roll call the previous night had showed how lucky our Company had been, only 23 had been wounded, and no-one killed. They were taken care of by the "medics" in their forward Red Cross units and would eventually return to us in a few days (if we were still here). As we returned to the beaches from our forward position we carried the wounded from the infantry down to the beach for shipment to the hospital ship. We were still on hard tack and "compo" rations though we heard the Yanks on the next beach had brought an oven ashore and were baking bread. At mid-day a Regiment of Scots Guards waded ashore waist high in water. They ran past the dead and wounded and swiftly moved inland through tomato fields into the thick undergrowth. At once the Germans opened up with mortar and we all had to take immediate cover. A message was received from the nearby Regimental Aid Post that they could not cope with the amount of casualties and was there anyone from the Pioneers with first-aid experience?

I with several others immediately volunteered as we had all passed First Aid Course in the Boys Brigade, little did I know then as I served in the Boys Brigade from 1929 to 1939 my knowledge would come in very handy in such a manner. When we entered his tent the Medical Officer thanked us and we asked him where our bandages were so we could bandage up the slight wounds. He wavered his hand over to the right and we saw a metal cabinet marked Medical Supplies, but, we also saw a sight I never want to see again of maimed arms and legs, arteries spouting blood, torn chests and abdomens and empty eye sockets. We just gasped as a corporal said "These are the less wounded, the worse ones are outside on stretchers, will you take them down the beach and put them on the boats". Our first-aid course was never required so we returned from the beach to our foxholes to await further orders. We intended to snatch an hour or two of rest, but in a very short time our CSM was quietly rousing us up to collect ammunition and to follow him. We moved forward at the double bending low to make ourselves smaller targets. Apparently we learned the Fusiliers and Ox and Bucks were fighting desperately to hold their

'Only 23 wounded and no-one killed'



positions and stop a breakthrough to the beach. Clerks, cooks and truck drivers were all moved up as every possible soldier, irrespective of his duties were being pressed into service as an infantry man. One batch of American engineers who were preparing to build an improvised airstrip after the front line had moved forward a couple of miles were approached by an infantry RSM who told them he urgently needed their help. The American Sergeant informed him they were to work not fight. Drawing his revolver the RSM levelled it at the American's head and said "Take your choice run the risk with Jerry or I shoot you here and now, you'll have your chance to earn a medal, but stay here and all you'll get is my bullet". The Yanks joined us as we let out a quiet cheer. The Tiger Tanks we were facing had an electrically fired gun and the frightening combination of armour, firepower and noise was awesome. We all stood our ground and poured our fire power any where in the hope it would delay or cause the Germans to keep their heads down. One group of Yanks facing the enemy for the first time broke into a panic run shouting the Tanks are coming behind us. They were ordered back by some officers, but frightened men take some stopping. Suddenly the RSM, about six feet tall, and well built placed himself in front of the poor retreating men and pointing his revolver at them said, "Halt, this is as far as you go". One has to have been a veteran to understand these men retreating. As we moved forward we were ordered to hold the canal north-east of the crossroads at all costs and watch out for the Tiger tanks. Attaining our position we awaited the attack, but there were no sign of tanks or Jerries. So much for the retreating Yanks. We spent a day in position preventing the enemy from crossing the canal or using the cross roads, though we were harassed by snipers and mortars.

Messages we received from our HQ gave us the impression the Operation Avalanche had reached a stalemate. We could not advance due to the German power in tanks and guns, and Jerry could not because our troops were holding the 3 mile area of the canal. The answer would only lie in which side received reinforcements first. Pray God it is us, we also heard that the 41 RM Commandos had suffered 198 casualties out of their total force of 350 men. Allied prisoners taken by the Germans were about 1500 comprising of both British and American forces.

On 13 September our General, Mark Clark, came ashore to see for himself the position and found the British were taking the brunt of the punishment as Panzer units thrust themselves forward determined not to allow our exhausted troops an

opportunity to consolidate before attacking again.

The next few days was comprised of attack and withdraw and counter attack. Land that we gained was next day lost, but casualties were growing more and more. Rumours were soon spreading around that we may have to evacuate the beach head. As the air attacks and shelling continued food and medical supplies became scarce. Buildings all around us had been damaged and set on fire and thick smoke billowed up around us. We had to cover our mouths and noses with damp cloths and we were told to urinate on the cloths first. We carried the young wounded Durham's and KOYLs into a deserted hospital for shelter and were surprised when a few nuns appeared with their Mother Superior and said in English, "Place them here as we have German casualties in the other rooms." There were mountains of supplies on the beaches and we were waiting orders to destroy all supplies to avoid them falling into enemy hands. Things were beginning to look very serious. When the Yankees began to withdraw on our right flank a gap had been left which would allow the Germans to pour through, but the disheartened and demoralized Americans abandoned their positions at Altavilla and Hill 424. We were ordered with the remnants of the Durham and KOYLI regiments to close the gap and 'yield not an inch'. We learned that the British Navy vessels had been told to approach the shore or as near as possible and blast the German troops who were ahead of us. We also learned the 46th Division (our Division) were barely holding on as over 3000 men were dead, wounded or missing and contingency plans were being made for an evacuation. The Jerries had broken through the Yankee lines at Persano and had split the American and British sectors. The beach head was still only a mile deep and we could see a hospital ship the Newfoundland blazing from stem to stern no doubt it had been bombed by the Luftwaffe. We could also see reinforcements landing on the beach, apparently they were told to make preparations to get away if the Germans made an overwhelming attack. Oh yes! It definitely looked like an evacuation would take place. So what was our fate, fight on until the infantry got away in the boats, then POW or death? God how I hate war. The question our OC was asking was where Montgomery's Eight Army who were supposed to have advanced from the South and reinforced our position? (We did not know it was to be 21 days before Monty's

reinforcements arrived). Yes, 21 days of hell. How we survived I shall never know, as we were hungry, tired, dirty but still full of spirit as every British soldier fought on and on knowing it was now do or die.

It was now 14 September, the day that Lt Gen Clark had said we would be in Naples and our position had become critical and at one time we were only 1000 yards from the beach. The attacks by Jerry were being pressed on all parts of the front with the utmost vigour. Every remaining reserve was thrown in, administration troops taking their place in the front line. And, by nightfall the enemy were held. All troops were exhausted after six days of uninterrupted struggle.

The port of Salerno which had been captured by the commandos on 10 September could not be used as it was being subjected to a continuous German artillery bombardment from the guns sited in the hills which encircled it. One of the patrols was sent into Salerno to see if the port could be used to disembark the ships instead of using the beaches. The patrol found the town practically deserted of civilians only 2000 remaining out of a population of around 70,000. The patrol of 13 men suffered 5 casualties, but returned safely. The port was finally opened on the 25th September. The beaches meantime were being congested with men and materials and were still vulnerable to artillery and mortar fire. Casualties amongst the Pioneers were very high reaching 139. 79 Company who had stayed and worked on the beaches suffered greatly by their casualties and their OC Maj Hossack had registered in the records that his men had worked fifteen hours per day and were nearly at their breaking point.

By 18 September we had pushed the Jerries back several miles and the Eighth

Army had finally joined in and made contact. The evacuation order was cancelled. We were now able to land tanks and reinforcements ashore as the Jerries retreated and our Royal Navy guns had a field day shelling the Panzer tanks

and lorries as they fled northwards.

Our troops now used Salerno as a base, and we were now billeted in schools or empty houses though blitzed by bombs and shells it was better than foxholes. We were now clearing up the mess in the docks area to enable the ships to use the docks. Quite a peaceful rest period. Our casualties listed around 27% of our Company of 350 so it was not as bad as we thought. New troop reinforcements were taken on strength and so we were fully manned once again. How strange to think that my closest mates and I

‘We had pushed the Jerries back several miles’

were still together.

Naples was finally captured on the 1st October and we were moved up to Portici just outside Naples to await our next orders.

Now maybe is the time to tell you about one or two congratulation letters received by our OC Maj Hubbard. The first one is from the Fifth Army Commander Lt Gen Mark Clark and reads something like this:

"Dear Major,

As your Army Commander I want to congratulate every Officer and enlisted man in your Company on the accomplishment of their mission on your landing and afterwards up the west coast of Italy. All the more splendid is your achievement when it is realised that it was accomplished against determined German resistance at the beaches. Every foot of our advance has been contested. We have now arrived at our critical objective as our beach-head is secure. Additional troops are landing everyday and we are here to stay. Not one foot of ground will be given up. Side by side with the 8th Army the 5th Army will advance to occupy Naples then Rome and the other cities in the north and free Italy from German domination. The people back home in our countries know that we shall drive on relentlessly until our job is done. I desire that the contents of this letter be communicated to all ranks of your Company.

Yours sincerely
Mark W Clark"

A person letter from Prime Minister Churchill

"I had as you know been worried about the rate of the Avalanche build-up. It is great news that General Montgomery appears to bring the Eighth Army into action today. Every good wish as the initiative is passing to us."

No one mentioned to Lt Gen Clark that he had forecast on 8 September it would take only 3 days to reach and capture Naples, but it had taken 21 days of sheer slog and HELL.

Oh yes, did he mention the 13,614 casualties - I doubt it very much.

Italians say "Thank You"

As we entered Naples

our spirits began to soar

The Italians shouting

"Grazie" silently then in a roar

For they realised the Germans

had left their City

But the Nazis hadn't left

Italy more's the pity.

It was now approaching winter

and we expected snow

But we had to maintain our position for

there was no where else to go

Build up our logistics and keep

up our spirits too

Climbing, portering, keeping fit there

wasn't anything else to do

With the Germans now out of sight it was time for the "higher-ups" to make a grand entry into the liberated town. At Portici, the entrance to Naples we were greeted by throngs of shouting, hand clapping Italians. We were handed purple and yellow flowers as the people swarmed onto our transport "Grazie" they shouted and laughed and cried hysterically. We drove past shattered factories and tenements and deep pits that had been blasted in the streets. Broken cranes and twisted girders rose from the docks area a reminder of what our job would be. The city was full of booby traps and mines as the armoured column ahead of us searched for mines and snipers. Finally the crowds

thinned out as we left the crowded streets and headed for the open country. Well there was a war on and the Germans could return if they thought all the British troops were "drunk".

But where was our conquering hero Lt Gen Mark Clark?

It was much later that we heard Mark Clark's henchmen were arranging a triumphant entry into Naples. At 1300 hrs Mark Clark was standing in his half-track, all 76 inches of him with an intense feeling of pride. As he was driven along he saw only the wrecked buildings - vehicles and debris. Where were all the people? Where were all the cheering and applause for the conquering hero? It was not until later that he discovered the crowds after cheering the British troops had dispersed and made their way to the Piazza del Plebiscito at the other end of the city were the people were drinking and rejoicing with the British Troops.

Nobody had told Lt Gen Clark as he wended his way through silent streets that October was a month where both sides needed to consolidate their positions as stores, reinforcements, ammunition etc were brought up by road from Salerno as our infantry and supply troops dug themselves in to await the next order. Will it be an attack by our troops or a counter attack by the Jerry? Apparently the Allied Commanders had assumed that the enemy would withdraw by gradual stages to the Northern Appenines. In October we soon found out that this was not to be the end and the Germans intended holding a line between Rome and Naples from West to East for defensive warfare amongst the mountains and by using the broad major rivers as obstacles to thwart the Allied attacking force. Both the 5th and the 8th Armies were at a standstill. In early November, however, both Allied armies were on the offensive striving to break through the German Winter Line. The rains which had started in late September made the roads extremely difficult and turned the countryside into a sea of mud.

As there was no chance of a break through our Company was placed on assisting the Royal Engineers. For six weeks we worked under very close enemy fire making tank diversions, constructing a 3 mile long gun track and erecting Bailey bridges. The scarcity of building material for making roads made our job harder so it was decided to blow up a few houses that were empty. Obtaining some land mines from the REs we placed these on the ground floor of the housing area and wired them up for detonating. Suddenly an irate Italian farmer came from somewhere and begged us to stop. He took us to two of the houses and showed us in the cellars where in one house tons of wheat grain had been stored for planting next year. He then made the mistake of taking us to the next house where about 200 bottles of wine were stored for fermenting. We told him to take the wine which was unfit for drinking, but we had no option, but to blow up his other houses as we required the brick etc to make roads. Our Lieutenant Hope supervised the jobs and on completing the road we named it "Hopes Highway" and dutifully erected an appropriate sign. I wonder if it is still there today?

On 4 November 1943 we moved up to a place called Sandra where our HQ was to be located. Lt JJ Blanford and three of our Sections were sent to a place called Sessa and CSM Marshall and one Section were

attached to the Hampshire's. Maj Hubbard, Capt Chapman and Lt G Hope and the rest of the Company were sited at Sandra. With our HQ firmly based they planned and prepared Agire College into a rest camp for use by the 46th Division when they were pulled out of the front line for the first time for a 48 hour rest. Showers, dormitories and canteens were prepared in record time.

Meantime under Lt Blansford our 3 sections made ourselves as comfortable as possible and chose a bombed church as our billet. We found the statues of the angels very convenient as were able to hang our kit over the outstretched arms. At least we were dry under cover and were now accustomed to gunfire and air attacks and sleepless nights. For 6 weeks we enjoyed the peace, but soon we were required for portering.

If any one is reading this and thinks "portering" is a cushy job on the railways carrying passenger's luggage I will bring them back to reality. I will try to paint a background against which your imagination can set the scene.

Remember we were support troops for the infantry in this case the KOYLIs (Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry).

Picture then, mountain running into mountain with long ragged ledges that lead to nowhere except a steep drop into the valley below. Snow covered peaks and below the snow line infantry of the opposing forces (Germans) fighting to hold onto high ground that will give them fire advantage sited mortar and machine guns covering every track up which we must climb. The artillery of both sides shelling the mountain face, and always and what seemed for ever the heavy, ceaseless rain making visibility poor and our existence wretched. To move in daylight was suicidal, and so it was in darkness that patrols from both sides crept here and there hoping to surprise an enemy outpost. In these conditions actions were carried out by either section or platoon strength. Small parties of men isolated and exposed to the cruelty of man and of course, the elements. They were dependant after the first few hours on their comrades like us the Pioneer support troops for fresh ammunition, food and water and all other necessities of life.

To help them, RASC transport brought supplies to the nearest road in the foothills and mules took over led by Pioneer mule Transport Companies climbing the narrow and winding trails until the pathways ceased. Here we took over - unarmed so that our hands were free for climbing and a load of 50

lbs on your back securely fastened inching forward in the darkness as we paused breathlessly lest we made our presence known to an enemy patrol. Each time a loose rock was dislodged and fell noisily to the alley below we froze in our tracks as the enemy or our own forces fired an inquisitive flare into the sky illuminating the mountain side. No one spoke or sneezed and even tried not to breathe loudly as we were very terrified in case we gave our position away. Finally we would reach our infantry and hand over the logistics which were always welcomed as without them they could not carry on fighting.

Did we then rest! You must be joking!! On the descent we acted as stretcher bearers, bringing down from the high mountain ledges the men too badly wounded to make their own way down on foot. Usually four men would handle a stretcher where the track was wide enough,

"To move in daylight was suicidal"

but often it was two men slipping and stumbling over the rock while the wounded men would be groaning and cursing. On few occasions it could be one man in the wind and rain and darkness with the burden across his shoulders where a stretcher could not be used. Captain H Tristham who was the observation officer for the 46th Division recorded in his divisional records, "The Pioneers provided bearers for positions well forward of the Cassino Monastery Hill. During the battles they worked for seventy two hours without sleep or rest until towards the end they appeared to walk and work like robots, their limbs moving only from an unbreakable sense of duty and discipline and the aim of not letting the other men down known as camaraderie." It was also recorded that Private J Tancred (13011512) carried a wounded officer for 16 hours through the bitterly cold and continuous rain along treacherous tracks for one night and part of the next day. He stumbled into the ADS (Advanced Dressing Station) handed over his officer to the RAMC, collapsed and died. He had fulfilled his duty to his fellow man. He was not awarded any specific honour for courage and duty for they were common currency on Monastery Hill. The nature of his death "Died from natural causes", in this case exhaustion. He will be remembered by Pioneers everywhere and for all time, but we did not want preferential treatment over duty as support troops for the infantry men in our case the KOYLLs, day after day, night after night, the men of the 108 Group of which we were now attached (as the 46th and 56th Divisions were united) were to be part of the biggest counter attack of the Italian war. In an attempt to break the deadlock it was planned to make an amphibious outflanking attack between Rome and the River Garigliano, the landing to be made at the small port of Anzio. A diversionary movement to distract the enemy's attention and probably force him to commit his reserves elsewhere opened on 17 January 1944 with an attack by 10th Corps (British Army) across the River Garigliano. Two Sections of 807 (Smoke) Company Pioneer Corps were recalled from Naples to provide the necessary smoke cover and were commanded by Lts TR Grey and Ed Eyland.

Was Casino a Holy Place?

Look at the west where the sun's rays are sinking
 Into the darkness at the end of the day
 But spare just a thought for the lads who were with us
 And those of our comrades who fell on the way
 Bravely we had stormed the Salerno beaches
 Now to climb the icy mountain for Cassino to beat
 Endured the mud and the snow for unassailable reaches
 And then next day we tried to find a quiet retreat
 The area around the Monastery was bloody and defying
 We built sangers like madmen as our dead lay all around
 We heard the cries of the wounded and the groans of the dying
 Comrades who had perished on their last bit of ground
 Advance and Advance and we obeyed for this was our training
 Knowing to our course that we

gambled with death
 But did it really matter the few yards we were gaining?
 Of course and we would not give in until we ran out of breath
 "Listen to our orders" and think of the message
 Think not of our lives that were given in vain
 You know all this fighting is merely a dressage
 For you'll do it tomorrow and again and again
 Now look to the East where the sun's rays are dawning
 Into the light of hope at the beginning of the day
 Maybe it's a sign or maybe a warning
 That the war is nearly over I hear you say

'Once again the Pioneers were working day and night to relieve the situation'

To assist in this attack we were withdrawn from the mountains much to our delight on 15 January 1944 and bivouacked under some trees forming a local wood. Our orders from what I can remember were to leave the "bivvy" area at 1800 hours and carrying only our rifles which were encased in a canvas cover we had to proceed in single file and in complete silence to the river bank. To ensure complete silence we were issued

with an extra pair of socks to cover our boots. Three hundred and fifty made their way to the rendezvous point. The RASC had the previous night, made their way to an assembly point and dropped the equipment for bridge building as near as possible and then left the area.

Arriving at the assembly point we felt about for the parts of the bridging equipment and place them in order together with the necessary belts and clamps etc. Each section was responsible working under the eye of a Sergeant to complete their own section of the bridge. The first section of the bridge when completed was half-carried and placed on rubber rollers and moved to the edge of the river. There were thirty men also two Lance Corporals and a Sergeant to each Section. When all the sections of the bridge were complete they were covered with camouflage nets while we laid chestnut and wooden palings down on the muddy lane to allow jeeps carrying the infantry to come down the land and cross their bridge when we built it. The first Pontoon (a light wooden boat) was placed in position of the water's edge and the first section of the bridge was laid upon it and secured. This was pushed slowly into the river and held firmly while 3 or 4 men made their way into the water to hold the boat and bridge section in place so as the current would not move it downstream. We continued in this way until all boats and bridge sections were completely across the river and secured on the far side. The Germans were about 800 yards away and we had no infantry between them and us, so doing our work quietly was imperative. We then secured the last section on our side and carried very silently the wood paling to lay on the enemy side of the bridge when the jeeps crossed over with the infantry.

It was now 0300 hrs and we had to leave the area by 0500 hrs. We collected our rifles and signalled to the infantry we were leaving enabling them to approach on foot to cover our retreat. We were then informed we had to remain in our position to assist the infantry in case any of the bridge sections was hit by shelling, we would have to enter the river to repair it.

No one slept and suddenly the jeeps entered the area as quickly as possible, then with infantry aboard they roared across the bridge. Instantly all hell was let loose as the Germans realised what was happening and started shelling. This part of the river was ideal and had been chosen carefully by the HQ of 108 Group for the bridge was almost covered by a bend and a curve of the river. Gradually the shelling increased, but we had dug our shallow fox holes and felt comparatively safe.

The infantry crossed the river and fanned out on the other side as the armoured cars and light tanks and guns made their way over the bridge. Further down the river the RE were building a Bailey bridge to enable the heavier tanks to cross over. It was now daylight and time for our Company to leave except for our Sections which had been ordered to cover the Company's retreat. As our Section assembled to move off we found that our Sergeant was missing and also our Corporals, as they had the route map we did not know which way to go. However, our Lance Corporal took charge and said we would just make our way back as far as possible and hope we were safe until our missing NCOs arrived. We crept behind a large wall and made our way as quickly as possible. We must have been seen for suddenly the Germans started stonking (shelling) us and we all dived into a ditch by the roadside and crept along on our bellies. Unfortunately on arrival at a safe area we found we had six casualties (wounded). Our NCOs arrived later as we heard that they had been left on the other side of the river. What a shame!!

The river crossing was successful and after bitter fighting 10th Corps captured Minturno and the outside area of Castleforte. Further attempts to advance northwards were unsuccessful, but the aim had been achieved as three German Divisions (approx 30,000 men) were brought south from their reserve in the north to restore the situation.

On 22 January British and American forces landed on the Anzio beaches meeting little opposition. By the 23rd the 1st British and 3rd US Divisions were ashore and the first phase of the operation had gone better than expected. This was all due to the crossing of the river Garigliano forcing thousands of German troops to stay in our area in case we attacked without warning. The Anzio force remained in position and during the next few days 11 Company Pioneer Corps were subject to dive-bombing attacks by the Luftwaffe and the Company suffered two killed and twenty-nine wounded. In mid-February the Germans counter attacked the Allied line at Anzio and forced the British and Americans almost to the original beach-head. The beaches were in the danger zone and once again the Pioneers were working day and night to relieve the situation.

Meanwhile our attacks on the German positions continued at Cassino where both side were gathering their maximum strength for the decisive battle. During the February operations of rebuilding we were under constant shell and mortar fire as continued portering of carrying supplies and the wounded along a track which was rock encumbered and in places was two feet deep in mud. We often lost count of the number wounded, but our CSM who kept count reckoned that on two successive nights we carried 251 and 182 casualties respectively from the heights beyond the Garigliano to the River Road. Our Sergeant-Major Maskell was in charge of our ammunition party which had to take heavy mortar bombs up every steep and muddy

hill which was a three hour climb. As they climbed it was pouring with rain and they were under constant fire. We had been on these manoeuvres for 21 days without a break and our casualties were mounting up. Finally we were ordered back to base for a 48 hour break. There was no transport available as these would have been targeted by the Germans so we marched or stumbled down the mountain side and found we had to swim the river as the bridge had been wrecked.

We were recalled to take our place again with the KOYLIs and support them, but this time we were freezing behind rock built sangers watching the activity on Monte Cassino. There were other attacks taking place on various mountains and gaps all leading to the eventual main attack on Monte Cassino. We, however, were not involved in any of these attacks as a rumour spread amongst the ranks that we were going home.

So much for rumours as the next day we were ordered to a little village called Calabritto where we had to rendezvous with the Northumberland Fusiliers. The Fusiliers were to occupy the village and area and ensure the Germans did not counter attack. We were to act as support troops. As we made our way our Section, No 3, were required to make our way to village and so Cpl Hall and LCpl Brown and twenty men were sent in advance to "reccy" the area and ensure it was safe for the remainder of the Company.

When we were about 400 yards from the village Cpl Hall called a halt in a ravine between 2 small hills. It was actually where the road had been dug in the mountainside and looked a safe place to rest as it was too early to rendezvous with the Fusiliers. Jimmy Anderson, Frank Bennett, 'Jock' Alexander and myself were not too happy with the situation and approached Cpl Hall with a request that we make our way up to the village and wait there. We mentioned that if Jerry opened fire on any movement he may see he only had to hit the mountainside behind us and bring down tons of rock onto our position with disastrous results.

We all lay there motionless, but we were still not happy with our position. We again approached our Corporal but received the order to stay put. We were feeling edgy and again asked if we could go on a patrol as the Fusiliers may have rendezvoused earlier than the set time. Our Corporal said, "Go hell I am responsible for your safety, but if you wish to go and 'reccy' it OK by me, if you are not back in 30 minutes we will know it is safe for us to come and follow you". In a few minutes we reached the village and found the advance party of Fusiliers were there. Suddenly from the ravine came the noise of bursting shell fire and tons of rocks suddenly fell onto where the rest of our Section were in hiding. We hastily returned with some of the Fusiliers but we could not do anything practicable as they were buried deep. Jimmy Addison scrambled over the rocks and hurriedly reported back to HQ. Had we given away our position to the Germans as we had made our way cautiously to the village and thus caused the shelling to commence?

We did not think so but another lucky escape for me, but at the back of my mind were lingering thoughts of had we given away our position, we will never know now anyway. Cpl Hall and LCpl Brown were killed and 4 others injured.

As the build up was still taking place

ready for another big attack we were attached to the Grenadier or Coldstream Guards (I cannot remember which) but on 10 February we were ordered to advance ahead and build shelters (sangers) or dig trenches if possible to enable the guards to advance during darkness and occupy their RV positions without the laborious task of either using their trenching tools or build the sangers in darkness. The advance was successful and silently carried out and we received a commendation from their CO for a job well done. When you think about it we could have been cheap gun fodder as we were saving the infantry once again.

Next day, 11 February, we were ordered to a class 30 ferry crossing which had fallen into a bad condition due to heavy overnight rain and was 2 feet deep in parts. We had to drain it to the best of our ability to keep the advancing traffic moving as they moved up to the front line.

We were now near Minturno. This town was on the road known as Route 7 leading to Gaeta and Anzio and also Route 630 leading to Mt Cassino. It was essential that the town of Minturno and the Minturno Ridge was captured and taken at all costs if headway was to be made to the taking of Mt Cassino. The hills of St Albans dominated the area and these were held by the Germans who had a bird's eye view of any movement below. The 5th (British) Infantry Division and the 201st Guards Brigade and elements of the 23rd Armoured Brigade crossed the river Garigliano and a bridgehead was established despite strong resistance and heavy casualties and considerable problems with mines.

The British 56th Division (Black Cats) made their objective the high ground in the area of Castleforte and by the evening they held either side of the town and had surrounded the Germans who were secure in the town itself. Five of our Sections (including No 3) joined forces in Minturno working to supply the infantry. We worked in 2 shifts from 1800 hrs until 0600 hrs each morning until 15 February under heavy shelling and we had 32 light casualties. On 23 February we were placed under CRE 5th Armoured Division and waited for our next order to advance to Cassino. The other 5 Sections of our Company were moved to our HQ at Sessa and though under heavy shell fire suffered no casualties. Orders were then received for our 5 Sections (incl No 3) to join the rest of the Company and on 2 March 1944 we all met at Afrigola - the first time the Company had been together since we had

landed at Salerno on 9 September. Most of the time during that day was spent in greeting old friends, but also learning for the first time of the loss of a number of mates

who unfortunately had been in the right place but at the wrong time. Lt Hope who had been our guiding light in most operations and Lt Hall said their farewells as they were leaving the Company. It was sad to see our Lieutenants go especially Lt Hope as he had inspired us on numerous occasions. He was, I believe, sent to another Company as a Captain. On 4 March 1944 we sailed from Naples in a Dutch liner homeward bound for England.

Our stay in Italy had been successful and the number of incidents and operations in which we had taken part takes no account of the daily grind of long marches, of lack of rest, of constant exposure to the elements and enemy fire. All this was forgotten or put the back of one's mind as we were going HOME, if the German 'U'

boats would let us. No mention as to the reason, but we knew we had landed at Algiers on 9 November 1942 as raw recruits ignorant of battle experience but we were going home on 4 March 1944 as hardened veterans no doubt ready to face the enemy on future occasions. Where? Churchill didn't tell us. On our second day towards Gibraltar our OC, Major Hubbard, called our Company to report to the upper deck.

We were all agog with excitement thinking we would now be told what our future was and where. It was nothing like that however, only a congratulatory message from General McCreedy who had been our Commander in Italy as part of X Corps.

"At this time when some of you will be leaving X Corps at the end of 6 months continuous operations, I wish to congratulate all ranks of the Pioneer Corps on their splendid work. You came out to North Africa as youths, you are returning home as men past your youth as you kept on going to serve the fighting men in whatsoever sector, in whatever conditions you had to work or on several occasions fight. A fine determination and a spirit of endurance has been shown.

Often your tasks in the front line and forward area has been done under shell and mortar fire. You have always shown a fighting spirit under these conditions and a determination to see the job through. Whether your task has been supporting the infantry, acting as stretcher bearers, or carrying the ammunition and other vital supplies up to the forward infantry in atrocious weather conditions, or making and improving tracks or roads without which our fighting troops would have been at a standstill, it has always been well done. The Pioneer Corps should now be content to rest on my judgement of its conduct and worth to have been at that place CASSINO which we all know was HELL on EARTH. I welcome you all as part of the elite and I have been proud to have you serving under me.

Signed General McCreedy"

On reading and finishing the recommendations all our officers, NCOs and other ranks stood perfectly still, no doubt we were all thinking of our comrades who had been left behind for ever. Suddenly from other parts of the ship came bursts of cheering and cries of "Good Old 'Chunkies'" as other Regiments had been listening to our OC.

We were called to attention and had 2 minutes silence then dismissed.

There was blood on the hill of Cassino
Blood of the faithful and try
There was blood on the hill of Cassino
It was shed for the red, white and blue.

There was hell on the hills of Cassino
With the roar and the thud of the shell
There was hell on the hills of Cassino
Where men fought and died as they fell

There was death on the hills at Cassino
Life was over for many a man
They died on the hills of Cassino
So young with a fore shortened life span

Now there's peace on the hills of Cassino
And song birds there as of yore
In the peace that reigns at Cassino
We'll remember our dead evermore

The white stones that stand at Cassino
Mark the thousands who died on that hill
Their bravery will not be forgotten
Their heroism lingers on still ■

'Cassino was hell on earth'



Lancastrian Fatality

How a family received the news of the greatest sea tragedy of all time

Report: Pte P Beever
Picture: RPC Archive

THE TOTAL loss on the "Lancastria" was around 3,300 of which some 400 were Pioneers. It has been described as the greatest sea tragedy of all time.

1939

1 September - Germany invades Poland. Start of official evacuation of children from the cities

3 September - France and Britain declare war on Germany

13 December - Percy Beever enlists in Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps in Doncaster, aged 35 years 4 months. His attestation shows he was born in Penistone in Yorkshire in 1904. He is described as being 5 ft. 7 ins. weighing 131 lbs, with a fresh complexion and brown eyes and hair. His occupation is labourer and his religious denomination Wesleyan. He signs to say he is willing to enlist for General Service and he is willing to serve outside the UK. He is posted to AMPC No. 2 Centre at Caister-on-Sea, Norfolk.

1940

1 February - Percy embarks with 73 Coy at Southampton as part of the (B.E.F.). Lands in Cherbourg, France.

3 March - 73 Coy. diary records they are located at St. Mesmin (probably the St. Mesmin just north west of Troyes)

14 March - 73 Coy. diary records they are at Anglure near Rheims - working at food and petrol dumps

April - 73 Coy. diary records they are part of 10 Group - working on airfield construction

9 April - Germany invades Denmark and Norway

May - Germany invades Holland and Belgium, then France

May-June - Percy's Casualty Card records 'Between 10-5-40 [and] June 1940 MISSING (B.E.F) South of the Somme'. This is puzzling as we know he was on Lancastria on 17 June, presumably with the rest of the company. However, things would have been pretty chaotic as the Germans broke through, so it could be that he was with a section that lost contact for a while before they regrouped and began the evacuation west. The Somme is a long way north of his Coy HQ and much nearer the German lines, so it could be that they'd been sent up there and lost contact for two or three weeks before finding their way back to Rheims or St. Mesmin.

26 May - Date of last letter received by his wife Agnes Beever from Percy

27 May - Start of evacuation of BEF at Dunkirk

1 - 11 June - 73 Coy. diary records they are 'salvaging rations at Rheims Station. Also salvaging aviation spirit at Forest Of Avize. The town of Anglure is overflowing with refugees.'

12 June - 73 Coy. diary says the Coy concentrates at HQ at St. Mesmin. They then proceed by lorry to Chateau Renault via Blois and Vendome.

13 June - Coy. diary records they have 'moved to Nantes'.

17 June - Coy. diary records: 'Embarked on 'SS LANCASTRIA'

13.00 Air attack on nearby SS ORONSAY which is hit.

16.00 Air attack [on] LANCASTRIA received 2 direct hits and sank in 20 minutes. 153 other ranks drowned, all papers and records lost. Survivors picked up and conveyed to different UK ports. All personnel having spent at least 2 hours in the water.'

22 June - Fall of France

20 July - Letter received by Army authorities from Agnes Beever at 8 St. Lawrence Road Duncroft, requesting information as to the whereabouts of her husband: 'Dear Miss, My husband was in France in the Pioneer Corps when I heard from him last which was May 26th and I have had no news since of his whereabouts I would be much obliged if you would help me in this matter as I am getting very worried about him this was his last address. Pioneer P. Beever, No 9 Section, 73 Coy. A.M.P.C. B.E.F.'

3 December - Pioneer Corps Record office at Bournemouth receives memo from War Office stating that if Pte P. Beever's death is subsequently established, they need not send out the Form of Application for pension for a widow, as they (the War Office) would inform the Ministry of Pensions instead.

1941

14 February - Pioneer Corps Record Office at Bournemouth receives letter from Agnes: 'Dear Sir, I would be much obliged if you could give me any information concerning the whereabouts of 73 Coy, 9 Section of the Pioneers of whom my husband was serving with in France and who I have not heard of since May as I'm anxious to get in touch with some of his Company as I may get to know something I am enclosing a stamped addressed envelope for reply.' Lt. Colonel Baldwin of Pioneer Corps Records forwards the letter to 'The officer in charge No.35 Group Pioneer Corps 'for information, and any action that you may consider necessary', but the stamped addressed envelope is filed with Agnes' letter, indicating she may not have received a reply, or they did not use the envelope. The address on the envelope is 8, St. Lawrence Road, Duncroft.

28 June - War Office at Liverpool informs Pioneer Corps Record Office in Bournemouth in a memo that 'It has been decided that the information concerning the above [Pte. P. Beever] that he was killed in action at sea on 17/6/40 (drowned ex SS Lancastria) must now be accepted as evidence of death, in view of the lapse of

time during which no news has been received. All appropriate action should be taken accordingly, including notification of next-of-kin ... care being taken to show ... that the date of death is now shown is authorised by this office, thus:-

"17/6/40. Authority R. Casualties."

1 August - Pioneer Corps Record Office in Bournemouth receives notification from Ministry of Pensions in Blackpool that a pension of 22s/6d a week has been awarded to Agnes Beever along with an allowance of 19s/9d a week in respect of her three children, with effect from 8.9.41.

22 August - Pioneer Corps Record Office receives Effects Form 118A from War Office in Liverpool requesting that any articles of personal property belonging to Percy are returned to Agnes at 8 St. Lawrence Road, including any medals.

24 October - Pioneer Corps Record Office in Bournemouth receives memo from War Office Casualty Branch in Liverpool informing them that 'On reconsideration of the circumstances in connection with the report of death authorised in this case, it has been decided that the evidence is such that he should be recorded as:- Presumed KIA drowned at sea ex. SS "Lancastria" ... No communications should be addressed to the NOK regarding this re-assessment, but should any enquiry be received regarding the nature of any death certificate, non-publication or any such matter, the reply should merely indicate that the exact posting is "Presumed ...etc."

1942

18 May - Pioneer Corps Record Office receives memo from the War Office Casualty Branch in Liverpool: 'The extract shown below is included in a report from German official Totenliste No 66 and can be regarded as acceptable for any necessary action. Name - Beever, Percy. Date and place of birth - 28.8.04 Pennistone. Rank - Pte Regimental No - 13005168 WES (P) Remarks - Dead. Buried Cemetery des Brochets. 'This list from the Germans is the final confirmation. I guess he was buried there initially by the locals and then after the war they moved the remains of the British soldiers from all along that coast to the one site at Pornic, established by War Graves Commission.'

1949

30 September - Combined Record Office in Wimborne, Dorset receives the following form completed, but not signed by Agnes: Dear Sir, No.13005168. Name Pte. P. Beever, Corps RPC. I, being the legal beneficiary/next of kin of the above named soldier, request that the Campaign Stars and Commemorative Medals awarded to him are sent to me at the following address:- 15 East Ave, Stainforth,

6 October - Medals issued (1939-45 Star). ■



D-Day

■ Field Marshall Montgomery talking to Pioneers repairing the road to Douvres in France.

Picture: RPCA Archive

We do the difficult immediately - the impossible takes a little longer

Report: Gordon Webb 21 Sept 1944
Picture: RPCA Archive

THE MEN of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps have used their picks and shovels – and their rifles – in battle zones across the world. Their official motto is on their badge.

Their unofficial motto is: “We do the difficult immediately. The impossible takes a little longer.”

These men wage war with a pick and shovel chiefly – but are ready to use weapons at a split second’s notice. The jobs they are called upon to do are legion; their ages vary from the teens to the fifties. In a single day they may be stretcher-bearers, airfield constructors, road-makers – and fighting soldiers.

They are the men of the Pioneer Corps, masters of trained technique and swift improvisation, yet men of whose courage and skill we hear little of.

In their ranks you’ll find a grand blend of A1 young soldiers with “old sweats” of the last war. Wherever we have carried the war they have been among the first to go into action.

Greatest moment in the history of the Pioneer Corps came on D-Day. Thirteen pioneer companies went in on the first tide – there are about 400 men to a company. They had to wade ashore with full equipment. It was quite a way to the beaches, and the rough seas continually threatened to sweep them off their feet.

Against the Tide

Some of them were armed as infantry, carrying flexible wire netting which had to be laid to get our lorries over the sand-dunes. Others carried petrol, boxes of ammunition and their picks and shovels.

Some of the landing craft were swept on to sandbanks and grounded. The Pioneers in them had to swim ashore – with their picks and shovels. A large number of the

men later reported missing must have been drowned, but the others went on.

As they struggled through the surf they found that they had to fight before they could start their work. They exchanged shot for shot with the Germans defending the beaches and helped drive them back. Sixteen men of one company rounded up 86 German marines and took them prisoner.

Then came the pick and shovel work. They cleared the beaches of enemy obstacles, built up our storage dumps – most of the time under heavy shellfire and harassing sniping.

Three companies were detailed for stretcher-bearing, one to each beach sub-area. All the beaches were cleared of our dead and wounded by the evening of D plus 2. Pioneers worked through the day and night in the field dressing stations.

Four companies who had been specially trained took over another task – setting up and operating Rhine ferries to carry vehicles from ship to shore. It was difficult work against the fast running tide, but soon lorries, tanks and trucks were streaming over in the ferries.

After the initial assault on the beaches had swept inland the great cry was for new airfields. More work for the Pioneer Corps and their picks and shovels.

The Pioneer Companies who formed an integral part of the airfield construction groups had received a long period of specialised training in England. Most of the men were employed laying tracks on the runways and operating the varied technical equipment used in this work. The airfields were ready on time – or before time.

Then the need came for roads, the existing ones were utterly inadequate and far too narrow to take the incoming traffic of a modern mechanised army. The call went out – to the Pioneer Corps of course.

At one time twenty companies of Pioneers were concentrating on this task

alone. New roads had to be built, old ones widened, surfaces made adequate.

The men working in a blinding swirl of dust; often the traffic almost ran them down on its way to the battlefield. In the forward areas many of these pick-and-shovel soldiers were killed by enemy snipers.

A Giant Task

The weather worsened, a three-day storm reduced to a trickle the stream of supplies which could be landed. The ammunition situation grew acute. The order went out that all available Pioneer companies should be switched over to handling ammunition and building up a safe reserve. That job, too, was done.

Pioneer Corps achievements from D-Day onwards owed much to experience bitterly won on the shores of North Africa and the beaches of Sicily and Italy. Men of the fire-fighting units who went in with our troops in Normandy had already added this job to their long list of skilled accomplishments and the fires they were handling were all too frequently amongst live ammunition.

And when it was decided to de-crate ammunition to prevent the spread of fire the Pioneer Corps carried out the work of de-crating.

I can give only a brief glimpse of the giant task the Pioneer Corps have been doing silently and unobtrusively since the first day of war back in 1939. They have used their picks and shovels – and their rifles – in battle zones across the world.

A large number have given their lives in carrying out seemingly unspectacular jobs. But without them the fighting men could not have gone forward.

The official motto of the Pioneer Corps is “Labor omnia vincit”. I have a sneaking preference for the unofficial one: We do the difficult immediately. The impossible takes a little longer.”

By Gordon Webb “Daily Sketch” Special Correspondent. ■



Picture: Paul Brown

■ Our Chelsea Pensioner, Mickey Hall at the Association Reunion Weekend 2009



■ Association Reunion Weekend 2009

Picture: Paul Brown



■ Marching onto parade, Association Reunion Weekend 2009

Picture: Mr P Bradley



■ Marching onto parade, Association Reunion Weekend 2009

Picture: Paul Brown



■ Laying the wreath, Association Reunion Weekend 2009

Picture: Mr P Bradley



■ Association members lining up for some photos

Picture: Mr P Bradley



■ Association members lining up for some photos

Picture: Mr P Bradley



■ Servers vs Veterans Football Match, Association Reunion Weekend 2009

Picture: Paul Brown



Founders Day, Chelsea Hospital

Picture: WO2 J Mormon



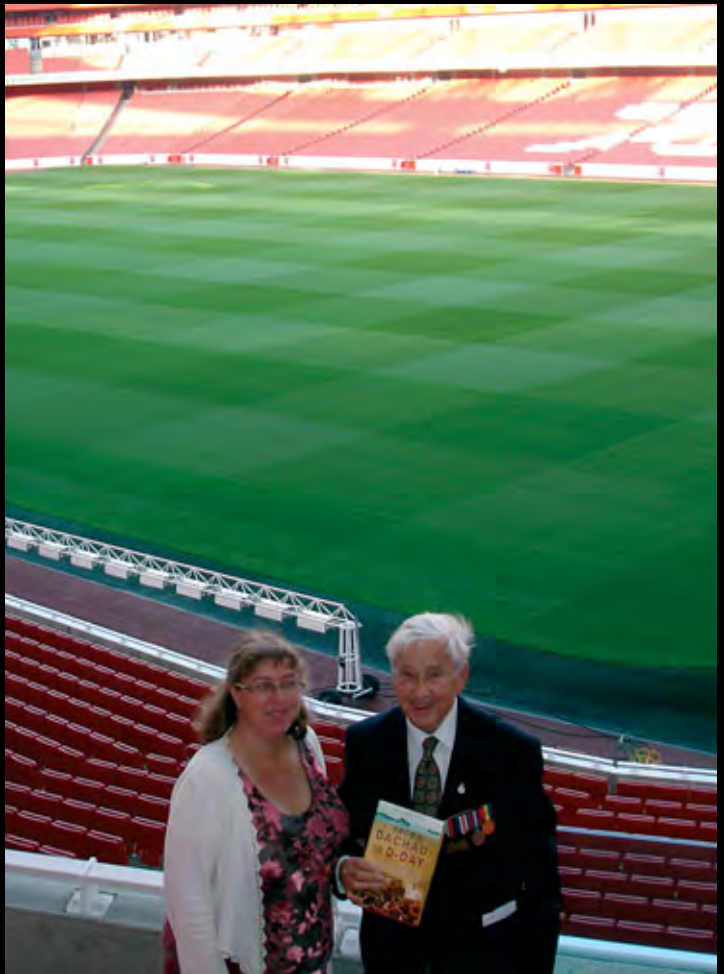
Normandy, Pioneer Monument

Picture: Supplied



Willy Field and Lt Col John Starling at the Emirates Stadium

Picture: Mr N Brown



Helen Fry, author of 'Dachau to D-Day' and Willy Field

Picture: Mr N Brown



VRSM Medals - LCpl Gibb, Sgt Haynes, WO2 Finnmore, LCpl Gibbons, Sgt Thompson, LCpl Dalton, Pte Gibb

Picture: 168 Pnr Regt RLC(V)



Tom and Gloria celebrate their Ruby Wedding Anniversary

Picture: Supplied



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: Supplied



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: Supplied



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn





■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn



■ Operation Herrick, Afghanistan

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn





Operation Tosca, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus

Picture: Paul Brown



Operation Tosca, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus

Picture: Paul Brown



Operation Tosca, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus

Picture: Paul Brown



Operation Tosca, Mobile Force Reserve, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus

Picture: Paul Brown



Picture: Paul Brown

■ 23 Pioneer Regiment, RLC, Rugby Team



■ Operation Tosca, Mobile Force Reserve, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus Picture: Paul Brown



■ Operation Tosca, Adventure Training, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus Picture: Paul Brown



■ Operation Tosca, Adventure Training, 23 Pioneer Regt, Cyprus Picture: Paul Brown



■ Operation Tosca, 23 Pioneer Regiment, Cyprus Picture: Paul Brown



■ Op Tosca, Catering Warrant Officer shows off his crossed axes Picture: Paul Brown



■ Operation Tosca, Lifeguards, 23 Pioneer Regiment, Cyprus Picture: Paul Brown



A lecture on man management and leadership

Officer commanding 2038 Mauritian company RPC

Y Report: Major A C Woodroffe 27-02-45
Picture: RPC Archive

EVERY MAN under your command is a separate entity. Every man under your command is different. Each one has his own personality, his own background, his own likes and dislikes, troubles and fears. There is no general pattern. Your first step in man management will be in trying to understand in what way each of your men is different and what makes them tick.

The first thing that you will discover is that every man has a name and prefers to be called by it. Nobody likes to be spoken to as "He, you!" or worse still, as "Hey! You with the square head". We live in the age of the personality cult. The world of commerce has already appreciated this fact to its advantage. Is it not heart-warming to be greeted by the Head Waiter of your favourite restaurant by name? Makes you feel a little important, doesn't it?

Begin, therefore, by learning the name of every man under your command. It pays dividends. A man's reaction is not, as you might suppose, surprise that you should know his name – it goes much deeper than that; he feels that you have gone to some trouble to learn it, he feels that you care; he is no longer a number – now he is an entity. That is the basis of man management, the ability to care.

You will find the study of men to be an absorbing task. You will be astounded that you understand some of your men so easily. You appear to be on the same 'wavelength' as it were. They know at once what you are talking about or trying to say, almost instinctively. Others, on the other hand, always seem to be difficult and contrary, express totally different opinions from yours and you find it difficult to communicate with them. This does not necessarily mean that you are right and they are wrong. To understand these soldiers you will need to know their minds, their backgrounds, and why they take certain attitudes. Some men are even more difficult and are what I call, 'prickly pears', 'horny cusses'. Who just refuse to be understood. Frequently, these men are tough and independent. A weak leader will accept that they are awkward and will avoid them altogether or give in to them whenever their paths cross. This is an error. You must recognise strength in personality, even if it makes your life a little harder. So often I have found these, 'prickly pears', to be the ones who are still in there fighting when all others have fled – for the basic reason that they are obstinate and will not give in. These are the priceless casualties in

a soldier which must be encouraged, rather than weakened.

Be careful that you do not confuse the 'prickly pear', who is a pearl without price with the man who is truly impossible. There used to be a saying in the British Army that there were no bad men only bad leaders. This is a large slice of baloney. Think back to the beginnings of this unit for some examples, we began with some of the most incredible soldiers of all time. What can you do with a confirmed drunkard? How can you teach a confirmed drunkard? My advice is – don't even try. Your duty as a Commander begins and ends by recognising them quickly and getting them out of your Unit before they can do any damage.

You will notice that men will respond willingly to some leaders and not to others. If you make a study of the methods of the successful ones, you will find that they invariably have confidence in themselves, show enthusiasm even for the most menial tasks, have a sense of humour, and are proficient soldiers.

A lot depends on the way you go about things. Tone of voice, for instance, is most important. One tone, which you will use when you are 'on duty', will indicate to your men – they will know you just as you will know them – that you mean business, but no fooling, get on with the job, lads. Be the same every day, not easy-going and playful one day and hard as nails the next. This confuses the men, understandably.

The bed-rock of man management, however is discipline. Nothing is more certain than that you will obtain the best results with your men, if you insist on a high standard of discipline. You will soon find that your men, all men, prefer to be led firmly with discipline. It results in fairer treatment for one thing and every man knows what to expect and where he stands. Once you have decided on your standard of discipline – and this is really a matter to suit your personality and may vary from 'iron hand' tactics to the other end of the scale, where you merely insist that your orders are carried out – you must apply the golden rule of consistency. My advice in regard to this is to take no chances and to be 'Regimental'. Be hard, but fair. Strangely enough, men take a pride in being treated hardly. Let your men know that when you are 'on parade', you are very much 'on parade'. Off parade you can relax a little. This will demand on your personality. But watch it. More man management problems arise off duty than on. It is totally impossible to spend a night drinking with your men and yet expect them to answer your commands the next day. Familiarity

breeds contempt. Human nature works that way and, whilst some of your men will appreciate the difference between off duty and on, there will always be the few who will wreck the thing for you on the parade ground.

With regard to familiarity, should you use Christian names? On parade, definitely not. Off parade, everything depends on the circumstances. I do not think that an occasion can ever arise when juniors would address you by your Christian name. And whilst on this subject – make no favourites.

This leads to endless discontent and can be as hard to the man favoured, as it is unfair on the others. Keep your relationship formal.

Man management, I think you will agree is something that we can all learn. We do not have to be greatly gifted to do it. But how do we become leaders of the men? We become leaders of men, in the first instance, by showing that we are worthy of being followed. Men will only follow a man that they respect. Let us study how we can earn the respect which will turn us into leaders.

We begin with self-discipline. Let us give you an example. The rules which are laid down for your men, must be obeyed by you, regardless of the privileges which may go with your rank. It PT Parade is at 0600 hours, then you should appear on it on time and not be lying in bed, encouraging your men from the warmth of your blankets. Your personal behaviour will come under the closest scrutiny. Men have an inbred desire to respect their leader and express excessive self-indulgence will wreck that ideal. No man will follow a booze artist – except, perhaps into a pub – no matter what excellent company he may be. This does not mean that you must be puritanical, but your standard of personal behaviour must be above average.

Next will come a thorough knowledge of your job. Anything you may ask your men to do you must be capable of doing yourself, from walking fifty miles in full equipment to stripping a machine gun. You must be technically superior in all facets of soldiering. You must be fit, if not fitter, than your men. You must demonstrate to your men that, 'you know your stuff'. This will impart confidence, which in its turn, will instill a sense of respect and build up your powers of leadership.

Let me stress the great importance of being able to communicate with your men. The best way to impress your personality on your men is by frequent talks and discussions. You must practice the art of public speaking and develop a facility for getting your message across clearly and

concisely. You must learn to instruct, for teaching will be one of your main occupations as a leader.

There are many rewards attached to leadership, but the friendship of your men is not one of them. Leadership, is generally speaking, a lonely task. It has to be so, it is impossible for a good leader to be chummy with his men and yet subject them to his orders, many of which will be unpopular, even harsh.

The comradeship of men in the ranks is a warm and rewarding feeling a rare sensation only know to soldiers who have roughed it and braved battle together. Many men recognise this and stay in the ranks, preferring comradeship to the joy of command, which is a different thing altogether. I mention this, so that you will be warned against the cardinal error of trying to curry favour with your men or seeking popularity. It never works. The best you can hope for is the respect of your men, and this can be a considerable reward in itself.

Now let me deal with two aspects of leadership in practice. Firstly, the good leader is one who cares for his men. On active service, the average soldier is usually completely reliant on his leaders for a variety of things, from the supply of food to ammunition. The good leader looks after the welfare and comfort of his troops. He sees they are billeted reasonably, have blankets, and food, and receive their share of creature comforts available. He ensures

that Guard Rosters are fairly arranged and that 'willing horses' are not given too great a burden to carry. The health of his men and their morale must be his constant anxiety. He does not nurse them, but makes himself available at all times to help them care for themselves and represents their case at higher levels whenever necessary. He cares about them.

Imagine that you are riding along in convoy and suddenly you run into an ambush. Bullets are flying everywhere and confusion and panic grip the column. This is the 'moment of truth' for you as a leader. Every man will look to you for leadership. In this moment you will stand or fall in their eyes. How do you react? My advice to you is simply this. Anticipate every situation which can arise in battle and think out your reaction to it, well in advance. The split second which you gain can be decisive.

As soon as trouble strikes, shout out an order. It matters little what it is, so long as you let your men know you are in command, "Take cover", for instance – obvious enough and something which they will do in any event, but the fact that you have reacted immediately to the situation and given an order is a relief to your men.

Your next order is eagerly awaited. Go on, and lead firmly. Do not let your men flounder about, wandering if they should take the initiative, something they have heard so much about. Invariably this leads them into trouble. This is your job. You

must lead. You must tell them what to do.

Finally, let me say something about that powerful emotion, 'sympathy'. Watch out for it. It has no place on the battle field. A stern, even a harsh, word to a wounded man will often induce in him a fighting spirit, which will react to his own advantage.

I have seen men die from an overdose of sympathy.

Sympathy, no matter how well meant, must be carefully controlled on the field of battle. In the Casualty Station it may be a different thing.

Let me recap. To manage your men well you must know them. You must know them intimately, beginning with their names and ending with their private histories. This is the very core of man management.

To lead men you must gain their respect. To do this, you will have to show them that you are worthy of it. You must, at the same time, be as fit as any of them and technically better than all of them.

This way you will impart confidence. Finally, to lead conclusively in battle, you must show yourself to be their leader when the time comes. In the moment of truth, when they look for leadership, your must not fail them.

Let me end by saying that a leader is only as good as the sum of the man he leads; but let me also assure you that a good leader can raise this sum to the power of ten, by caring for his men, setting a good example, and leading with a firm hand. ■



Life and death of a rural mansion

The Pioneer Corps used the hall in the mid fifties

Report: Norman Brown
Picture: RPCA Archive

THERE IS something almost spooky about visiting the site of a once-great house, since demolished. It's odd to think of the forgotten lives who lived there and all the energy and skill that went into building it. A splendid mansion in the Jacobean style, it was built in 1904 on the instructions of Arthur Ashworth, a Manchester cotton merchant, who gave his architect, GH Kitchen, pretty much a free hand.

The Jacobean style didn't go down too well with architectural aesthetes in a largely

Gothic area, and Ashworth is said to have placated critical opinion by appointing a firm of local builders, William Randles and Son - a firm that had hitherto only built small houses. Masons, carpenters and bricklayers were brought in from all over North Wales. In all, 84 men worked on the house, commencing in 1906 and finishing six years later. Stone was brought from Cefn Quarry by horse-drawn cart and Dick Randles who left school to work on the house as an apprentice joiner, later supervised the Cefn end.

Two men were needed to produce designs from the sandstone. One to hold the template and the other to etch the

design on the stone. Horsley was never a happy haven for its owner. A few years after moving in, Ashworth's business got into financial difficulties and eventually collapsed. His only son, Phillip, was killed on Army service in Arabia, and Ashworth sold Horsley to Lord Wavertree.

It soon seemed that the hall was doomed. It became a billet for the military during the Second World War, and for a short while after the war, it was pressed into service as a public school.

The Royal Pioneer Corps used the hall in the mid-fifties in addition to the Depot at Wrexham. Unfortunately the hall was demolished in the late fifties. ■





My Service with 120 Company

“I saw both Monty and Winnie at Normandy...”

Report: Pte H C Whitehead
Picture: Pte H C Whitehead

ON THE 1st September 1939, Germany invaded Poland and the Second World War had begun. My brother Joe was a 'Terrier' and was called up to full service on that day. I agreed to look after his allotment until such time as I was called up. On the 3rd September Britain declared war on Germany. I had been to church that Sunday morning, and got back to my home in Lissadel Street in time to hear Chamberlain make the declaration.

When I went to work the next day, it was obvious in the Jewish quarters that they were scared. One or two women had rushed into the streets in a panic, screaming that the Jerry planes were coming to bomb them immediately. The phoney war crept on, and men were being called up in their turn. My turn came in April 1940, but my boss got me a three months deferment, so that he had time to sort his business out. The phoney war was now over, and the Blitzkrieg had begun. Eventually, my calling up papers came, telling me to report to the Auxiliary Military Training Camp, Nitshill, Glasgow on the 18th July 1940. It is interesting to note, that I should have originally reported to Caiston, on the 11th July. This had been scratched out on the papers, and the new date and place substituted. I found out afterwards that the Germans had badly damaged the camp in Caiston in a bombing raid. My family was not happy in Lissadel Street, so we made a move to 26 Chapel Street.

My last couple of days of freedom was spent doing as much decorating as I could, I tidied up my personal affairs. Mr Hilton of the next allotment promised to look after the allotment. I gave mother the bulk of my savings, which was about £6.10.0. I said goodbye to my friends, and was all set to go. When I left 26 Chapel Street, my sister May kissed me goodbye, but Agnes my younger sister was too shy to. Mother and Shemus McManus came to the railway station with me. Poor mother looked so sad and forlorn, as the train moved away. I shouted to Shamus to look after her, and see her home. That was a heartbreaking time for me.

It was 11p.m. when I arrived at the camp, and I was one hour late. Everything was dark because of the blackout, and I was bundled into a bell tent. There were some other live bodies there, but I couldn't see who they were. I had no bedding, and so spent a miserable night. Morning and daylight, and I could see my comrades. There were six others, and they looked as miserable as I felt. Now came kitting and sorting out.

There were about 5,000 men in the camp, they were in various stages of process. Companies were formed, or being

formed. We seven were kept together, and put with 250 other men, to form and become the 120th Company Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps (AMPC). We were mainly Lancashire lads, but were still about 36 men under strength. Thirty-six Londoners were drafted in later that week, and the 120th Company was full strength. Conditions were primitive, and complaints were loud throughout the whole camp. I personally didn't find it too bad. Anyhow, the Lord Provost (Lord Mayor) of Glasgow visited the camp, gave us a pep talk and twenty Woodbines each, and that was that.

When I was called up, the AMPC was a real mixed bag. The originals consisted mainly of older men, who had served in the Great War. I was intrigued to see 'Old Bill' sat outside his tent. This was Bruce Bairnsfather, who became very well known in the Great War. His best cartoon was one of 'Old Bill', sat in a shell hole, and saying, "If you know of a better hole, go to it!" There were lots of other old sweats, and quite a number of old lags. These were men with criminal records who had been drafted out of other army units, and put into the Pioneers. There were lots of Great War heroes, too. My brother Joe informed me that the Pioneers had more VC's in its ranks, than any other unit. Dunkirk proved the use of the Pioneers, and so lots of new draftees went straight in to swell the ranks. Apart from ordinary men like myself, there were also one or two notable people. There was Jacky Brown, who came from Manchester, and had been the World Flyweight boxing champion. When I saw him, he was lined up outside the medical officer's tent, and looked most miserable. There was also Sydney Wooderson, who was the fastest man in the world over the mile distance. The 4 minute mile hadn't been cracked then. He too was called up to our camp. He made an attempt on the Scottish mile record, and beat it without much effort. I think the time was clocked at about 4 minutes 12 seconds. There was also Nat Gonella there too. He was very well known in top band circles. Bank Managers and City business men were ten a penny. So were cinema managers. I made friends with one, Roy North. I believe he too formerly worked in the 'City', and wore spats to work. He was a very good man with a very keen brain. He had a sound knowledge of Radio Location, better known as radar these days. It wasn't very long before he was taken out of the Pioneers, and was put to work on radio location. I lost a good friend then.

After a period of training, the 120th Company was moved to Thornlie Bank, another suburb of Glasgow. Now we had both work and training. Britain had huge supply depots everywhere. The biggest of

these was, or had been, in Deptford, London. This was No 1 SRD (Supply Reserve Depot). The Jerries bombed the place badly, and so No 1 SRD was moved to Thornlie Bank. Thousands of tins of tinned food was continually coming in and going out. It was our job to store and despatch these goods. I can assure you, there was lots of hard grind. On top of this we did our training and guard duties. We were often very tired 'sojers', as the local people called us. We lived in tents in the mud, and there were thirteen or fourteen to a tent meant to hold eight. The men got fed up and mutinied. Ring leaders were sorted out and sent to HQ Company, the rest of us were put in St Patrick's Hall and Carwardric School. I was billeted in the school, and this was much better with lots of space. Incidentally, this was the same school that Ian Brady went to later on. He was the man who was later convicted for the 'Murders of the Moor'.

We had a nice civilian caretaker at the school. Mrs Playford was married to a one legged man, and they had two lovely daughters, Mary and Anne. I was in Section 8, and we would have a billet orderly, who would not go out to work, but would stay in and keep the billets clean. Normally he would be changed every week. I liked the job, and made a good job of it, so it was decided that I stay on indefinitely. This way I got to know Mrs Playford well. It wasn't long before I got to know her husband and daughters too, and they were a grand family. I never made any advances to the daughters, but often took them to company dances and such. Then I in turn would be taken to their friends and relations. I would soon get through my billet duties, and so was able to get out early and spend lots of time in Glasgow.

Britain was being blitzed, and Glasgow got its turn. We had one spell that lasted five days. I was doing a full stint at the SRD by day, and continued on and off guard duties by night. We had hardly any sleep at that time. The SRD didn't suffer much damage, but when morning came, we found shrapnel all over the place. Often, all

around the spot where I had been on guard. God must have looked after me, because that shrapnel could be heard, coming down continuously, but not one piece hit me. I had a happy time when brother Joe came and spent the day with me. He had his food with us, and just mixed with the men. I showed him Ben Nevis from my hut window.

I am a bit vague on the date, but I think it was early May 1941. It was a sunny day, and a little plane was buzzing around, high in the sky. This went on for some time, and then the plane disappeared from sight. Later on came reports that it had landed

‘There were about 5,000 men in the camp’

about three miles down the road, and that the German pilot had been taken prisoner. His name was Rudolf Hess. Some of our men went up the road and came back with bits and pieces of the plane as souvenirs. I didn't go, but was given a little piece of wire from the plane. I kept it in a matchbox for a long time, and then lost it. We were no longer billeted in the school and hall, but had moved into a Nissan hut camp on the Stewortron Road. The Duke of Hamilton lived on this road, and that was where Hess had been heading for. This was the same camp that brother Joe had visited me at.

All good things come to an end, and now in August 1941, we were to move from Glasgow, and go the Shetland Isles. But first, I want to mention a move that the 120 Company did not make. Our Company was supposed to go from Nitshill to Northern Ireland, but we were still under strength, so another company was sent in our place. We learned afterwards that the ship was torpedoed, and that eight hundred lives were lost. On to the Shetlands; this was supposed to be a nine months station, because of the severe conditions. Troops and shipping were hard to replace, so our nine months stretched into two years.

Our first place was Brock Camp, Lerwick, It was ditched all around, and we knew that there were rats about. One evening, my friends and I were returning from an evening in the town, and as we neared the camp we heard this scuffling and squealing. We saw movement across the road, and shining a torch in the ditch, we saw it was packed tight with rats. The rats were on the move to another field; we were scared to death, because we would be done for if they attacked us. We stood still for ages, until there was a gap in the roadway, then we hurried to camp. We weren't bothered much with rats afterwards.

Our work was building and digging fortifications and trenches on the big Stainey Hill, overlooking the town. It was solid rock, and we nicknamed it Stoney Hill. There wasn't a tree on the whole island. It was always bitterly cold in winter, which seemed to last right through the year. One hundred mile an hour winds were not uncommon, and summer, when it did come, came in glorious colour. The sun would still be shining near midnight, and would rise again after 4a.m. Winter was the reverse, and there would be as much as twenty hours of darkness, and about four hours of daylight.

We were under naval command at first, and got a good daily rum ration, but this fell away when the Army took over. We were allowed extra clothes, bedding and food, but we were cold and hungry most of the time. The Army, Navy and Air Force were there. The Navy and Air Force did not get on together; the Army was in between and got on with both. When it came to leave, we got the best places on the ships, the Air Force got the worst. When it came to entertainment, the very fine Ensa shows were held in the Air Force hangars. We got good seats, and the Navy got the worst.

We would do normal camp guard plus dawn manning, and this was awful, getting up an hour before dawn on a winter's morning. We also did deck patrol in the early hours. This was all extra to our normal stint on Stoney Hill. Dock patrol had its interest, because we would often see grey shapes gliding in and out. Sometimes we would be near enough to see the names on the shapes. Later on the BBC would announce that HM Submarine Swordfish, or Sea Wolf or Shark had been out and sunk so much enemy shipping,

picked up some survivors, or even captured an enemy U boat. Lerwick was a secret submarine base.

We travelled about the mainland, or Zetland as it was called, bringing in sand or other requirements, for our work. Girlster was one of the places we would often go to. There was a field nearby, and a couple of depressions were pointed out to us, and we were informed that these were the spots where the first German bombs fell on Britain. The locals said the bombs killed a cow, not a rabbit, as is commonly believed. Near here we would often see fishing boats coming in; some sail, some steam. We were to learn that these were escapees from German occupied Norway, which was only 169 miles away. There is a book written about this, called "The Shetland Bus".

We had an extension built to our camp, and this was occupied mainly by Commandoes. They would go out on the job, and come back hours, or even days, later. Their job was to raid Norway, and knock out radar installations, and go for the heavy water plants, which were so vital to the German atomic bomb effort. These commandoes would tell us about it. Such as one occasion, when they went into a German barracks and slit the throats of the soldiers as they lay sleeping. There were lighter moments. We had all sorts of pets in the camp, including a Shetland pony. The commandoes captured this pony, put oilskins over its back, gumboots round its neck, and tied a tin hat on its head. Then they gave its bottom a good whack, and sent it running through the camp. It was a high spirited beast, and went straight for our Sergeant Major. It was so funny to see it kicking out at him, and he defending himself with his stick. The pony did what we would have loved to do, and we just loved the commandoes for thinking up this trick. There were sad moments too. A Salford friend got so down with conditions, that he ended up trying to commit suicide. He cut his wrists, but was found and saved in time.

The Shetlands had no pubs, and only one cinema. There was also a known brothel in Lerwick; 10 Constitution Street was well known, and often frequented, but not by yours truly. There was very little female company for the 40,000 troops, so it was not surprising that some could not contain themselves; the brothel was an outlet. Our own company also had a chap who was hungry, so he raided the cookhouse and stole some bread. He was put in the guardroom. When he came out, he went to his hut and tried to shoot the corporal who had caught him. He missed the corporal, but hit a very good friend of his and mine. He was heartbroken over it, but luckily, 'Grandma' Grason soon recovered.

By way of a break, we were sent in small groups at a time to a pleasant little island called Wallsey. We didn't do any work, but continued training and drilling. One of the things we did during this training, was to put on equipment and respirators on our faces, and then run up and down hills, This was very strenuous. They gave the same training to the Militia after the war, but it was stopped after one or two died over exertion; I think their hearts burst.

My first leave came in November 1941. While I was home, I went down to see Mr Hilton. Marion invited me to tea the following Tuesday. I was introduced to this girl, who had also been invited. I went home the same way as the girl, so I saw

here to her door, and then said goodnight. I was tickled pink, the way she chattered on and on, whilst we were going home. Her name, by the way, was Ada Stewart. I thought very little about this interlude until I was back in the Shetlands. Then I received a letter in a strange handwriting. I cheated and looked who it was from, before I read it. It was signed 'Ada'. I hoped it was Ada Stewart, and not from Ada Walker. It was from Ada Stewart, and our romance blossomed from then onwards. It is interesting to record that Marion Hilton had tried her hand at matchmaking; first by introducing Ada to me, and then daring her to write to me. We both soon got wise to this, but we kept Marion in the dark for ages.

To mention two episodes at Lerwick: a German plane came low over the Straits.

The ack ack guns on Bressay lowered their sights and fired. They did more damage to Lerwick than to the German plane. The second episode was when it was a very stormy day, and dozens of sea mines had broken their moorings, and were hitting the harbour, exploding and causing a lot of damage. It was a miniature blitz. Marksmen exploded some of the mines by hitting the points before the mines got to the harbour. A motor torpedo boat was hit, and caused a huge blast. Its Norwegian sailors came rushing up the hill (Stoney), scared to death.

After twelve months in Lerwick, the 120 Company was moved to Sumburgh. This was a much happier place to be in; the ground was softer and the digging easier, I got a job as an assistant to the REME electrician, who was in charge of all that part of the island. I took a little course and became a maintenance electrician, 3rd class. This gave me 3d a day extra on my pay. Concerning pay, I started in the army at fourteen shillings a week. I allowed mother seven shillings of that, there was a compulsory stoppage of one shilling a week credit, and I was left with six shillings a week. I finished up in 1946 with forty-nine shillings a week, less my wife's allowance and credit stoppage.

There was a big airfield at Sumburgh, and we would watch the planes coming and going. Sometimes they would come in all shot up. Lots of them made safe belly lands, but others just crumpled. There were casualties, but not a lot. The worst of these, was when a big Canadian plane had missed its mark, and hit the 500 feet high cliff at Fitful Head.

During our long stay in the Shetlands, we only had our blankets changed once. Most of the time, we would take them out and beat them like carpets, they were as dusty too. We were able to buy lovely sheep-skin rugs, and Fair Isle gloves and pullovers, if we had the money, which wasn't often. I was actually sad when we had to leave the place; it's wild rugged beauty had grown on me. Its lovely summer colours, and the glorious Northern lights need to be seen, and not talked about.

Before I finish with the Shetlands, I must mention the sea trips whilst going on leave. The waters were the roughest in the world, and I was the worst sailor; always seasick. The very last trip of all, for leave, they asked for volunteers to try some new pellets, and would we write our reactions on the form provided. I was the first to volunteer. The pellets seemed to clamp my jaws together, and my stomach was like a tight ball. But I wasn't seasick, oh, happiness of happiness. That was the best trip (although the roughest sea), I had ever

'The ditch was packed tight with rats'

taken. Those pellets were the very beginning of travel sickness tablets.

In November 1943 I left the Shetland Isles, and travelled down to Aberdeen, where I spent the weekend, and then on to the 120 Company's PC new station, which was at Leith, Edinburgh. You will notice that the AMPC had given way to the PC, and we were now, and had been for some time, integrated in the British Army. The Auxiliary had been dropped, and we were now plain and simply PC, or Pioneer Corps. Other units referred to us as pineapple chunks or chunkies. At Leith, the port of Edinburgh, we were billeted first at the big army barracks, and there were also other army units billeted there. Discipline was very strict. There were Military Police and Provost Corporals and Sergeants, to see that we didn't have a button undone, that we walked correctly, or that we did not walk across the parade ground, or that we did salute officers etc etc. Pioneers were known for their working abilities, but not for their smartness.

My own 120th Company was an exception; we could work and be smart. Our Commanding Officer had seen to that. He was a Russian, by the name of Tchplane; we called him Polo Joe. A newspaper article incorrectly said that we called him Charlie Chaplin. He was a very gifted man, who had been a professional soldier all over the world, after being a submarine commander in the Russian Navy, before the Revolution in 1917. He could speak seven or eight languages, and was reputed to have more medals than Monty, but not quite as many as Goring! Yes, he kept us smart when it was most needed, and so we didn't have much trouble with those MP's.

Our work in Leith was mainly on the Docks, or at a Military Supply Depot, and there was a docks canteen, where we could go for our breaks. The canteen was run by the WVS, and it was here that I got to know a nice old WVS lady, by the name of Mrs Gibbon. She lived very near to the barracks, and I was invited to her home for tea on several occasions. She was very sweet, and a nervous old soul, whose life was more or less run for her by 'a man of business', as she called her lawyer. I was introduced to Jean and Jim, her neighbours, and I think I was actually being vetted by them. Anyhow, we all got along fine.

Ada Stewart was my fiancée and Miss Gibson kindly allowed her to stay with her over a weekend. I did say thanks for that lovely weekend. The three of us had a happy time, visiting the Castle and St Giles Cathedral, Holyrood Palace and King Arthur's Seat.

In the barracks, my training as an electrician came in handy. With other help, I was able to wire and put in power points in various parts of our quarters. This included what had been the stables, but was now being converted to our cookhouse. Horror of horrors, when the electrical work was completed, it was to be inspected by the Chief Engineer of Edinburgh himself! Remember, I was only third class maintenance electrician. Anyway, with one or two minor alterations, the great man passed my work, and I felt more like Bighead than Whitehead at that time.

We moved from the barracks, and were billeted in Nissan huts, right in the docks themselves, but our work was very much the same. We worked often with the civilian dockers, who were generally paid on results. We, the Chunkies, got the same

little army pay, regardless of whether we did a little or a lot. We worked well together, and the dockers at one stage took the unusual step of going on strike for us, and not for themselves. They wanted more pay for us, but unfortunately it did not come off. We still did our best. One time, a Liberty prefabricated vessel, 10,000 tons, came into dock with a huge shell hole right on her waterline; she was carrying thousands of tons of grain. This is normally left dry, and quickly sucked out of her hold, by air suction pipes. But now the grain was wet with sea water, and was swelling, and the ship was in danger of sinking with all the extra weight and pressure. There was only one way, and that was to shovel it out. The gang of us, Chunkies and dockers alike, sweated for days and days, shovelling the grain into huge containers, which were being continuously being hoisted up and down by a big dock crane. We saved that ship, but lost a few pounds ourselves.

Like Glasgow, Edinburgh was a good place for the troops, and in both cities the people went out of their way to make us welcome. Like all the country, they were on very short food rations, but it didn't stop them inviting us into their homes, and feeding us time and time again. I went to quite a few homes, but Mrs Gibson's and Jim and Jean's were my favourites. We had free Forces Shows too, to which we could take a friend. There were lots of pretty girls, and we were not slow to take them to lots of the free shows. It was all clean fun, and we did not leave any little Chunkies behind.

1944 had come, and there were rumblings and talk of a Second Front. Armies were being stockpiled, and even in the Edinburgh streets, we could see an excess of army vehicles; tanks, carriers, etc. Men were being drafted in and out of different units, and different units were being moved to different places. One such man was Wally Sibley; he had some trouble with his feet, and was drafted from the Infantry into the 120th Company Pioneer Corps. He was to become my army mate, and my closest friend; equal with Tommy Jennings.

The time came for us to be moved, and so in April 1944, we went down South. Everybody and everything seemed to be doing the same thing. We were under canvas, and continually moving from place to place. I think this was done to confuse Jerry, who must have guessed by this time that something big was on. Our movements covered Surrey, Sussex and Essex; I name one or two only. There was the beautiful village of Isfield in Sussex where I went to pray in an old fashioned church. I was an unbeliever by this time, but I prayed just the same, to be on the right side in case anything happened. There was also Littlehampton in Sussex, where I saw the commandoes riding the first powerful scooters, and they were also riding folding up bicycles. Then there was the village of Piltdown, in Sussex, where I saw a replica of a skull in a garden; I realised that this was the place where the Piltdown man hoax occurred.

We were allowed 24 hour passes to relations within a fifty mile radius, so I invented an 'Uncle' in London, and went to see 'him'. He wasn't in London, so I went to see my family in London: whoops, Salford. I was very late getting back to camp. Along with several others who had also 'lost' their 'Uncles', seven of us were now confined to barracks. At the same

time, every camp was scaled up, and the Second Front was about to begin.

I think it would be wise to pause here, and reflect on a couple of points. First, my own outlook. I was never one who loved war for its own sake. However, I was, and still am, fiercely patriotic. To me 'There'll Always be an England'. I am a pacifist at heart, and will always prefer peace to war, but it cannot be peace at any price. Those days before the Second World War, when the Fascist jackboot was marching up and down Europe, certainly tested our principles. I could see that war was imminent. The First World War saw untrained men pushed into battle and killed without a cat in hell's chance. I knew the same thing would happen to myself if I wasn't prepared, so I tried to join the 'Terriers' in 1938, but unfortunately my eyesight let me down, and I was not accepted. When my calling up papers came in 1940, I went in front of a medical board of about seven different medical men. I passed six with flying colours, but not the seventh, the optician.

The result was that I was graded A3, with bad eyesight. I was not fit for a fighting unit, but there were many other units to go into. My own choice was the Medical Corps, where I would help to save life, instead of taking it. I applied for the Medical Corps and the Ordnance Corps, on Joe's recommendation. However, I was put in the AMPC, and that was that.

Now a word about the AMPC. In the First World War, they were known as Labour Battalions, graded men not fit enough for front line troops. As the same implied, they laboured, doing the 1001 different jobs that needed to be done, and so leaving the A1 men to do their own specialised jobs. They were armed, and would take up their arms and put down their tools if need be.

In the Second World War, and after Dunkirk, it was obvious that there was a great need for an Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps in the British Army, with as many as perhaps 600,000 men. They later became the Pioneer Corps. I say with due modesty, we were one of the best. We consisted mainly of graded men with bad eyesight or bad feet. As the saying went, if there was nothing wrong with our feet, there must be something wrong with our heads. There were so many men that wore spectacles, that it was once reported that a German pilot flew over a company of Pioneers. Everybody looked up, so the pilot dropped his bombs on them, and then went back to his headquarters and reported that he had bombed Crystal Palace! It was also a bit of a joke to say you were in the Pioneers, and not in the British Army. However, the Pioneers proved themselves time and again, and at the end of the war, they were given the title of Royal Pioneer Corps.

And now to continue where I left off; all the army camps had been sealed off, and final preparations were being made for the Second Front. Some units were given Arctic clothing or desert gear, or anything and everything to confuse the enemy. We in the 120th Company had our pay books stamped with the ominous Far East, as if it were intended to send us east, to jungle warfare. We were made to send home all our stuff which we each had collected over and above our official army stuff. To cap it all, each man was issued with an amount of Military money. I thought it rather strange that we should be paid in French francs, when we were supposed to be going to the Far East.

Then the big move started. Very early in the morning of June 4th 1944, our camp was broken up. Everything and everybody

'The Pioneers proved themselves time and again'

was loaded up into army transport, and we were away. We travelled through Essex and Kent, and never did England seem so beautiful to me. As we passed through towns and villages, people would be standing by their doorways and the roadside. They waved to us and wished us Good Luck, or God Bless, and 'Come back soon'. Our hearts were filled, and excitement was in the air. Our convoy of trucks had joined others and the roads were crammed tight with every conceivable type of vehicle. They were all headed in the same direction, towards the coast.

Eventually we arrived at our destination. We stopped in an approach street to Tilbury Docks. All troops and equipment were off loaded, and then the trucks moved off, probably to pick up other troops. For the next five hours, we edged slowly forward, and then we were facing and boarding the troopship, Warwickshire. She was a ship of 14,000 tons, and 5,000 of us men were packed into her. This was to be our home for the next four days. We were packed tight by day, eating very good food from the ship's galley. By night, we slept on hammocks or tables, or on the floor. The ship moved off with the darkness, and we sailed down the Thames. We were then informed that we were in a convoy of forty ships. The Warwickshire was the flagship of the convoy.

It was a glorious day, as we passed through the Straits of Dover, and saw the famous White Cliffs. Calais was pointed out, but to us, it was twenty miles away, in France. At first we were amused by these big splashes we saw in the water, and some quite near to us. Then the realisation struck us: we were being shelled by big German guns, positioned in Calais, and this was later confirmed by the BBC. We heard the announcer say that the biggest convoy to date had been shelled during its passage through the Straits. No ship was hit. The convoy proceeded along the South Coast, and we eventually stopped in the Solent, between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth.

When my feet left British soil, and I stepped aboard the ship, the thought came to me that I might never return, and I felt so sad. Now in the Solent, I would gaze inland at Portsmouth, until the sight of the clock tower and the face of the clock, were imprinted on my mind.

On June 6th we moved out into the open sea. The BBC had announced that there were reports coming in, that Allied troops had landed in Normandy, and that the British 2nd Army was heading inland to a place called Caen. The Invasion had begun.

On the night of June 7th, our convoy came to a complete stop, and there was a deathly silence, as every ship's engine stopped. Then our naval escort ships, slowly and carefully moved through the ranks. We had run right into a minefield. Mine detectors were used, as well as sound detectors or asdics. A clear path was found, and the ships were led out one by one. Believe me, it was a very narrow squeak. Soon after dawn on June 8th, the coast of France loomed up, and along the coast was the greatest armada of ships the world has ever seen. The sun rose, and France looked so peaceful. We were opposite a town called Oustreham. Small landing craft came to the ship's side. We climbed down rope ladders and into them. At about 11.40am, on June 8th, I set foot on Normandy.

Another pause for reflection. I noticed

that I was able to write my story, up to the beginning of the war, in what was not a lot of words, and when I came to my war years, I seem to go on and on. This is not as strange as it seems. I am not taken up with war, but rather, when one considers there can, and often are, more experiences in six years of war and death than there are in a lifetime of peace and life.

Prior to boarding the Warwickshire, the men of the 120th Company were told that we were going into something big: no details. We were strongly advised to 'mate up', in other words pick a friend and stick to him. You needed someone reliable, who would help and stand by you in the near future. By this time, Wally Sibley and I had already struck up a grand friendship, so automatically we chose each other.

Now we were on French soil, and right in the thick of the battle, and my feelings were twofold. For the first time in my life, I was on foreign soil, and I felt like an experienced globetrotter. Also I was going into battle, in the true sense of the word; the enemy were right there in front of me, so I would be involved about one hundred per cent now. The immensity of the thing both excited and scared me. We landed on golden sand without getting our feet wet. There was great activity everywhere. The great armada offshore was landing thousands of troops all along the beach, and vast amphibious vehicles were bring in every conceivable type of supplies needed for making war. Ammunition and food dumps were going up all over the place.

The sounds of battle were all around us; the crump of bombs, and machine guns rattling from the aircraft overhead. Small arms and mortar fire ahead of us, the deafening noise of the big naval guns, which were firing their shells deep into enemy territory. Now and again would come a noise over and above all else. It started with a little whine, reach an ear piercing screech, and end with an awesome explosion. We learned later that this came from a huge German gun. Far bigger than any naval gun, it was mounted on railway lines, which ran into the side of a hill. The gun would come out, fire, and then go back in again. It was positioned near Le Havre, about twelve miles away. For the next two months, the gun tormented us, and its target was mainly the Allied shipping.

Amidst all the apparent confusion, there was order and efficiency. Each unit had been given precise instructions as to what they were to do, and where they were to go. On the beaches, Military Policemen had taken control, and really came into their own. They were to be seen everywhere, controlling the jumble of traffic, instructing the uncertain, and in general, doing a thousand and one things. They were superb. In the grand order of things, Army HQ had assumed that the city of Caen and its vital airfield would by this time be in Allied hands., The 120th Company's instructions were to head for the city, which was about ten miles away, and accordingly we began to march inland in single file. Number 1 Section at the front with HQ Section, and then in order, with Number 10 Section at the rear. I was in Number 8. Our officers were dispersed along the line. The Commanding Officer was a few yards in front of me. We had been in France for twenty minutes, and were marching on the edge of the inland road.

The fields each side of us had lots of

food and ammo dumps, just over the hedges. Suddenly, a German fighter plane swooped towards us, with his machine guns firing. The OC threw himself to the ground, and I knew if he did that, it was certainly time for me to do the same. Everyone around did the same. Then there was a tremendous bang, followed by explosion after explosion. We lay flat for what seemed ages, and when the near noise had abated, we gingerly found our feet. There was no sign of the plane, but about twenty yards in front, in the right of the fields, was a big black hole with burning debris scattered all over the place. Believe it or not, there had been a big stack of artillery shells there, and the plane had crashed right into it. Officers and Sergeants milled up and down our lines, counting heads, as it was feared that there would be a large number of casualties. By one of those miracles, only about four or five men in Section 10 received slight injuries. They were sent back to Britain, like all early casualties who could not be treated locally because of insufficient medical aid. So ended their Normandy adventure. It seemed that the full blast went upwards and outwards, away toward the end of our line, which is why we, who were nearer the blast, did not get injured, or killed. And so, welcome to Normandy, 120th Company; unfortunately, there were casualties elsewhere from this blast. I will tell you a little about that, later.

The rest of the 120th Company continued their march, and we had gone some miles when a despatch rider came up and informed our OC that we had gone too far. Caen had not yet fallen, and we were in enemy controlled territory. We scampered back quickly, and eventually we stopped and reached a cornfield, where we were told to dig in. There were gliders all over the place, some damaged, some intact. These gliders had landed with the very first assault troops on D Day. Our company had an American correspondent attached to it. He was giving a first hand account to some newspapers in the USA. He made his home in a glider. We dug in, and Wally and I had a neat sleep slit trench dug in to time. Just near to us, was one of those unlucky chaps who had no mate, so we helped him to dig his trench. Just near to his trench was growing a lovely poppy, that I picked and later sent to Ada. I think she still has it. An hour or so later, another plane swooped toward us, and again we flung ourselves to the ground, or dived into our trenches. There was no machine gun fire this time, and the plane crashed. It was a Spitfire, that had been damaged, and the pilot stepped out, unhurt. Some of our men guarded the plane that night. I didn't feel very brave and was glad that I wasn't on guard duty. I felt safer in my little slit trench, with Wally for my friend.

The next morning, we marched to the beach and began our work. The corn, or glider, field remained our camp. Our work was varied. We marshalled the supplies and stacked and stored them in the various places. There were hundreds of DUWKS (Amphibious), to keep us busy. We made new beach roads where they were needed. We repaired existing roads which had been war damaged, we sweated and worked hard. However, we did stop for morning and afternoon tea. I couldn't get over the latter; tea break right in the middle of the battlefield. How like the British! We even worked regular hours; there must have been a Union about somewhere.

We had been given free NAAFI supplies before we landed. Our NAAFI canteen was not set up until ages after D Day. There was

'The sounds of battle were all around us'

no care and precautions with the Salvation Army and Church Army. Their mobile canteens were there from the beginning. It worked wonders for our morale, and it really did my heart good to see those girls serving tea and cakes in the midst of bombs and bullets. It says a lot for their dedication and courage. They did not have to go out there, but they volunteered to go because their hearts were in the right place; Bless them all.

We got to know an AA crew while we were doing roadwork nearby, and these men seemed to be blasting away at German planes all day long. We said we pitied them, because they got no rest, they said they pitied us because we had to work and couldn't hit back like they could. Later on, we heard that these brave men had all been killed in action.

Back at camp, our OC took a party of forty men to a nearby woods, supposed to be occupied by the enemy. He came back with 68 German Marines, who had been hiding there. This made news in the British newspapers. Another time, our camp was showered with parachutes. We thought they were German paratroopers, and it was a relief to learn that they were allied supplies, dripped on us my mistake. They were intended for some other men who were cut off. The RAF Regiment came and collected these supplies, which even included a jeep with engine ticking over, and the morning papers. I had lost my blanket, so I took a yellow parachute as a replacement. Later on I gave it to Ada, and she made curtains from it. That parachute was a Godsend to me; it was so light, smooth and warm.

Before we went to France, I had been having trouble with my false teeth, and had been visiting a dentist, who was in the process of making some new dentures. Then the order came to go abroad. He could not continue on the work, but advised me not to wear old dentures, but to wait until new ones were made. It was about two weeks after D Day before a field dental unit was set up, and this was just a big tent. The one technician's gear was not very up to date; however, he did make me a set of dentures, and he worked under very adverse conditions. He made a marvellous job of them, and in fact I still wear them. The trouble was, that we were on hard biscuits and similar field rations during the time I was without teeth; I got over it.

The weather changed shortly after we had landed, and for a period of about five days neither troops or supplies could be landed, apart from the artificial harbour at Arromanches (Mulberry Harbour). This was the time for the Germans to make an all out attempt to drive the Allies back into the sea. Normally we would sleep crouched in our slit trenches with our clothes on, but with boots off. This night we were told to keep our boots on, and be prepared to move quickly on the call. The enemy main armoured force was about half a mile away, and only held up by our defence on the river Aunay-sur-Odon. The battle raged long that night, and we couldn't sleep. I was really frightened that night, and thought I would never see the light of day again. All sorts of things went through my mind; oh, how your world seemed so far away, and how I longed to just sit in a chair at home. Poor Wally was worse than me, he just couldn't stop shivering. We never spoke a word to each other, just crouched there. My mind raced, and I thought a thousand thoughts, and thought many ways to escape certain death. Just a few of my thoughts.... I would run away in the opposite direction,

or I would run to where heavy British armour was, or I would swim out to the ship, The things I would and would no do, my mind was so confused. In the end I came to the conclusion that I would just stay put, and if the Germans came, I would try to fight to the end. It was no comfort, because I was feared to death all the time.

When morning did come, and I was still alive, it was the most wonderful feeling to know that I was still alive after the most fearful night of my life. The Allied line had held, and my courage had returned. An interesting sidelight to this episode concerns some of our mates nearby, who were convinced that the enemy was already upon so that night. They could hear their voices, talking in a foreign language, then they would come near the trenches and go away again. Our mates were sure the voices were from Germans who were spying out the land. When the truth was known, the voices actually belonged to our guards, who had to patrol the camp. It transpired that they were talking in Welsh, which happened to be their own native language.

A worrying thing to me was, how would I react when I saw death in its horrible form? Would I be sick or what? I got my answer quick enough. My first sight was to see the bodies of our own early parachutists. Some were headless, and others with different parts of their bodies torn from them by mortar bombs. It wasn't a pretty sight. I shuddered, but was not sick. After that, I saw hundreds of bodies during the Normandy campaign. Falaise was a place in particular. The Allies trapped a big German army, thousands were taken prisoner, and thousands were killed. Death and destruction were everywhere. The sickly sweet smell of death permeated everything, and it was there all the time. There were so many prisoners, we didn't know what to do with them. In the end, the 120th Company took over guard duties. Forty of us would have as many as 5,000 prisoners to look after. There were no prisons, or anything like that, and we simply guarded them in the fields. Weapons were scattered everywhere, and it would have been the easiest thing in the world for them to grab some weapons and overpower us, but the poor souls were too knocked about to do anything like that. They were like beaten dogs, and I felt terribly sorry for them. We had them cleaning up and road mending, and burying their own dead. With regards the latter, often it was just a case of digging holes and filling them with bits and pieces of bodies. A reversed rifle and German tin hat would mark the spot. One of their officers said a brief prayer over the grave. We, the guards, took off our hats and bowed our heads as a mark of respect. And that was that.

When the 120th Company moved from the cornfield, we set up camp about two miles away. Most fields were mined by the Germans, and the skull and crossbones signpost with the words, "Achtune Alcenen", were very familiar. This field was likewise mined. Some other slit trenches were all round the edges of the field. This was common practise in a mined field. Flies were everywhere, especially around what we thought was a bit of meat and such. We were told that this blackened stuff was actually parts of the bodies of some Pioneers, who had been there before us. Even then we were thinking they must have trod on the mines, and been blown up. The

real truth was hard to believe; these Pioneers had actually been killed by the flying shells and ammunition from the exploding dump that the 120th Company was passing, just after we landed.

At times, we heard the most awesome sound imaginable. It would start with a little buzz, then get louder and louder, until it was deafening. Then it would get stronger still, until it was no longer a noise, but the very air itself was vibrating. We had learned to live with the many sounds of battle all around us all the time, but this was different. Even the battle sounds were smothered. The cause of the new experience was to be found in these things which came low over the fields and rooftops. There seemed no end of them.

They were the Lancaster bombers, on their famous, or infamous, 1,000 bomber raids. Another awesome sound and sight I saw was when a huge fleet of

American bombers dropped their bombs much too near to us. They had missed their target, and bombed the Canadian lines, just on our flank. Five hundred Canadians were killed, and their mates were blazing mad, when they told us of this experience. I saw a Canadian Mustang fighter having a dogfight with an American Lightning once. Snipers were a danger. In one place, a French girl sniped from a church tower. They had to bring a field gun in to stop her. The gun blasted off the top of the tower, and the girl. She was supposed to be fourteen, and had a German lover.

Booby traps were everywhere, and a place called Villiers Bocage was the worst of all; everything was booby trapped. One was scared to touch anything, or put a foot anywhere. Flail tanks were a godsend, they were like super bulldozers, and would explode and detonate any mine or booby trap in front of them. Our own Forces were not all innocent, and there were lots of examples of bombing and killing. I saw a mental home where most of the patients had been killed by bombs. They had been locked in cells, and didn't stand a chance. At Thury Harcourt, we mended a road and filled the huge holes with the remains of a German Red Cross ambulance, which had been shot up by the RAF. I still have one or two surgical instruments, which I kept as a souvenir.

Eventually, the Allies burst out of Normandy and the big push was on. The 120th Company pushed through France, and places made famous in World War One. We went through Arras, where previously the RAF had made a famous raid. They breached the prison walls, and let out scores of political prisoners. We stayed overnight at Amiens, and slept anywhere. Wally and I slept in an old cowshed. A Manchester mate slept there because he was frightened of rats; I don't think he meant us.

Next day, we pushed into Belgium, and finished up eventually by going right through Brussels, into a little village a few miles away. In our journey we got about eight miles from Paris, and all along the route, the civilians cheered and made heroes of us. Even though they were drastically short, they would shower us with fruit and flowers, and even cigarettes. We would throw them hard biscuits and such, and it was pitiful to see how they scooped these things up.

While still in Normandy, the 120th Company billeted in a village which I think was called Mouden. There was something different about it, which defies description, or explanation. Other places would have

'Told to keep our boots on'

their quota of inhabitants, and the usual number of fly blown bodies of men and cattle, but at the back of all this there was always the feeling that the living enemy was lurking somewhere nearby. Not so with Mouen. There were lots of dead, stinking cattle around alright, but there was neither living nor dead humans about, and I felt as if there was no living enemy within a million miles of the place. Wally felt the same way. It was most eerie and haunting, when we two were on guard, in the middle of the night. We felt as if we were guarding against ghosts. Everything was so deadely quiet too. It's one thing to be scared of the known, but it's a different thing entirely to be scared of the unknown. Believe me, Wally and I were scared to death that night, we seemed to sense ghosts and spirits all around. There might be something to it, or it might just have been that our imaginations were playing ticks on us. I'll never know the answer to that one.

The 120th Company was in Mol (Belgium), which is not too far from the Dutch border. One day, in brilliant sunshine we saw hundreds of Allied planes, towing gliders, and flying overhead towards Holland. Very soon after that we were rushed to Bourg Leopold, which is right on the Dutch border. The planes we saw were some of those which were heading for Arnhem. We and other units were supposed to go on and link up with them, once they, the airborne men, had consolidated their position. They didn't do this, and the rest is history. I did see one or two tired and dirty men, wearing sheepskin coats, coming into our lines. They would be the lucky ones who did manage to escape the hell in which such a lot of their comrades were caught up.

We stayed in the Brussels area for some time. We still did road work, but there wasn't as much to do, because the roads were not much damaged by war, so there wasn't any need to make new ones. Instead, we started to travel miles about the place, filling up pot holes. The civilians cheered us, wherever we went. We felt like chocolate soldiers, and it was a bit embarrassing to be seen just filling up holes in the road. We got over that, by telling the onlookers that we expected many heavy vehicles; tanks and big guns would be passing that way, this was why we were digging little holes and filling them up again. We were testing the roads to see if they were strong enough to take the expected heavy traffic. This satisfied the onlookers, and our own honour was saved.

We moved to a small town called Mol. In this area we released some prisoners, who had been held by the Germans, and among them were five big Russians. They were strong but rather uncouth. At this time, I had made friends with a Belgian family called Van Hoof, but so far I had not been to their home. Now Henri, the father, begged Wally and I to pay them regular visits. It seemed that the Russians, who were attached to the 120th Company, had been going to the Van Hoof's house, and generally making a pest of themselves. Henri was fearful for the safety of his family in general, and his attractive daughter, Jeanne in particular. He said the Russians would stop going if they saw British soldiers there. Wally was not eager to go, but I took the chance. The Russians were there alright, but quietened down on my appearance. This was the order for several visits, and after that, the Russians stopped going altogether. The Van Hoofs were lovely people, and made me very welcome. Alpronsin was the wife, and Korel the young son. Jeanne had a

boyfriend, Josef. He was the only one to speak English, so he did all the translating.

We were billeted in a big school, and it seems that the famous Africa Korps had been there at one time. They had painted some fine murals on the walls. They depicted the story of Lili Marlene, very good.

On New Year's Eve, Wally and I saw the year out in a local cafe, which is similar to the British pub. After midnight we started to walk home. Suddenly, planes came over us, and the area was being machine-gunned. It was strange, because their planes didn't make the usual noise until they passed. The plane came first, and the noise afterwards. Anyhow, we flung ourselves down, there on the ground in front of Wally was a 100 franc note. When all was quiet, we got up and went back to the cafe. That 100 francs bought quite a few cognacs and gins, which we felt we badly needed. The planes came again when we resumed our journey, but again we escaped injury. That was our introduction to 1945, and to the jet. Another new weapon was in the air too. The Doodle Bug (V1) had been used in Normandy, and was now being used against Antwerp. Mol was in the line of fire, and became a kind of bomb alley. AA gunfire was concentrated in this area. Spitfires were also used to knock out as many doodle bugs as possible, before they got to Antwerp. Many is the time I have seen them explode in the sky, hit by gunfire. Other times they were nudged off course, and then they blew up in the near countryside. We had a few V2's as well. When they came, it was without warning; suddenly there was an almighty explosion, and that was that. Another time, there were rumours of German paratroopers landing all over the Belgian countryside. They were supposed to be dressed all in black, and land in the dark of night. I found it rather ludicrous, when we were asked to hunt them down. Fancy, most of us were as blind as bats, looking for non-existent men dressed in black, in the middle of the night. For your information, we never did find those paratroopers.

Our leaders in their great wisdom, decided that we were battle weary, and should have a weekend rest. So we were packed off to Brussels, and put in one of the very best hotels. There were waiters like penguins, lovely maids, orchestras, everything. We sent them our army rations to cook. Boy, what a wonderful job they did with that food. How different from our army cook, to be shouted at 'Grub up', and then be given a dollop of this, and a dollop of that, and call it food. There were all sorts of entertainment, and we had a good time on the town. Almost every cafe was a brothel. Madam would be there, and she would send the girls over as soon as one sat down. The girls would ask you for a drink, and then invite you upstairs, looking like cats who had just drank the cream. This little innocent remained an innocent. I would buy my 'girl' a drink, and when she made the upstairs sign, I told her in a mixture of English, French Flemish and sign language that I was already engaged, and I had promised my fiancée I would have no Mum sellers. This way, their pride was not hurt, and I kept my virginity. I must have been old fashioned.

Before going to Brussels, I had received word from Joe, telling me that he was in Antwerp. We arranged to meet there, and it was a joy to see him again. We had a very happy time together.

After this period of leave, we went to the Belgium-Dutch border, where we stayed in some big barracks at a place called Bourg Leopold. We saw a small concentration camp there. The barracks were damaged, and the civilians told us how they fooled the German soldiers that the barracks were the safest place in an air raid. One night, there was a heavy air raid on the barracks, and many Germans were killed. While we were here, the Allies tried their big air attack on Arnhem. Thousands of paratroops and ground support was supposed to come through the town. Through some blunder, the supporting troops and supplies never got here. Monty was blazing mad. He came and sacked men, left, right and centre. We were near to the Ardennes during the Battle of the Bulge. Lots of other Pioneers were thrown in, but we were not involved.

Holland was not very exciting. The stubborn Dutch had suffered a lot during the German occupation, and they were very short of food. We employed some civilians to help us build an army camp of Nissan huts. Our own rations were reasonable, and some would share their food with the Dutch. We had pig swill bins, often stinking and slimy. The poor Dutchmen would plunge their hands into these bins, and try to salvage any solid food to be found. I spent the coldest night of my life in Genop. I slept on a concrete floor in a half finished hut, the temperature being well below zero. I had left a mug of tea near my head, and it was frozen solid when I woke in the morning.

As Spring approached, the Allies pushed on again, and the 120th Company went into Germany. We settled into a little place called Pflzdorf (Goch). The picture changed here. So far, we had been liberating countries, they would cheer us and fly their national flags. Now, there was no cheering, and the only flags to be seen were the white flags of surrender. We were in enemy country, and needed to tread warily. We were not allowed to speak or mix with the people; this ban was lifted later. We bedded down where we could, that first night here. There was some damage to buildings and property. I slept under the Burgomaster's (Mayor's), grand piano, probably making less beautiful noises than would normally come from that beautiful instrument.

Still West of the Rhine, we moved to such places as Goch and Kleeve, the place where Anne of Cleves came from. Some of our men, clearing rubble in Kleeve, were startled to see an arm moving in the rubble. They bought the bulldozer to clear the rubble quickly, and found a woman and baby down there. Unfortunately, the dozer killed the woman, but the baby was saved. They had been buried alive for two weeks.

March 21st found us deep in a forest near Goch. 'In the spring, a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love'; prior to this, I had asked Ada Stewart if she would wait until the end of the war before we got married. She agreed for my sake, but would have preferred an earlier marriage. Now, on this first day of Spring, I thought the war with Germany was coming to an end. I wrote and asked Ada if she would marry me, the next time I came home on leave. Her reply said 'yes', and so I left her to all that was necessary at her end. She arranged for a special licence and a mutual friend, Rev Cummings, to perform the ceremony. Because of different religions, I had thought that a registrar's office would be best, but

‘This was our introduction to the jet’

somehow our marriage seem too sacred for a cold registry marriage, so I changed my mind and asked for a church wedding. Ada was delighted. It was a happy thought for both of us. I asked for a quiet one; Ada mistook me, and thought I meant without music.

The river Rhine was the last big obstacle in the way of a complete Allied victory, so the 120th Company found new work. Most of the Rhine bridges had been damaged, and lots of new ones had to be put over. Thousands of tons of material had to be brought up in readiness. We worked long hours on this. The Bailey and pontoon bridges were thrown over eventually, and we were personally thanked by the commander-in-chief of the BAOR (British Army of the Rhine). When our turn came to cross, we did so at a place called Werel. We moved many miles into a place called Bergsteinfurt. The locals here were not cowed down, in fact they were very arrogant. The Infantry and ourselves had to be very tough with them. In the end, the Armoured Corps brought in tanks on tank transporters. The locals were used to seeing their own tanks, and were not impressed with ours. To our surprise, they were impressed very much with the tank transporters. It shook them to see that the British had something which they did not; yet they remained arrogant and hateful.

By this time, some of the awful concentration camps had been over run. Films of the gruesome finds had been made, and German civilians were made to see these films. We prepared the Bergsteinfurt trials in a cinema, and made them watch these films. I believe the people in other parts of Germany were sickened and saddened by what they saw. Not so the people here; they came out of the cinema laughing and joking, as if they had just seen a comedy. It saddened and sickened us to see the hardness of these people. They were hateful, and it's not without reason that Bergsteinfurt became known as the Village of Hate.

We moved about Germany, and then settled for a while in Volksen, a village near Hanover. We were billeted in a hall, which was much too small to hold about three hundred of 120th Company. When we bedded down, the air was unbelievable, so Wally and I knocked a hole in the wall so that we could breathe in the fresh cold night air.

We did not do any manual work in Germany, and instead of being the scruffy worker, we now had to impress the Germans and become the very smart and victorious soldier. Military law was fair but strict. We as individuals had to play the role too. When Wally and I went into a local pub, Wally asked for two dark beers. The place was filled with civilians, and there were some mighty husky Germans there too. They were nearly all drinking dark beer. The bartender gave Wally two light beers. The Germans watched; we were the only two British soldiers in the place. I advised Wally to go back and demand dark beer. He didn't fancy the idea, so I did the job instead. We had our rifles with us, so I made it clear to the people that I intended to have my way. It was a 'no nonsense' confrontation. I took the light beer back to the bar, and in as loud a voice as I could, I demanded dark beers. There was a pause and a silence, then the bartender took back the light and gave us two dark beers in replacement. We then drank these beers and stalked out of the place.

We had shown them who was boss alright, but it had all been kidology, as I am not the bossy type, and that which I did in the pub was one big act. I have often wondered what would have been the outcome if these people had known the truth; oh yes, we had our rifles with us alright, but we didn't have a single cartridge with us.

We had travelled to a place called Salthause, and would see some buildings going up in smoke. At a time previous to this, some other soldiers had come back in a blinding dangerous rage; they looked as if they would kill any and every German they could see. They had come across this concentration camp, and the sights they saw were too much for them. It was the infamous Belsen. Now we could see those burning buildings just a few miles away. The British had set fire to the place.

Our officers were generally pretty good. We had one captain, who must have been rolling in money before the war. He owned his own yacht, amongst other things. It was good to go out on a route march with him, in our early training days. He was bound to find a pub at a time when we had gone far enough to work up a good thirst. Then of course it was beer all round, and he footed the bill. We had a Lieutenant who liked to make himself one of the boys. He swore and cursed with the best of them, but it didn't stop him from being a good officer.

We had a Second Lieutenant who had a mammy pammy sort of voice. His very manner of walking and talking suggested he was a cissy, a softy. He was very low in my esteem; I didn't think he was good enough to be an officer. My assessment of him was proven very wrong after we had landed in Normandy. The 120th Company had had a very rough night of it with the Luftwaffe. They bombed and strafed us with cannon and machine-gun. Quite a number of butterfly bombs came down. There were anti-personnel bombs, which opened out and strewed shrapnel in a wide arc. All that night we cowered down and kept our heads low. We wouldn't budge an inch out of our slit trenches. Only one person did move from his trench. In the thick of everything, he moved about from one slit trench to another, calling out and asking was everybody alright. This was the sissy officer whom I had thought wasn't good enough. I had quite a run of emotions that night. At first, I was scared to death because of the Luftwaffe. Then I was filled with admiration for this brave officer, who risked his own life, just to make sure that his men were safe. He boosted my own morale very high, at a time when it was most needed. Lastly, I was terribly ashamed of myself for having misjudged him in the past. I've never made that same mistake since with other people. We just cannot pre-judge.

My leave came up, and home I went. At the big transit camp at Osnabruck, there were very strong reports that Germany was ready to give in. At home in Salford, I spent the first couple of days leave at my mother's place, and then came the big day.

Ada and I were married at St Paul's Church, Kersal on 7th May 1945. Tommy Jennings was my best man. I was dead scared, and Tommy told me to face it like a man. If I could take my mind off the ordeal, it would help to think of Manchester United instead, this was sound advice. I walked up to the altar, and was still enjoying the United match. They were just about to score, when I felt a tremendous

dig in the ribs. Ada was glaring at me, and the Rev Cummings was grinning his flipping head off. We had come to a vital part of the ceremony; I had to repeat something after the Rev, and then say 'I will'; I never did get to know how that match ended up. Coming out of church, the bells started to ring. With a tremendous thrill, I realized that bells ringing could mean only one thing. They were Peace bells, and the war with Germany was over. I had asked Ada to wait until the end of the war with Germany, and we had timed it to the hour. Our friend, Marion Hilton, took wedding snaps, but her camera got jammed, and the photos were ruined. The reception was at Ada's house, 38 Welford Street. A big misunderstanding at the church meant that my request for a quiet wedding, by which I meant just a few friends and relations were to attend, was to mean that I did not want the organ to play. That was sad, because Ada and I would have loved to hear the organ. Now we were home for a quiet reception, or so we thought.

The evening newspaper arrived the same time as us; the headlines screamed that the war in Europe was over. The world outside went mad. There was singing and dancing and bonfires, and allsorts going on. Somebody had made an effigy of Hitler, and he was ceremoniously burnt later that evening. Meanwhile, the people of Welford Street had invaded our 'quiet wedding' reception, and were dancing through the front door and dancing out through the back. 'Hitler' was placed at the head of the table; he was not the guest of honour, I think that privilege was given to yours truly. I was in uniform, and the way people fussed, you would have thought that I won the war all by myself. We were showered with gifts from every quarter, and the people were so happy. The evening festivities were a roaring success, and we had a grand do outside. Hitler was placed on top of a huge bonfire and set alight. Yes, a roaring success indeed. And so ended what I can say was the happiest day of my life.

The first night was a different matter altogether. It took us ages to sort out all the different things which had been hidden in the bed. There were combs and hairbrushes, and allsorts. The bed itself had been made into a French bed. The sheets had been sown together, and so had Ada's nightgown and my pyjamas, which had been bought specially for the occasion; we didn't have pyjamas in the army. When this happy leave was over, I went back to North Germany, to a place called Luneburg.

It was in a caravan here on the plains, that Monty and the Germans had signed the peace papers. It was on these same plains that the British Army had to battle with over 12,000 released prisoners and former slave workers, when they went on the rampage. They were over the countryside too, looting, raping and murdering the Germans. They were seeking vengeance for what they had suffered themselves at the hands of the Germans. We could understand their feelings, but law and order must be upheld. We even had to re-arm Germans in outlying places, so that they could defend their families.

Often we would pass through the centre of Luneburg, and take note of various buildings. We were in the town at the time, and were near to the building where Himmler, the chief of the Gestapo, was caught. He swallowed a poison pill and committed suicide before they could do anything with him. Five of the 120th Company got killed in a road accident

‘The war ended on our wedding day’

here. They were the only fatalities that the 120th Company suffered in the entire war. The German people at the scene of the accident were marvellous. They tore their dresses and shirts to make bandages, and did everything they possibly could to help the injured.

We moved to Ouxhaven, after passing through Bremerhaven and Hamburg. The damage all over Germany was very bad, and was even worse here. In a forest nearby we came across a hidden V1 and V2 factory. There were doodlebugs and rockets in all stages of completion, all in a hidden complex of railway and factory buildings. It was like a complete town, and there was nothing to see outside of the forest. The British captured a lot of scientists too. We were not allowed to talk to them, or mix with them. I believe the Russians got most of these men, and used them toward their own space effort. There were lots of pure alcohol here. The Germans showed us how to mix it with fruit juice and get gloriously drunk.

The war in Europe was over now, and it only remained for Japan to be defeated. Then came the news that a most powerful bomb equal to 20,000 tons of TNT had been dropped on Hiroshima. 120th Company was still in Germany at this time. The Germans were very excited about the news. Our own men did not grasp at first that the Americans had exploded an atom bomb. Of all our Company, there was only myself and an officer who did understand, and we had to explain just what it was all about. The second atom bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, and shortly afterwards the Japanese gave in, and the whole war was over. I suppose we, the British soldiers, were a bit war weary, and we just took the news in our stride. But not so the Germans, they really let themselves go in our area. They cheered and they laughed; you would have thought that they had won the war.

All through the war years we had talked about, and pined for, that little piece of paper called a ticket (discharge paper). It was a standing joke that we had only one ambition, and that was to become an ex-serviceman; now the joke, or dream, was becoming reality. Men were being discharged from the armed forces, according to their age and service. They were grouped and numbered. Brother Joe was group one, and was soon out. I was group twenty seven, and had to wait my turn. The 120th Company left Germany and then returned to Britain. First we were billeted in Seaford House in Seaford, Sussex. It was all right there. Then we moved to a village, undamaged by war. The people had not suffered like others, and they were most unfriendly towards us. We moved to another village nearby. This too was undamaged by war, but these people were just the opposite. They couldn't do enough for us. People are strange. Another move to a place called Turvey, Bedfordshire. We worked at a railway siding handling foodstuffs, and as a fringe benefit, we were allowed to buy certain rationed goods. I went home on leave from there and gave Ada that which I had bought. Her eyes popped out of her head when she opened the parcel and found a seven pound tin of chocolate biscuits. These were very scarce at the time, one was lucky to get half a pound, and here was I with seven pounds of the very best.

Back from leave, and the 120th Company had moved to Houghton

Conquest near to Bedford. There is a bridge in Bedford, which in the early days of the war was called the Bridge of Sighs. It seems there were lots of Forces people stationed there, and there was nothing for them to do. So they would just stand on the bridge, gaze into the water, and sigh. When we arrived things were very different, there was lots to do and the people were good to mix with. By this time, demobilization was in full swing. Companies were under strength, and had to join up with others to get back to strength.

'Pte Whitehead was now Mr Whitehead'

The 120th Company, which had been my life for nearly six years, was disbanded, and the men were put into the 178th Company Pioneer Corps. This was a sad time. The old 120th Company had been a very fine Company. Over the years, we had come to know, respect and trust each other. Loyalty was very strong. We had good and bad times, and we always stood by each other. Now all that was gone. The esprit de corps didn't somehow seem to match up in the 178th Company. It might have been there in the old days, but it wasn't there now. There was mistrust and petty thieving, and all sorts going on. Added to this, 26 Group was being demobbed, and my friend Wally had gone. I was happy for him, but sorry for myself. My final leave was due one day, and I made last minute preparations. Just a good look, and then I was all set to go. I hung my battle tunic up by my bed and went to the ablutions for my work. On returning, I put on my tunic and felt in my pocket to make sure that my leave papers and leave were intact. My leave papers were there all right, but my leave pay had gone. Somebody in my own hut had pinched it. It was heart breaking to go home without money. I needed it to pay for my keep and entertain Ada etc. Ada and her mother were real bricks. They never grumbled, and did everything they possibly could to make my last leave a happy one. When I got back to my unit, an old 120th Company friend told me that he felt certain that a certain 178th Company Corporal had stolen my leave pay. He could tell by the way this man had been splashing his money around. We had to let the matter drop, because we couldn't prove anything.

Came the big day; 27 Group was being demobbed, and I was to get my very own piece of paper. On the 20th April 1946, which was Good Friday, I left Bedford and the 178th Company, and headed for Ashton under Lyne to get demobbed. We had priority rail passes to travel the 140 miles. There was a small group of us. Anyway, not only was it Good Friday, when not many trains would normally run, but because of the war, there were even fewer trains to run in any case, and there were far too many people trying to travel on the far too few trains. Our priority passes counted for nothing. In the end, we were travelling on local trains for a few stations, and then swapping and changing along the line. After over twelve hours, I reached my destination and was landed my discharge papers. Oh, happy days; the former Private 13058028 HC Whitehead was now an ex-serviceman, and Mr HC Whitehead.

It still remained for me to go to Oldham to collect my civilian clothing, but I'd had enough for one day, and instead, I headed straight for Salford and my dear wife Ada. It was a grand reunion. I was too full up to know what I really did, but I do know I was so happy, to get back to my wife and civvy street. We had met in the war, and all our romance had been conducted by letter and

leave. Now we were together for good, and about to start a new chapter in our lives. Poor Ada, she had worn the pavement down, walking up and down, waiting for me that day.

The following morning I went to Oldham, and was there kitted out with brand new civilian clothes. We were allowed to keep our army clothes, but were supposed to hand in our army greatcoats. I handed it in, but they gave it back to me, and no questions asked. I had also received other papers and things at the time of my demob. These included clothing and furniture coupons. I received my reserve instructions; they told me that I would be on the army reserve for the next fourteen years, or until I reached 45 years of age, whichever was the first. I was given the sum of £56, which consisted of my savings, plus 'nest egg' money, contributed by the government. There was also my reference and army 'character'. I kept my army paybook Part 1 (AB64). This gave an army history, and told the world in general that I had been an excellent soldier.

Thus equipped, I set out for that great adventure of making my own way, and my living in the other world called 'Civvy Street'. No more would I be pampered, petted, clothed and provided for. The army had cast me out, and from hence forward would have to make my own living. It was a frightening thought. From being the 'excellent' person, referred to previously, I set out with great determination. One thing in my favour was that the government had made it compulsory for returned servicemen to be given back the jobs that they had held before they had been called up. This meant that I could go back to S Maurice & Co, 268 Bury New Road, Manchester 7, just whenever I was ready. I gave myself about four weeks rest, and then went back to the little backyard factory which manufactured buttons, buckles and slides. When I left this place to go in the army, nearly six years previously, I felt that I was in a rut there. My heart was never really in soldiering. I had done my best for King and Country, and when the war was over I was very glad to get demobbed. Now I was back in the old 'slaveshop', and the big question was, would I be back in a rut again? Time would tell, and this ends my war story, but there is another story to tell yet.

I feel I must add one or two memories to the war years story, before I march onto Civvy Street.

This was my first leave from Glasgow, after being away from home for three whole months. I didn't realise a person could feel so homesick. It was a most wonderful feeling to set foot in Salford again. The place itself was no improvement on Glasgow. It had the same sort of grimy street and grimy factories. The people had the same pinched industrial faces. In fact, there was nothing whatsoever to commend Salford to the stranger. It even had its own particular stink too. But not so for me on that first leave. In my eyes, Salford was the most beautiful city in the world. I loved the grimy streets and factories. The aroma that arose from the River Irwell was like nectar of roses to me. The people didn't look pinched, they looked lovely, and I felt that every one of them was my personal friend. My family and my home might have been just very ordinary people in a small slum home, but to me at that time they were the royal family, and lived at Buckingham Palace. It was a most glorious leave indeed, and was only surpassed by my wedding leave.

In Normandy, there was the time I saw

'Monty'. The 120th Company was making a road, and there were hills on either side. There were British ranks on and over the crest of one hill, and German tanks on and over the crest of the other hill. They were both having a lively ding dong with each other, and we were right in the centre of the tank battle, Monty came on the scene and spoke to several of our men. He asked Corporal Williams if he would he like something to drink. Corporal Williams said yes, and being a very thirsty Scouse, he had visions of Monty handing him a couple of bottles of beer, or even a bottle of Scotch. Instead Monty handed him a bottle of Bovril; Corporal Williams remarks to us later could not possibly be printed here. Anyhow, Monty went his way, and the tank crews got fed up and went their different ways too. We were left in peace to continue making the road, and Corporal Williams was left to enjoy his Bovril.

We saw 'Winnie' in Normandy too. He rode by very quickly in his car. We just got a glimpse of a round face, and two fingers stuck up in the V sign. I'm afraid that we were very rude; we put out our two fingers, and made a certain sign to the back of his retreating car. I can assure you, it was not the V sign.

Still in Normandy, several times I saw paratroopers drop from the open hatches of their planes, and never got the chance to open their parachutes. They were machine-gunned before they had dropped many

yards, and fell to the ground like bricks.

The 120th Company adopted an orphan French boy of about twelve years, for a period; his parents had been killed in the Allied landings. We fitted him out with the smallest uniform. That boy was worth his weight in gold. He was ever so helpful about the camp, and had an uncanny knowledge of where German mines had been laid. He had watched the Germans laying the mines, and had memorised the positions. Time and again, he would point to different spots in the fields, and sure enough, the mine detectors would locate another land mine. Responsible people took this boy over afterwards.

Although I was happy to do my bit for King and country, I never felt any hatred towards the Germans. True enough, there was some anger at the time when Belsen went up in smoke, and there was some contempt with, or towards, the Germans who cringed and crawled for favours after Germany was beaten. Also toward those hypocrites who told us how good we British were, and how they were on our side all through the war, and how they hated their countrymen. Generally, I got on well with the Germans. I felt a kind of kinship with the German prisoners. They like me, were ordinary people caught up in events not of their own making. They too had mothers and fathers, and brothers, sisters, wives and sweethearts. They were from the other world, and put in the middle

of the holocaust. They had shared our experiences and sufferings, and it was only by chance that they were the prisoners, and we the victors.

I made friends with a German family in Hannover. This caused ill feeling between Ada and myself, and rather regretfully I dropped the friendship. Later, I was able to explain the situation to Ada, and she had a better understanding, and realized that there was no harm in it. We had no further ill feelings.

I will never forget a certain old lady in Hannover. The people of that city had come to accept the British soldiers, but not so this old lady. I boarded a tram, on which this old lady was travelling. She was small and ill looking, dressed in black. She looked at me, and all the hatred in the world was in that look. We stared at each other, and her hatred was a like a sharp knife penetrating my body. My own eyes tried to tell her that I was not that evil, but my eyes lost the battle. The poor soul must have suffered awfully in the war, and no doubt had lost sons, and maybe other members of her family also. My own heart bled for her, and I only wished that I could help her. She was a brave person, with no hypocrisy whatever, and that moment was a moment of truth for me. Her look told me exactly what war was all about. She will haunt me until the day I die, but I will always be thankful to her for opening my eyes to the true meaning of war. ■

Dieppe Memories

Memories of Dieppe in 1944 by a Pioneer Corps liberator



Report: Mr Peter Howard Wayne
Picture: Supplied

THE FOLLOWING article written by Mr Peter Howard Wayne appeared in a recent edition of The Dieppe Shopper. Peter enlisted at Liverpool and joined 3 Centre Pioneer Corps on 14 Feb 41 and served until 17 Oct 46 achieving the rank of WO2.

On enlistment his name was Hans Dieter Wolff and he was allocated service number 13805468. His name was changed to the one shown above and he was allocated a new service number, 13116554.

Among the many poignant testimonies to the very vital role Dieppe played in the history of the last war, and the link between that time and the present, Peter Wayne, a regular visitor to Dieppe, has sent the following reply to our survey.

"My first visit. We arrived in Dieppe on the 1st September 1944, as liberators, but our reception was not as enthusiastic as we had experienced elsewhere, especially from older people who had witnessed the disastrous raid by British and Canadian Commandos in 1942, and who were convinced that we would be eventually driven back into the sea.

However, as our engineers cleared the beaches and the harbour basin, and normality returned, we were welcomed into their homes, and frequently asked to share a meal with

them, despite the fact that food was severely rationed.

In order to meet the local young we always made our way to the Cafe des Tribounous, in the Grande Rue, which today is still a great place to meet. Since those days, I have been back almost a hundred times, enjoying the beautiful surroundings of Dieppe and the town itself, which fortunately, has not changed much from the time of my first visit."

We could reluctantly leave Peter Wayne's reminiscences of this point, but thanks to him we can move on the Dieppe Property situation.

He goes on to relate the following incident.

"A funny story that happened in December 1999.

I was walking down the Rue Saint Jacques with my brother, stopping at an estate agent's window, and remarking that, for the price of a one-bedroom flat in London, you could get a chateau in Normandy.

The proprietor, who spoke hardly any English, and must have heard me say the word 'chateau', asked us to wait a second, and returned with a brochure advertising a 19th century chateau near Dieppe, one half of which had already been modernised with central heating, etc, with a 5 acre park and outbuildings all for £190,000, the actual price my son is paying for a small basement flat in Hammersmith!". ■



The history of the Pioneer painting

Pioneers on Sword beach, painted by the renowned artist Terence Cuneo

Report: Major E Jones
Picture: Terence Cuneo

DURING 1992 it was decided that the Royal Pioneer Corps would commission the renowned military artist Terence Cuneo to paint a scene from the 'D-Day' Landings in June 1944, depicting the Pioneer Corps roles in support of this massive operation. This painting would then be presented as a gift from the RPC to the Royal Logistic Corps on the amalgamation on 5 April 1993.

At the time, Maj Elfryn Jones was SO2 APL1 at HQ DAPL in Northampton, and as part of his responsibilities regarding Corps matters became the co-ordinator for this project. Mr Cuneo then in his eighties came to the RPC Training Centre at Northampton and started to make preliminary sketches of how he saw the scene for the painting which was to be 8' x 5' in size. Maj Jones and Mr Cuneo then visited the RPC Museum, and 522 Coy RPC Det at the Central Engineer Park in Long Marston where historical RE equipment was stored. Together with members of 522 Coy, dressed in WW2 period uniforms, montages of activity were created and numerous sketches and photographs were produced from different angles. They also visited the School of Catering and the RAMC Museum where the relevant Field Kitchen and medical equipment were on display.

Following the preliminary work, Mr Cuneo produced a large working drawing showing the events he believed would be appropriate for the painting. Brig Charles Telfer (the last DAPL) and Maj Jones then

visited Mr Cuneo's house in East Molesley in Surrey to see progress, and then shown some of Mr Cuneo's personal sketches and photographs of his work as a recognised War Correspondent in WW2.

Maj Jones found one photo album which showed Mr Cuneo in uniform and riding his bicycle with his artists equipment. It was then found that he had been on Sword Beach with the first wave of Pioneers on 6 June 1944. Brig Telfer insisted he paint this in the main scene – *this is the one and only time that Terence Cuneo appeared in one of his famous military paintings.*

By the end of March 1993 the painting was complete, framed and ready for collection. Maj Jones and his EO Miss Beccy Forster were tasked to bring the painting to Northampton for formal unveiling by the Colonel in Chief (Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester). This was easier said than done. Using the PRI minibus they went to East Molesley to collect the uninsured and irreplaceable painting which by now had cost £10,000 plus £500 for the ornate gilt frame!

Eventually they arrived at Northampton. The painting was placed on its mounting in the Central Officers Mess and the painting duly unveiled by The Duke of Gloucester on the following day. The following morning Maj Jones and Beccy drove the painting to Deepcut for its formal unveiling on 5 April 1993 by the Princess Royal, Colonel in Chief The Royal Logistic Corps.

At about 0600 hrs the following morning Maj Jones and Beccy journeyed south with the PRI minibus to Surrey. They arrived at Deepcut at about 0910 hours and the place was a hive of activity and chaos – the RLC

was being formed on the following day and there were deliveries everywhere.

Maj Jones found the Mess Manager – who was dressed in formal tails etc, and he appeared to be very frustrated with what was going on. Without waiting for any explanation Maj Jones was told to 'park round the back of the mess, and wait for some one to deal with him later'.

At 1000 hrs Maj Jones once again tried to gain access to the Mess but the Mess manager did not have time to speak to him so he started to talk to Brig Foxtan who had just arrived outside the mess. Eventually the Mess manager re-appeared and said to Maj Jones "We are having an awful time here, we are waiting from some *!@?+* Pioneer with a painting, and don't know where they are". Brig Foxtan, nearly fell over laughing, and said the Pioneers had been there for over an hour and no-one was letting them and their precious painting into the Mess. The Mess Manager was most apologetic!

Eventually, with Maj Jones, Brig Foxtan and Beccy carrying the painting it was placed in its final site in the Headquarters Mess The Royal Logistic Corps and was officially unveiled by the Princess Royal on the afternoon of 5 April 1993.

Whilst the above account has been written light heartedly, the scenes on the painting remind us of the work of the thousands of British and Commonwealth Pioneers during WW2. This painting was the last produced by Terence Cuneo, as he died a few months later. His inclusion in the painting is a fitting tribute to the many War Correspondents that risked their lives during the war to convey news to the public in Britain. ■

Blast from the Past

Do you recognise anyone from these old photographs from the past?



■ Early morning run at Simpson Barracks, Northampton Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Ted Bates, Hughie Rooney, Cliff Mulaney, Arthur Sullivan & Bill Rowland Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Who are these soldiers, in The Pioneer pub, Bicester ? Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Higher Barracks, Exeter - now a housing estate Picture: Mr N Brown



■ Simpson Barracks, Northampton - now a housing estate Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Higher Barracks, (CMRO) Exeter - now a housing estate Picture: Mr N Brown

BLAST FROM THE PAST



■ No. 5 Field Unit PT Course, HQ 8 Group Pioneers

Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Mr Alf Redford states that this photo was taken at Ruabon on a reserve camp between 1953 and 1955.

Picture: Alf Redford



■ Do you recognise these Pioneers ?

Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Do you recognise these Pioneers ?

Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Do you recognise these Pioneers ?

Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Do you recognise these Pioneers ?

Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Do you recognise these Pioneers ?

Picture: RPCA Archive



■ Do you recognise these Pioneers ?

Picture: RPCA Archive

AGM Minutes

61st Annual General Meeting of the Royal Pioneer Corps Association

Acting Chairman: Lt Col JA Starling
Secretary: Mr N Brown
Members Present: 76

THE Secretary opened the 61st Annual General Meeting, held in the Officers Mess, 23 Pioneer Regiment RLC, Bicester on Saturday 5th July 2009 by welcoming members present and receiving apologies from, Brig HJ Hickman, Brig CB Telfer, Col RF McDonald, Col A Barnes, Lt Col JGO Lowe, Lt Col N Smellie, Mr P Ennis, Mr K Ludkin and Mr D Luker the Chairman opened the meeting at 1215 hours and requested 1 minutes silence in memory of those members who had sadly died during the last year after their names had been read by the Secretary.

ITEM 1 MINUTES OF 60TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

1. The minutes of the 60th Annual General Meeting were unanimously agreed. There were no points arising.

ITEM 2 REPORT ON PIONEER ACTIVITIES

2. Maj J Hall, OC Rear 23 Pnr Regt RLC read the following report from Lt Col SP Wheelton RLC, CO 23 Pnr Regt RLC:

Please accept my apologies for not being with you for the Royal Pioneer Corps Association Reunion. However, although I regret that I am unable to be with you on this important day I am immensely proud that once again I have the privilege to have been entrusted with the command of Pioneers on operations.

Today the Pioneers are deployed to three very different theatres of operations. The Regimental Headquarters, 187 (Tancred) Pioneer Squadron and 522 Pioneer Squadron are currently supporting the United Nations in Cyprus. The unique mix of Infantry and Pioneer skills are proving invaluable in keeping the peace and bring about a rapprochement between the two communities on the divided island.

Whilst operations in Iraq have formally drawn to an end the Pioneers continue to labour in that country. A small detachment from 518 Pioneer Squadron is providing a more traditional Pioneer capability of labour support and materiel handling carrying out the unheralded but vital role of removing the last signs of our presence in Basra Air Station which is soon to be handed back to the Iraqi people to whom it belongs.

Our thoughts at this time are particularly with 206 Pioneer Squadron. Equipped with the Mastiff Armoured Fighting Vehicle they are fighting a determined and resourceful enemy in Afghanistan. For nearly four months they have been engaged on one of the most demanding operations since the Korean War. It is a testament to their professionalism, their thorough and effective training, and their excellent kit and equipment that they have yet to suffer a serious casualty from the tour. I'm sure you will join with me in taking a moment today to wish them all safe home.

The Pioneers of 2009 are deployed across the globe and across the whole spectrum of conflict from Major Combat Operations in Afghanistan to Stabilisation Operations in Cyprus. I am confident in saying that in all these operations we strive to maintain the heritage and tradition of the Royal Pioneer Corps. Our identity as Pioneers gives us an invaluable bond, the same bond which brings you all to our home in Bicester today, and a bond which gives us tremendous strength and unity while we are far away from home.

3. Lt Col SJ Caldwell CO 168 Pnr Regt RLC(V) gave the following report.

Current Operations

Currently 3 x soldiers on Op HERRICK acting as infantry escort to IEDD operators. Tour ends Oct 09.

Future Operations

Nothing on OCP for FY10/11. Thereafter a Sqn will deploy with 23 Pnr Regt on Op TOSCA and immediately after a troop will deploy on Op HERRICK with 23 Pnr Regt. Preparation for these deployments will be a major factor in the next training year.

Training

a. There will be no central annual camp this year. This will allow individuals to undertake a course relevant to them with regards to trade progression, future promotion and the regimental skills matrix. This is a significant task which is keeping the permanent staff busy, but will ultimately see a better trained regiment with people able to do the role commensurate with their rank and role.

b. Field training is being achieved over numerous weekends. Highlights include an OBUA weekend at Whinny Hill and a military skills competition at Wathgill.

c. The next Class 2 Course will include installation of a new trim trail at Headley Court.

d. I am hoping to support 170 Pnr Sqn, part of ARRC Sp Bn, on Ex ARRCAD E FUSION 09.

Sport

Re-engagement with sport has been my aim this year. The regiment competed at the RLC Ski Championships in Ruhpolding for the 1st time in many years. No medals but no broken legs either. Similar results for military skills competitions such as the RLC Gore Trophy, the UKRFA Altcar Challenge and numerous Shooting Competitions. Basis of some good teams is there to build upon. We were more successful at the RLC X Country. We are now the RLC TA Major Unit Champions.

Community Engagement

a. To date £4000 has been raised for charity, mainly ABF and Help for Heroes. The most notable event was Maj Collinson's Lands End to John O'Groats cycle ride.

b. 104 Pnr Sqn continues to help the Catcote School in Hartlepool.

c. Numerous events at local fairs in

North East England.

d. Significant support is being given to a Help for Heroes charity cricket match near Grantham in Aug.

Manning

a. All Regular and NRPS posts are filled. TA manning is 64% but climbing. This low number is in part due to a sweep out of non attendees, over 100 soldiers being discharged last year. Recruiting this year is going well both in national and regional Sqns. As always I am looking for high quality ex Regular soldiers to join us.

b. The demise of a TA Sig Regt in North East England is offering a significant opportunity to recruit both into the pioneer trade but also attached arms such as AGC and REME.

Basing

Linked to the demise of the TA Sig Regt an option is being run through LAND to move the RHQ and HQ Sqn away from Grantham to Middlesbrough. This would be a significant benefit allowing the RHQ to better interface with 15 (NE) Bde and the 2 regional squadrons in the area. The decision to move will not be made before early Aug and is dependant upon gaining an uplift in permanent posts to take on the numerous additional responsibilities a regional RHQ would be given.

Summary

The Regiment has undergone some difficult times in recent years. That has now changed. Budgetary constraints do exist but I am determined to use all means to lift the profile of the Regiment. That includes better reporting of events with articles in journals such as The Pioneer, Sustainer, North East Volunteer etc. Finally for those with access to ArmyNet, do look up the Regimental website. In particular I seek your help in expanding the history section about each squadron. Information on 34 Sqn would be particularly appreciated.

ITEM 3. REPORT ON BENEVOLENCE

4. Maj R Corbey Controller Benevolence The RLC gave the following report on Benevolence:

The benevolence caseload for 2008 eventually showed a slight increase over 2007. But, the influx gathered pace and we experienced close on a 40% increase in the first two months of this year. The number of fresh cases has since reduced slightly, but there is still a significant increase over last year. This is without doubt due to the effects of the recession filtering through to the charity sector.

However, if we look at RPC cases in isolation, the demand on benevolence has been falling since 2005 and continues to do so, against the trend. If we compare the number of cases for the first six months of last year with the same period this year, then the stats show that we had 137 cases in 2008 against 121 cases in 2009. We suspect that a major contributing factor in that was the fact that a lot of the older men who fought in WW2 were conscripted into

the RPC so we must expect the numbers to dwindle rapidly, some 64 years after the war ended.

Nonetheless, when we examine the cost of the cases, it is apparent that the amount required to satisfy a case continues to increase. The amount requested by the applicant has more than doubled over the last three years and to give an example, we granted £24,320 towards the 137 cases last year, but this year we have had to grant £28,699 towards 121 cases.

However, in one way this is seen as a positive by the RLC Benevolence Committee. As part of the RLC commitment to convergence we agreed that the cost per case for the Forming Corps would be enhanced to the level of the RLC. It was planned that the increase was to be made gradually, in line with the annual increase in the budget, but it has happened rather quicker than we had planned. The average grant per RPC case in 2005 was £264 and it rose quickly to £304 in 2008. The trend continues and already this year we have an average of £319.

We do of course get good back-up support from the ABF and our call on them has increased considerably over the last two years. In the first 6 months of last year they granted £18,804 to ex RPC soldiers, whilst this year the figure has increased to £23,725. And this does not include the generous annuities and Nursing Home Fees that they also grant.

We get a vast variety of cases from the £68.15 we paid for a specialist hearing device for a dear old 90 year old widow who could not hear her TV, to the £19,900 requested to buy a car so that his wife could go to college and do the shopping, which we naturally rejected. For the Forming Corps and the RPC in particular, the trend continues for increasingly expensive home adaptations to enable disabled people to live at home, mobility aids such as electric scooters, which are growing in numbers and cost.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the recent collapse of the financial markets has had the inevitable adverse affect on the population and since last November we have seen evidence of this through the type and number of cases that we receive. The income has manifested itself at the lower end of the cost scale, the £400-£1500 area, and is mainly for: inability to meet utility bills, rent arrears, mortgage arrears, arrears of council tax, bankruptcies, general needs (such as food and clothing) and lack of

funds to replace broken white goods.

ITEM 4. COUNCIL CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

5. Lt Col JS Starling gave the following report on behalf of the Chairman:

Our Chairman, Colonel Alex Barnes sends his apologies this morning but unfortunately he is employed on his military duties on a TA Commissioning Board, he will be attending tonight and hopes to meet as many members as possible.

Once again I would like to thank the CO 23 Pioneer Regiment for allowing us to use the facilities in his barracks and for allowing over 230 members to be accommodated. This must be a record, we have nearly 300 sitting down tonight and even more will be joining us in the WOs' & Sgts' Mess following the meal. Although, this reunion, because of the operational deployment of the Regiment, was billed as a low key affair it is probably the greatest attendance for many many years.

It is wonderful to see you all, especially those who have travelled great distances to renew friendships. Special mention must be made to Mr Barrett who has travelled from Gibraltar, Mr Simm from Denmark, Mr Lyle from Dublin and Mr MacDonald from Elgin. It is also nice to see our sprightly World War 2 Veterans and, of course, our one In Pensioner at Chelsea, Mr Hull.

ITEM 5. GENERAL SECRETARY'S REPORT

6. Mr N Brown gave the following report: I must apologise for those who are accommodated in St George's Barracks, unfortunately there is not enough accommodation here in St David's. There is a regular shuttle service to St George's so there is no excuse for drink driving. Can I ask all staying to respect the accommodation and leave it in a tidy condition. It would also be appreciated if you could also strip the beds, this will help the works party to tidy-up.

I would like to thank the members of 23 Pioneer Regiment who have worked so hard to make this weekend a success. Special mention must be made to WO2 Colin Bell the Rear Party Sergeant Major and Sgt Bob Pawley who have both worked tirelessly with their staff in arranging so much accommodation. The Mast Chef and his team must also be applauded for their work, catering for these numbers with a very reduced staff is no mean achievement.

You will see in the programme this afternoon there is to be a football match between the Veterans and the Servers on the sports field, please give this your support. Transport will be provided for those who require it.

We have 284 booked in for the carvery meal tonight. There are only two tables which are reserved, it would be appreciated if you could wait until your table is called to the carvery. Two carveries will be operating so you should not have to wait too long.

It is pleasing to report that the number of active members is remaining constant at the 2,300 mark. Since we met last year 71 have joined the Association. Six of these served in WW2, five served in the fifties, two in the sixties, five in the seventies, fifteen in the eighties, twenty five in the nineties and thirteen in the present decade.

The 39/93 Club meet twice yearly at the Red Lion Hotel, Fareham where they have arranged a substantial discount on the normal hotel prices. The next meet is to be held on 9 Oct 09, the cost of hotel accommodation is £32 pppn and £15 for dinner on the Saturday. Further details can be obtained from Mr Les Rowley on 01828 890913.

Finally, I would once again like to place on record my appreciation of the work carried out by my son Paul in preparing the Newsletter and keeping our web-site up to date.

ITEM 6. ELECTION OF COUNCIL MEMBERS

7. In accordance with the Constitution one third of the Council must stand for re-election every year. The following members all were willing to serve for another term and were unanimously elected: Colonel A Barnes, Lt Col J Starling and Capt M East

ITEM 7. ARRANGEMENTS FOR NEXT REUNION/AGM

8. The date of the next reunion/Annual General Meeting would be 2 - 4 July 2010.

ITEM 9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

9. Lt Col JS Starling proposed and all attending agreed that a vote of thanks be recorded for the work carried out by the Secretary, Mr Norman Brown.

10. There being no further business the meeting closed at 1255 hours.

N BROWN
Secretary

Long Lost Trails

The following are trying to re-establish contact...

47 COMPANY

Mr A Brown is trying to trace comrades with whom he served in 47 Coy during WW2 (North Africa, Italy and NW Europe). Please contact 01303 265634.

THOMAS OR TOM WOOD

The RPC Association helped me to find out about my father and the Companies he served with.

I wonder if there are any survivors who served with him, he served with 121 Coy until late 1944 and then with 823 Coy. Please contact Peter Wood ajs_327@msn.com

CPL JIMMY HACKING

Served in Defence Company in I am trying to contact Jimmy. I served in N.Ireland and Belize in 1984 then 1986. I was with the Queens Own Highlanders. There are other "chunkies" I would like to contact. If anyone can help I would be grateful. Contact ja009z1543@blueyonder.co.uk

273 COMPANY

Chris Mossley is trying to contact personnel who served in 273 Company (his father's unit) during WW2. mossley@wellibobs.fsworld.co.uk

PTE ARTHUR WOODWARD

Does anyone remember 23682931 Pte Arthur Woodward RPC served from 14/10/1958 to 13/10/1961. Served in 254 Coy in Cyprus from 6/5/59 to 14/6/60 and then served with 518 Coy in Episkopi until demob.

Arthur passed away a couple of years ago, but his wife Chris would like to get in touch with any of his old mates and chat about old times.

I am a neighbour and a friend of Arthur and Chris and I will

pass on any information.

I served from 1958 to 1964 in REME in Germany. I met a few Pioneers in Bordon when I was in training in 1959.

Clive
See link at: <http://royalpioneer corps.yuku.com/topic/1369>

NEV LANG (POSSIBLY LAING) AND BRIAN PARKS (CAME FROM BARROW IN FURNESS)

Both ex 518 Coy. Keith Paterson is trying to locate, contact paterson.keith@sky.com

The three muskateers

WE arrived home safe and sound yesterday, Dave Nelson and his three Muskateers after a welcome and enjoyable Reunion Weekend.

You and your 'enforced' staff did a wonderful job of organising and ensuring the various activities and events ran smoothly to everyone's satisfaction. Will you pass on our grateful thanks to 23 Pnr Regt for allowing us to use the barracks facilities and sports ground. May I also thank the veterans who took part in the football match and entertained us immensely; though by now they are no doubt suffering with aches and pains. Glad to hear the silent auction was 'profitably' attended.

Wishing you all the best in the future and looking forward (D.V.) to seeing you next year.

George Pringle

I continued with the advancing troops

I HAVE now received the April 2009 issue of "The Pioneer".

I must congratulate you on its contents and the quality of the stories contained therein.

Having read Part I of Mr Bradley's account, I was of course pleased to read part 2.

I did laugh a little at some of the light hearted episodes, but also touched and moved by the more serious events mentioned in the account.

I was interested in Mr Bradley's experiences in the same German towns Goch, Cleve and Kevelaer.

I was with 93 Coy in Bruxelles when I was seconded to the second "Interpreters Pool".

After a short training period, I was transferred to 30 Corps HQ deep in the Reichswald, to the fledgling Military Government Organisation, I was working with a Rhodesian Colonel putting up posters for the German Civilians and to apprehend the "Kreisleiters" who of course disappeared as quickly as possible.

Goch and Cleve were destroyed, but Kevelaer (a Roman Catholic Pilgrimage place) was more or less intact. I continued with the advancing troops towards Bremen.

I greatly enjoyed Mr Bradley's prose and his observations and compassion with regard to minorities.

P.S. I met Mr Harry Rossney yesterday, and I showed him the Newsletter and he was very pleased to read your report on his work, I also met Willy Field, whose book will come out in September!

EH Edwards

Parade - advance in review order

THANKYOU FOR sending me the latest "The Pioneer", it is beautifully done and full of information and memories. I do not know if what I put below us of any interest but it can be used if it is so!

I was very taken with the article about Munster. I was so much involved with those two companies although they might not have realised it! I was at DAPL HQ in Andover as a DADAPL (Major) when the companies were actually being set up. I wrote their establishments and was involved with all parts of the HQ Land Forces in establishing their types of equipment vehicles, weaponry, and training. They can blame me if it did not work and also for the training on Salisbury Plain. The two companies were given full infantry training in view of the items they were to guard.

The two OCs had to attend full infantry commanders courses, why can I not recall both of their names, getting too old I suppose even though one was at one time my 2ic in a Coy, the other was the late Lt Col Ian Milne.

I was promoted and went to NI, and following a couple of years there went to command the then 13 Group RPC which was the Pioneer part of 1 (BR) Corps, where I was also in effect the SOI Labour of that Corps. Naturally 8 Regiment with its RPC element was of great interest to me and I visited them on a few occasions. I attach a photograph of the shield which was given to me by the then OC of 70 Company, which I value dearly.

I am just sending this in case you might be interested.

The recent death of RSM Mel Evans also

sparked a memory for me. I commanded the very first parade held for the newly appointed Colonel in Chief the Duke of Gloucester in September 1978.

(Major Elliott and I would appear to have related poorly as this fact is not mentioned by him, and I only appear as a Captain out in Libya in his history!)

I was the person who directed the planning of the parade, I had a history of this sort of thing from my time in Libya when I was responsible for much of the planning etc of an annual Queens Birthday Parade, and thus to planning the parade recognizing the granting of the title Royal to the Corps 25 years before - I even managed to get on the then Today Programme on Radio 4 at that time!

I discovered that HRH was a keen railway fan, so we brought him in to the air lading plot at the RAOC end of the complex, and then brought him along to Queen's Halt. All this enabled the Railway people to get the loco done up in beautiful paint.

There was a firm in Banbury who made model railway engines and I suggested to the then CO Col Ridings that perhaps we could get a model of the engine made for HRH. He agreed and they, the firm, were delighted making a first class model at a reasonable price!

The parade was a great success and I always recall HRH asking me at the Officers Mess afterwards how on earth I knew that the parade would advance in Review Order when I gave that command!

Sorry to bore you with all this just hope it all gets to you!

Mike Grinnell-Moore

We called it George Lineham's circus

NORMAN thankyou for the magazine, I am writing to say how nice it was to read the letter sent in by George Lineham.

I served with George when he was a Sgt at 521 Coy where he formed the Pioneer Display Team, we called it "George Lineham's Circus". We went all over the UK doing military shows stealing the star attraction from the White Helmets Motorbike Display Team and the Red Devils Freefall Parachute Team. I wonder if he will remember that then I was posted to 206 Coy where George was CSM and

Major Snowden who was OC put their heads on the chopping block for me by promoting me again.

They turned my army career round for me and I thank him for that. His wife, Pat, always spoke when we met because we were both Welsh talking. After a spell in Germany I was posted back to Bicester (518 Coy) and George was now Major QM. All old Pioneers knew he would go far! All I can say George is thanks again and hope to see you at a re union soon.

Taffy Wall

Horsley hall



■ Horsley Hall, June 1957. Does anyone recognise themselves?

Picture: George Burgon

ENCLOSED is a photograph taken outside Horsley Hall in June 1957. I have marked myself, I wonder if anyone out there will recognise themselves.

George Burgon

(Ed Note: We have an article on Horsley Hall in this newsletter on page 39. Old

photographs of this era are always welcome and we are always on the look out for group photographs with a full list of names. Please send them in! We now have over 6000 photographs in the archive, which is growing all the time and CD's can be purchased via the RPCA shop.)

Looking back I have no regrets

THANKYOU for sending the copies of the last two newsletters which is really appreciated. Naturally I'm disappointed I missed the latest reunion as it was so close but you can be sure I'll be at the next God willing!

Briefly looking through the newsletters has brought a smile to my face as I remember some of the locations and experiences while in service with the RPC.

I will get around to reading the whole of the newsletters in depth and monitor the Corps website in the hope of coming in contact with some of guys I lived, slept, worked and partied with. I remember those days with much satisfaction because it does shape your life because of the discipline and friendships you develop during the unique time you spent in that type of environment.

After six years of service then stepping into a different lifestyle e.g. civvy street, it took some adjusting to but you quickly adapt and fit into your new surroundings

(that sounds familiar). Looking back I can simply say I have no regrets, I made my mark and took the Queens shilling because the experience was as I said a unique one which most civilians do not get the opportunity to taste.

Those who have and do serve enjoy something special that makes them different in many ways because they've shared in that unequalled involvement and participation that brings individuals together for the same goal. It binds them all together in one accord because of the same objective in mind, to serve and protect the people of our nation.

My apologies for going on a bit but I could not miss the opportunity to say what we servicemen/women have in common! Until the next time take care,

P.S. I've returned the application for membership card to you first class yesterday, I'm now looking forward to next years reunion.

John Murphy



The Pioneer



■ THANKS for another good magazine. You seem to be getting better each issue.
Jimmy Atkins

■ ROD and I had a fabulous weekend thanks for all the hard work you put into arranging a fab time for all. Well appreciated, see you next year and many thanks again.
Jill Burns-Smith

■ CAN you convey my thanks to all who were involved in the organisation of the Corps weekend. A special thank you to you.
Eddie Butler

■ MANY thanks Norman and everyone involved in organising Reunion weekend. Had a fantastic time - roll on next year!!!
Angela Stevenson

■ I WOULD like to thankyou and all those involved for a great weekend, It takes a great deal of organising and planning, I think it's safe to say on behalf of all those who attended it was a success. I look forward to next year. The man from Denmark lol.
Tony Simm

■ JUST just to say thank you for a great weekend looking forward to next year.
Alan Tooth

■ JUST a word of thanks for a great day on Saturday. We certainly showed the young soldiers how to march on parade. Thanks again for all your hard work.
Yours sincerely,
Brian Freeth

■ JUST a word of thanks, for another great weekend which I am sure was enjoyed by all. Again many thanks.
SSgt Paul Mardell

■ CHEERS for such a great weekend, book me in for 2010 for two. I may even bring my football boots out of retirement. Although the beer tent was a lot of fun too. Once again many thanks.
Legs Wegg

■ THANKYOU for the work and effort for helping me and my mates all get together, it was a fantastic weekend, book me in for next year please thanks again.
David Moulds

■ THANKYOU and everyone involved for a great weekend, the vets football match was brilliant, although my body is still recovering I will be staying the weekend for sure next year. Once again thanks.
Paul Scott

come on, send us a mail...

The Royal Pioneer Corps Association

c/o 23 Pnr Regiment RLC
St David's Barracks
Graven Hill
Bicester OX26 6HF



or email us at:
royalpioneer corps@gmail.com

Who organized and executed the building of the pyramid?

I WAS livid when I read the letter from Bob Setterfield and the drivel he wrote about 522 Company's fiasco in 1967.

It prompted me to write an eleven page article on the organization, training, and integrity that went into the building of the Pyramid on the Festival of Remembrance at The Royal Albert Hall.

Within the article I have explained and laid to rest this mistaken belief that the Ammo boxes were empty.

The integrity of our Officer was so high that he had an independent officer from the Royal Army Ordinance Corps to check the boxes to make sure the boxes had been filled with Sand to the correct weight of a full ammunition box filled with live ammunition.

His first proposal to the Organizers of the Festival of Remembrance committee was to use full boxes of live ammunition.

The committee said we couldn't use live ammunition. When you get the article, will you please print it for all to read the full and true story of the training and everything that we went through to bring Honour to the Royal Pioneer Corps.

PS Norman will you also do me a favour, can you try and find out the Officers name who organized and executed the exercise of building the pyramid.

I have an original photograph of the final team that went to the Royal Albert Hall.

I am going to take a copy from the original and send it with the article. If you print the article you can print the photo with it.

Although I don't know the guy's names, hopefully some-one out there can help you with the names!

Thanks in anticipation John.

John McDonough.
Ex Cpl. 23652392.

Will you be the winner of the derby draw prize?

MANY thanks for the latest edition of the Corps Newsletter. The quality and content gets better with each issue.

Well done. I enclose cheque in respect of Derby Draw tickets.

Afernote: I had a Implantable Cardioverter/Defibrillator fitted and not that item you printed in my last letter.

George Lineham

(Ed note: if your writing had been better I would have got it right - but GD I suppose!)

We watched our lads flatten Carne

MANY thanks for very recent copy of our 'Pioneer', a real pleasure to receive and at my leisure to read, also there were two books of Derby Draw tickets, I will deal with these directly, then Lilian and I will scheme and dream of how to enjoy the lovely 'Grand', shan't hold our breath in that regard.

This afternoon I phoned your office, in order to gain some information regards the proposed visit to the Normandy Beaches, sites of the June 1944 Invasion.

A brief resume of my small part in this is as follows:

At the end of Apr 44, we spent some weeks on Strensall Common York. Most of the training involved invasion techniques, apart from small arms training and much of the time was taken up with route marches, more to the point was to find out just how much kit it was possible to be carried. Halfway into May found us ensconced in the grounds of Ashford Great House, Kent. The perimeter of the house was surrounded by what we were told to be 'Home Troops'. We left there by lorry to a small nameless station at a seemingly snails pace. We finally pulled in at Portsmouth Harbour Station, this was not learnt by sight, but by the smell of sea air. Here there was some delightful 'Sally Army' Ladies giving out Sarnies, cakes, char and ciggies - no sign of NAFFI which was no surprise. Just as we were about to make a move we saw about 10/12 Staff Officers coming along the platform, they were in their full length Grey-Coats, when amongst us some were taking small articles from the trays which their companions held before them, as an officer was about to give me a packet, I then looked into the face of my King. I should have said our King. He shook my hand and said keep safe lad, then passed on through our ranks with the same goodwill. Soon after we embarked on the 'Maid Of New Orleans'. When we managed to get on we found that there

were Canadians everywhere, it seemed that the ship was already filled to the brim.

However, it seemed that someone knew the secret of putting a pint into a half pint glass. As we were funnelled aboard every last one of us, I remember thinking at the time that the Canadians were much more noisier than any of the G.I's we had come across. We crossed the pond safely, but the ship stopped about a mile from the beach, and we disembarked into large TLC's these took us into a point where smaller craft, crashed us up on to the beach.

We found that the place where we were was called Grey Ser Mur (you can check the spelling). The well told War-ry parts have been said and resaid. In due time having got through Beyeuax we eventually found ourselves on the side of a hill looking down on the village of Suble pronounced sooblay. There we found that our immediate job was to start No 1 Roadhead. We were delayed there for a few weeks waiting for our G.I. friends to pick their feet up.

The grass radio suggested that they were taking a census on the female residents, don't believe that to be true. Before we moved on we sat on the hillside and watched our lads flatten Carne. The next day we learned that Gen Patton got fed up with waiting. shot off with his men straight through Fallaise gap, leaving Gen Ike picking apples in the champagne forest.

Norman hope I have not bored you, if you are still reading, can you find out how I, former 13093381 A.C.Cole. Sgt. 291 Pioneer Company, now aged 89, Mr Arthur C Cole Phd. can get to go with wife (care person) on the pre-proposed last visit of veterans, to the sites of the invasion in Normandy. Most cordially In good comradeship I remain,

Arthur Cole.
(Ed Note: Hi Arthur, details for funding for visits can be found on the bottom left of page 12).

Corner stones laid in the past is their pride in the future

ON behalf of the members of the 39/93 Club and others I am asked to thank you and all those concerned in making the Association Reunion Weekend one that will remain with them as something very special.

Our thanks to the invitations as guests to attend the Officers Mess, Sergeants Mess and the Corporals Club.

Special thanks must go to all the catering staff both military and civilian. Food was made available for most of the time we were there.

Being of the highest quality and served

with good humour and politeness.

The Reunion Dinner was something that has been missing for a long time and the general consensus is that it should be considered for the future.

To close, many are sure, that it is from the dedication of yourself and your son both behind the scenes and with the production of the Pioneer Magazine that our reunions are going from strength to strength and to hear from the serving soldiers that the corner stones that were laid in the past is their pride in the future.

Bill Goode (Chairman 39/93 Club)

Never give up on your skills

I RETIRED from the Royal Logistic Corps in April 2006 after having spent 22 years as a Pioneer soldier.

Before I retired I was successful in applying for a position with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office as an Overseas Security Manager (OSM). The majority (95%) of all OSMs' are ex services and we come from a mixture of cap badges RLC (Pnr), RMP CP & Royal Air Force.

My first posting as an OSM was to Sana'a, Yemen which was a massive challenge as we were to move to a brand new Embassy which was still in the process of being built. I departed from Yemen in April 2008 to move to Amman, Jordan and I thought that my relationship with Yemen was over, how wrong could I have been.

In October 2008 Al-Qaeda attacked the U.S. Embassy in Yemen; this Embassy is only 600 metres away from the UK Embassy. After the attack on the U.S. Embassy my parent Department in London, Security Estates Directorate conducted a survey of the UK Embassy in order to look at ways of enhancing the security stance due to the type of attack that Al-Qaeda conducted; this survey included a number of measure of which one that of the installation of razor wire.

The FCO has a number of experts in virtually every field, however not in the installation of razor wire.

After hearing that they wanted to install razor wire and knowing the Embassy layout very well I flew to Yemen in November 2008 so as that I could conduct the survey for the installation on behalf of the FCO.

I submitted my report to London at the end of November complete with drawings and equipment requirements using the knowledge gained over my 22 years as a Pioneer. In January 2009, London agreed with my recommendations and asked if I could actually install the razor wire as per my drawings. I agreed and in March 2009 I travelled back to Yemen so as that I could complete phase one of the installation which consisted of installing 1.8kms of type 2 razor wire. Due to the ongoing security situation I ended up installing this on my own.

It was very hard going as Sana'a is some 7500 feet above sea level and very hot. During the installation the Senior Overseas Security Advisor from London visited and was impressed with the standard of installation. My experience of razor was gained from watching and learning from such great Assault Pioneers as Corporal Albert Tatlock and the Sgt (now WO2) Dinger Bell. Without their professional experience during my days as a Pioneer I would not have been able to conduct the task.

Phase two of the installation commenced

on the 23rd March and was completed with only one minor setback; a Yemeni who was helping me with this stage dropped a full coil of razor wire that then fell against my right leg.

At first I felt nothing but when I tried to shake of the tingling sensation I saw a fair amount of blood drip from the bottom of my trousers and over my new Merrell shoes. I gingerly lifted up my trouser leg which by this stage had turned bright red, only to find that I had a fairly large gash in my right lower calf.

After taking myself off to the Joint Oil Company Clinic for treatment I walked out with 12 stitches in my leg. 22 years as a Pioneer and this is the first time that razor wire has ever caused me an injury. Next day I completed the installation, only a bit slower than normal.

The motto of this story is never give up on your skills as they may come to yours and your countries aid. I am proud to have served as a Pioneer and all the people within the Embassy and London now know what Pioneers are capable of even when they are retired. I saved the FCO some £15000 (this is the amount a UK company quoted to install the wire) by installing the razor wire myself. I got a nice thank you letter.

Gary Thompson
(Ex WO2 - SSM 522 Sqn & HQ Sqn RSU)



■ Pioneers from 23 Pioneer Regiment in Afghanistan, utilising their Pioneering skills

Picture: 206 Pnr Sqn

No labour no battle

Book co-written by our resident Pioneer historian - John Starling

Foreword: Professor Richard Holmes
Picture: J A Starling

SELDOME has that insufficiently-acknowledged phrase 'no labour, no battle' been more true than in the First World War.

There is widespread agreement that it was a gunner's war, but the shells that shaped the conflict (and have left such an enduring mark on the landscape), had to be taken to ports, embarked, shipped to France and other theatres of war and then unloaded, transported to depots close to the front, and finally hauled forward onto the gun positions from which they would be fired. Trench warfare - combat in that obdurate framework of fighting and communication trenches, barbed wire entanglements, command post and reserve positions - depended upon backbreaking work. Roads and railways had to be built and repaired, timber for everything from huts to duckboards had to be felled, sawed and fashioned, and salvage - from discarded rifles to redundant boots - had to be recovered and, wherever possible, refurbished for re-use.

The British army was bigger than it had ever been before, or would be since. It put nearly six million men through its ranks, and in the summer of 1917, when numbers on the Western Front peaked, it had some 1.7 million in that theatre alone. This mighty leviathan gulped down resources: ammunition for its artillery, mortars, machine-guns and rifles; food, fodder and water for its men and animals; fuel for its motor vehicles and aircraft, and what were gently described as 'trench stores' - the wearisome litany of duckboards, sandbags, wire pickets, water pumps, corrugated metal, timber for stakes and revetments, and the half-round 'elephant iron' that made roofed-over sections of trench - for its field defences.

There is no shortage of scholarly work on the acceleration in munitions production, and on the political, social and economic consequences of wholly unprecedented changes in the organisation of British industry and agriculture. Similarly, almost every aspect of the fighting army's life has been explored, from its command structure, to its weapons and tactics and the everyday life of its officers and men. Yet there has been no comprehensive survey of the

organisation and use of military labour, even though its numbers were prodigious (at the time of the Armistice the Agricultural Companies alone contained 75,000 men, three-quarters the size of the entire British army as I write) and its impact was scarcely less than war-winning.

And of course we can see why. Not only does the topic lack the drama of battle or the controversial decision-making of high command, but, even in an army as inherently decentralised as the British, its organisation was fluid, often eccentric, and its wartime structures soon withered in the pale sunlight of peace: it was scarcely the stuff for aspiring regimental historians. Nor was labour likely to appeal to those who found the war's most definitive expression in the everyday life of its infantry, who sought the vicarious excitement in the achievements of its heroes, or who believed that the whole shocking business could best be understood in terms of 'lions led by donkeys.'

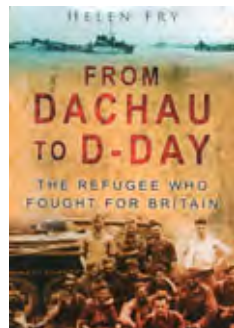
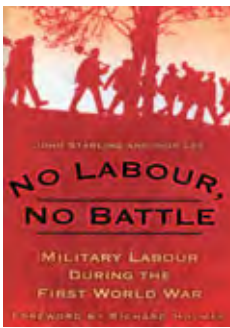
This is the first proper history of military labour in the First World War. It charts the fortunes of the many types of unit involved, from Home Service Labour Companies through Docks Battalions, Pioneer Battalions to companies charged with the exhumation and reburial of the dead, using War Office files in the National Archives to explain the administrative details which illuminate the complex twists and turns of units' organisational lives. It also examines the controversial issue of overseas labour units like the Cape Coloured Labour Battalion, the Fijian Labour Corps and the Chinese Labour Companies. Headstones of the latter's members are a not infrequent sight in Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries on the Western Front, and I can never see one without musing on the vagaries of fate that whisked a man from Shantung to die in Flanders.

Although theirs is evidently a labour of love, the authors do not flinch from difficult issues. When Private Freddie Alberts of the Cape Coloured Labour Battalion was shot for murder, the firing party botched its task though the range was very short and the victim had a white envelope pinned over his heart. The Medical Officer was narrowly missed by the sergeant who administered the coup de grâce with his revolver. Ratu Joseva Sukuna, a Fijian high chief, was commissioned into the Fiji

Defence Force but the governor decreed that Europeans need not salute him. He resigned his commission and served as a quartermaster sergeant in the labour corps, eventually returning home to become Speaker of the Legislative Council and later to receive a knighthood. Exhumation squads went about their ghastly work by first looking for grass that was a vivid bluish green, or water that was greenish black or grey, the tell-tale signs of a body near the surface, and groped for identity discs in rotting humanity. A wise company commander emphasised that men behaved much better if reminded that their job was really important because so many men were missing, and 'the greater the stress laid upon the need for identification, the greater the interest the men take on their work.'

Labour units were not immune from the indiscipline that accompanied the slow process of demobilisation: in June 1919, 360 soldiers were tried for disobeying a lawful order when men of the Eastern Command Labour Centre refused to go on parade as ordered, though proceedings were eventually halted. The introduction of conscription in early 1916 raised the question of conscientious objection to military service, and the authors are right to emphasise that many local tribunals asked questions, intended to prove whether a man was a genuine Conscientious Objector or not, that doomed him whatever his answer. Many objectors were enlisted into the Non Combatant Corps, whose strength peaked at 3,319, its members serving as part of the army although they could not be trained to use weapons of any description. Some objectors simply refused to obey orders, and were court-martialled: ten died in custody (one hunger striker choked to death when the tube used to force-feed him sent fluid into his lungs) or shortly after release. There was an undercurrent of what we might term today 'institutional racism.' For instance, black chaplains in South African Native Labour Corps were granted neither rank nor status, and one complained of an attitude by which: 'Black was black, and a boy was a boy, however dressed, educated or entitled.'

But there is also much resilience, determination and courage in the story. In 1917 a sergeant earned the Distinguished Conduct Medal (one of the many



decorations awarded to members of the Labour Corps) for keeping a vital stretch of road in the Ypres salient repaired 'although driven back by shell fire and gas several times.' When the great German offensive of March 1918 rolled the British right back towards Amiens, 876 Labour Company shifted 2,000 wounded to safety just before the Germans arrived, and 141 Labour Company stuck to its duties at an ammunition dump until it was actually being machine-gunned. Often officers and men of the Labour Corps ran a soldier's risks: in May 1918 three officers and 286 men of 101 Labour Company were gassed. All the officers and 134 of the men died, but the company was hard at work five days later.

Foreign labourers were not afraid to risk their lives: in May 1919 1st Class Ganger Yen Teng Feng was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for spending four hours in a burning ammunition dump, dragging tarpaulins off stacks of ammunition to drench them with water. Although the men of the Bermuda Royal Garrison Artillery, working as a labour unit on the Western Front, suffered terribly from weather which could scarcely have been less like that to which they were accustomed, in October 1918 a Bermuda RGA detachment near Ypres, offloading ammunition and sending it on to nearby batteries, stuck to their task under shellfire: their lieutenant was awarded the Military Cross.

Many readers will be attracted to the

subject because they will have had a relative serving in the Labour Corps. With a strength that peaked at just under 400,000 in early 1918, during the last two years of the war the corps was about the same size as the Royal Engineers and around eight times bigger than the Foot Guards, although - because its casualties were necessarily fewer - its throughput of personnel was smaller than was in the combat arms. But many members of the corps began their careers as infantrymen, and then re-badged as their battalions became part of the corps, or when they themselves were medically downgraded.

At this time in the army's history all non-commissioned personnel had a regimental number which was exactly that - an identification number issued them by virtue of their service in a specified regiment or corps.

The notion of an 'army number' issued to a man on joining the army and remaining with him for the whole of his career (thus providing a good indication of the year of his enlistment) did not arise till later. Thus a relative's First World War service medals, their rim engraved with his name, rank, number and corps, may simply indicate that he was in the Labour Corps, and this will provide little clue as to what he actually did during the war.

This book has an invaluable appendix relating the numbers of British Labour Corps personnel to the battalions or Infantry Labour Companies that were

rebadged to form Labour Companies. For instance, a man with a number between 55201 and 55800 will have been a member of 13th Battalion The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey) which formed 93 and 94 Labour Companies. A similar table relates the numbers of men serving in Home Service Labour Companies to their company number and its location: a number between 173141 and 173440 links a man to 315 Company, a works company based at Fovant in Wiltshire.

But this painstakingly-researched book will appeal to far more readers than those who are tracing the war record of a great-uncle, for you cannot really understand the way the British army went about its business during the war without understanding how it used the labour upon which so much depended.

The next time you see a Labour Corps headstone in a CWGC cemetery, pause to remember that they also served who plied pick and shovel, often in conditions that we can scarcely guess at, providing service upon which so very much depended.

Richard Holmes

NO LABOUR NO BATTLE: THE LABOUR CORPS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR
 By J A Starling and Ivor Lee
 Price £30 this includes postage
 Hardback, which includes a £10 donation to the RPC Association
 ISBN 10 0752 449753

From Dachau to D-Day Cheese Sarnies

Review: Norman Brown
Picture: Supplied

WILLY FIELD was born Willy Hirschfeld in Bonn, Germany. The morning after Kristallnacht on 10 November 1938 he was arrested by the Gestapo and transported to Dachau concentration camp.

This fascinating new book details the horrendous experiences of a German Jew in the camp, and how he survived to come to England as a refugee.

Shipped to Australia and interned as an enemy alien, Wally nevertheless returned to Britain as one of the 10,000 volunteers for the British armed forces.

He initially joined the Pioneer Corps before transfer to

the Royal Armoured Corps and eventually found himself on active service as a tank driver.

Three days after D-Day, Willy landed in France and saw frontline fighting through Normandy, Belgium and the Netherlands.

He was the only survivor when his tank received a direct hit, but, after recovery, he was given another tank and crossed the border into Germany with the Allied army.

Having been involved in the liberation of Hamburg, Willy drove his tank past Winston Churchill in the Victory Parade in Berlin in July 1945.

FROM DACHAU TO D-DAY
 (The refugee who fought for Britain)
 By Helen Fry
 ISBN 978-0-7509-5111-1

Review: Constance Hayball
Picture: Supplied

EDWARD LAMBERT was born in Bristol on 14 Jul 1911. His father, Edwin Lewis Hayball, was a Company Sergeant Major in the Royal Gloucestershire Regiment.

CSM Hayball died in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) of wounds received in the Dardanelles expedition in March 1917. Sarah opened a sweetshop in Lower Castle Street, Bristol, and lived with her two sons - Ted, as he was known, and his younger brother Peter - over the shop. Ted attended the local Church of England School, and, after leaving school at 14, was employed in several jobs in central Bristol.

After living with his grandparents for a short time, Ted decided to follow his father into the Gloucesters. During service in India Ted availed himself of the educational opportunities offered by the

army, and returned to civilian life. But he was then recalled to the army at the outbreak of war.

These memoirs begin at that point and cover the duration of the WW2. Ted had intended to publish these memoirs, but died before this could be accomplished.

The text printed is exactly as he wrote it, but has been edited by his daughter Jane with the help of his son Richard and myself, his wife. Ted's memoirs were all based on his memories, except where he states otherwise.

Note: the photo on the rear cover shows Ted with ex WO1 Roger Kirby in Normandy on the 50th anniversary of D-Day).

TUNNELS FULL OF CHEESE SANDWICHES
 WW2 Memoirs of Lt Edward Lambert Hayball, Gloucestershire Regiment and Pioneer Corps
 £8 (incl p&p) from:
 Mrs C Hayball, 147 Sapcote Rd, Hinckley. LE10 2AT

Last Post

It is with sadness to report the following deaths

PERRETT WILLIAM

11 Mar 09 Ex Pte (13044680)

Erskine Glasgow Home (Aged 94). Served 4 Jul 40 - 7 Feb 46

FORD WILLIAM GEORGE (BILL)

28 Mar 09 Ex SSgt (13036829)

Brighton (aged 90). Served 4 Jul 40 - 10 Jun 46

SLATER ANTHONY

30 Mar 09 ex Pte (24198253)

Weymouth (Aged 56). Served 25 Jan 71 - 24 Jan 74

LAWRENCE FREDERICK JOHN

11 Feb 09 ex Pte (14594888)

LONDON (Aged 96). Served 30 Dec 43 - 3 Jan 47

DANIELS DAVID HENRY

23 Dec 08 Ex WO2 (22272474)

PETERBOROUGH (Aged 78).

ROBERTS RM

30 Jan 09 Ex Pte (19188523)

ABERGELE (Aged 82). Served Jun 47 - Jul 49

COPELAND WH

1 Nov 08 Lt Col (Retd) Luton (Aged 95).

Commissioned into Pioneer Corps in May 1941. His wife writes: My husband died on 1st Nov, it was our 61st Wedding Anniversary. He was 95. Looking at "Last Post" in the Association Newsletter your would probably be interested in his post army career. He was demobilised in 1948, having married me in Singapore, I was a Nursing Sister in Quaimnsr. We lived in Luton where he had his own business as an Estate Agent, served as a councillor on Luton Borough Council for 18 years and was Mayor of Luton for 2 years.

STERNAGEL HERBERT

11 Apr 09 MONCHENGLADBACH

(Aged 84). Worked for many years in HQ BAOR (P&).

RICHARDSON GEOFFREY FREDERICK

Ex WO1 (RASC) (13067879)

Aged 92 In-Pensioner Royal Hospital Chelsea. Geof enlisted at LONDON into the Army Fire Service (Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps) on 24 Oct 40 and served until 30 Dec 40.

Because of the Blitz he was returned to the London Fire Brigade until Sep 42.

He rejoined the Army Fire Service (Pioneer Corps) under the Distribution of Labour Act on 18 Sep 42 until 30 Jun 46 he served in Bedfordshire at an Ammunition Depot, POL Depot, Plastics Depot covering 20 square miles until 1945 and then transferred on formation of a Company HQ at BULFORD in the Army Fire Service.

He became chief clerk and eventually WO2 (QMSI) Fire Inspector.

In Jul 1946 he signed on as a Regular at BULFORD into the RASC.

In Feb 48 he was posted to the Middle East arriving at PORT SAID and was stationed in British Troops EGYPT.

He ran various fire stations and was responsible for inspections. In 1953 he returned to the UK and in 1954 he was posted to BAOR at DORTMUND as Area

Fire Inspector Rhine Army.

He moved to DUSSELDORF and HQ Rhine District.

He did advisory trips to DENMARK, HOLLAND, BELGIUM and ITALY. On 24 Feb 59 he returned to the UK and was discharged in Dec 59.

WOOLLEY KENNETH VICTOR CHARLES

7 May 09 Ex Pte (13032242) Maidstone

Aged 89. Served from 13 Jun 40 - 4 Nov 45

NUGENT JM

10 Jan 09 Ex Sgt (13119435)

Bridge, Kent. Served from Mar 44 - 1952 in 263 Coy.

FRANKLIN REGINALD

21 Feb 09 Ex Pte 14938998 (Aged 82)

Cleveland (Served 1 Mar 45 - 13 Mar 48)

WALTON DENNIS

20 Jun 09 Ex Sgt 24005946 Loughborough

Mr N Taylor writes:

"Yesterday, 26th June we gathered in Loughborough to say our farewells to one of our brothers 24005946 Ssgt Dennis K Walton who sadly passed away on 20th June after being ill for some time.

We met up at Dennis's home and paid our condolences to his wife and young son Connor and his family.

Stories of Dennis were told by one of his oldest friends John Barlow, much to the amusement of all in attendance,

Just before 1300 hrs we made our way to the crematorium for the service of interment.

Dennis's casket was draped with the Nostalgia Group flag and Dennis's beret and a pair of NI patrol gloves and of course his medals, (GSM Northern Ireland, GSM South Arabia).

The chapel was full of family and close friends to see him on his final journey, the padre read a moving eulogy which at the request of Dennis's wife was light hearted and not too sombre as that was how Dennis would have wanted it.

A song was then played (A Pub With No Beer) and it brought a smile to everyones face as they all remembered a personal memory of Dennis.

Just before the end of the service and the interment the padre asked Connor, Dennis's son, to come forward and he was presented with his father's beret, with tears streaming down his face Connor took the beret and thanked the padre and returned to his seat.

We all commented on how very polite this young man was and what a credit he was to his mum and dad.

Then the last post was played, this was befitting for Denis a great husband, father and a Royal Pioneer. Stand at ease Dennis, stand easy."

HARTLAND GRAHAM GEORGE

27 Apr 09 Ex Pte (22459608)

Served in 523 Coy from 15 Feb 51 - 8 Mar 53

JOHNSON ALBERT WILLIAM

3 Jul 09 Ex Pte (13112314)

Served 1942-45 Leicester (Aged 92)

COOMBES TOM

23 Jul 09 Ex Pte (13032258) (Aged 95)

Salisbury. Served in 6 Coy from Jun 40 - Jan 46 which included North Africa (Coy employed as front line troops) and Normandy D+2)

SMITH ALAN

4 Aug 09 Ex Cpl (22190140) (Aged 77)

Uttoxeter Served 20 Oct 49 - 20 Oct 51

GREENING CLIFFORD

5 Jun 09 Ex Pte (24175329) (Aged 61)

Served 19 Jun 70 - 18 Jun 73

BRIG CF WALKER, DIRECTOR RPC

Jan 68 - Mar 70

Brig JB Ryall CBE writes: I heard the sad news of the death of Brig Frank Walker, who died on 17 Aug 09, from Mr Simon Addy, the son of the late Brig John Addy, who followed Brig Walker as the Director in 1970.

Frank Walker originally joined the Scots Guards as a Guardsman and was, during the War, commissioned into the S Lancs Regt. He saw active service in Burma and was Mentioned in Despatches.

He was one of the few selected officers to be granted a regular commission in the RPC in 1952. It was on his transfer to the Corps that I first met him.

Frank Walker was very much a family man, but for all that he put his heart and soul into the RPC and become well known for his hard work and depth for the goodwill of the Corps.

He held various appointments in the Corps; hence he became very

knowledgeable of the functions of the Corps. He held appointments as a PCLU Officer, subsequently 2IC of 10 Group, then Commander of 13 Group prior to being Commandant of the Depot & Training Centre in 1964 (Simpson Barracks).

Subsequently he became the Director Army Pioneers & Labour in BAOR, I was not on the staff at the time however I was very much involved with Brig Walker; subsequently he was appointed The Director at the MOD in London, where I joined him as the ADPL, hence I was able to see at first hand his strength and depth to which he would go to ensure the Corps remained part of the regular army, certainly he was highly respected by the senior officers at the MOD.

I met up with Frank on many occasions following retirement, notably when the Corps was granted the Freedom of Northampton by the Borough Council in 1984 and especially functions involving Past & Present Directors of the Corps & Commandants in 1982 and again in 1992 when HRH The Duke of Gloucester was present.

On retirement Frank Walker was the very much valued Secretary of the Guards and Cavalry Club (The In and Out) in London for many years. Frequently he was requested to continue in the appointment and did so willingly.

To Frank's wife Billie and daughter Suzanna Aylard I am certain all who knew Frank will send their deepest condolences. Frank lived until the 96th year of his life.

He and I corresponded every Christmas ... certainly I have lost a great and personal friend. ■



■ Pictured on the right, Herbert Sternagel MBE

Picture: RPCA Archive

OBITUARY - HERBERT STERNAGEL MBE

Herbert Sternagel died on 11 April 2009, age 85, after a short illness. He was conscripted into the German Army during World War II and, having initially trained as a parachutist, he was serving in an Artillery role when captured by the Allies. He recalled his time as a Prisoner of War in the USA as one long unpleasant encounter with farms and turnips. Returning to Germany soon after hostilities ended he was able to be re-united with his childhood friend Erika, later to become his wife, initially in Berlin and then in Moenchengladbach. His family home had been in Silesia which was by then in Russian occupation, and he was never able to return. His distinctive Prussian-style outlook and fortitude were to remain hallmarks of his career and life.

Quickly gaining employment with the British Forces he became an accomplished technical translator. By the 1950's he had become the senior technical translator with 37(Rhine) Wksp REME in Moenchengladbach and in this role came to the attention of Pioneer & Labour officers in 4 PCLU. During this period new Personnel Representation Laws were progressively implemented as Germany built its post war industrial relations system.

These laws presented new sets of challenges for the NATO Forces in Germany and particularly in large industrialised units such as REME workshops. There were also social challenges as trade union practices developed, and, in Moenchengladbach, ground-breaking new systems for local apprenticeships - an unheard of and troublesome precedent for the German authorities to accept among foreign employers such as NATO Forces.

By the decade of the 60's Sternagel's expertise in labour law was growing very rapidly. He acquired an unsurpassed reputation for deep understanding of the under-pinning legislation which, in turn, made high-level language skills vital in international industrial relations. His technical linguistic competence was now of the highest order and he became unique in his ability to switch contexts between the most detailed of engineering applications and the world of labour law.

At the same time as demonstrating unswerving loyalty to his British employers he became a keen student of the use of their language and literature and art.

By the 1970's he was the Senior Personnel Officer in Pioneer & Labour - later Labour Resource - Directorate, HQ BAOR, and the highest graded locally engaged employee in a management role.

In this role he befriended many Pioneer Officers and Senior ranks. His keenness on cross-cultural interests, particularly his reading of British authors and following of portrait and landscape painters brought him into close personal as well as operating friendships. A good number of Pioneer homes hold an example of Herbert's distinctive and highly skilled paintings in oils. He was a consummate illustrator artist, and was easily and naturally capable.

His technical and legal affairs reputation continued to ascend and he had by now secured a formidable reputation among his contacts in the various local, regional and national German government offices. Inside the P&L organisation he was especially respected for his encyclopaedic grasp of labour agreements and the ability to array arguments of great technical depth without need of briefing time.

There were frequent legal contests when the policy positions of the British Forces as an employer were tested. One director said "I never saw him reach for reference material when questioned, and his expertise was such that no case he handled was ever lost at the Federal Constitutional Court. His loyalty to the British shone through - but his love of Country out shone even that. I never met anyone to whom the purity of his mother tongue mattered more. He utterly detested the careless use of language - especially among so-called "experts"; the hallmark of a truly professional technical translator and interpreter.

Lawyers found him uncomfortably well informed on their subjects and utterly intolerant of their lack of insight into NATO matters - in the words of his British officer colleagues he suffered fools not at all and the incompetent even less.

Yet he was a charming man of great personal generosity, quick to seize on new enthusiasms - such as science fiction and works on extra-terrestrial beings.

He remained in contact with many former British colleagues and, aged 84, was seen socially with one officer and both of their wives enjoying coffee in the shadow of the Kaiser Freidrich Halle, Moenchengladbach, while still asking pin-sharp questions about former comrades, discussing Anglo-German politics - and still painting English landscape subjects.

He was made MBE for services to the British Army of the Rhine in the late 70s and continued to serve in the same role until retirement in 1984. His wife Erika, for whom he had cared devotedly during a long trying illness pre-deceased him in 2008. ■



■ Brigadier C F Walker

Picture: RPCA Archive



And finally...

a thankyou, a welcome
and a little humour to
keep your spirits up...

Report: Norman Brown
Picture: RPCA Archive

IN the next few months both the Commanding Officer, Lt Col S P Wheelton, and the Regimental Sergeant Major, WO1 W Ross, will be leaving 23 Pioneer Regiment.

I would like to place on record my thanks for the help and assistance they have given me during their time in Bicester. Both have been active Council Members of the Association and have taken a great interest in all things "Pioneer". The RSM has ensured that the 'red and green' will not be forgotten - even in Cyprus, where if anything stood still long enough it was painted in these colours! They also gave my son and I the opportunity to visit the Regiment in Cyprus, here we saw how hard the Regiment were working especially those on the Mobile Force Reserve.

I would also like to thank the rear party of 23 Pioneer Regiment for the help they have given during the year, especially during the Reunion Weekend when such a large number attended. Special thanks must go to the Rear Party Sergeant Major WO2 C Bell and the accommodation SNCO, Sgt R Pauley.

It is with regret that I have to report that Pte S Campbell (518 Sqn attached to 206 Sqn) was seriously injured in Afghanistan when the Mastiff vehicle he was travelling in was blown over by an IED. I am sure that all Association members join me in wishing him a speedy recovery.

Next year's Reunion is to be held on 2-4 July 2010, please make a note in your diaries. Full details and a booking form will be included in the April 2010 Newsletter.

IN the beginning was the word and the word was God, in the beginning there was God and all else was darkness and void and without form, so God Created the heavens and the earth. He created the Sun, the Moon and the Stars so that light might pierce the darkness. The earth God divided between the Land, the Sea and the Air, and he filled them with many creatures.

The dark, salty and slimy creatures that inhabited the murky depths of the oceans God called Marines and he dressed them accordingly.

The flighty creatures of the Air God called Paratroopers and these he clothed in uniforms that were ruffled and drab.

The creatures of the Land God called Soldiers, with a twinkle in his eye and the

sense of humour that only he could have, God created the Army Catering Corps and The Royal Corps of Transport. God gave them trousers too short, jackets that were too big and pockets to warm their hands. He gave the cooks bright white uniforms and hats they they could spill they many meals onto.

To adorn their uniforms God gave them badges, cords, ribbons and patches, he gave them emblems, crests and all manner of bright shiney things that glittered and devices that dangled. When you're God, you tend to get carried away at times.

On the seventh day God rested and on the eighth day at 0700 hrs sharp he looked down on the earth and was not happy, God was definitely not happy.

So God thought about his labours and in his infinite wisdom he created a divine creature in his own image, and God called this creature a Pioneer. These Pioneers were to be the back bone of the British Army and he gave them many wonderful things.

He gave them immense memories in

order to retain all information and knowledge. He gave them skills with weapons, explosives and building that no other soldier had. He gave them a weird sense of humour that only a Pioneer could understand and finally he gave them many wonderful uniforms.

He gave them practical fighting uniforms so that they could wage war against the dark forces of Satan. He gave them smart uniforms for their daily work and training so that they may be sharp and always ready. He gave them dress uniforms, stylish things so that they might promenade with the ladies on a Saturday and impress their pants off.

And at the end of the eighth day, Good looked down on the earth and saw that it was good but was he happy? No God was still not happy, because in the course of his labours he had forgotten one thing, God had not done an assault pioneer course. He thought about this, pondering over it for some time and finally satisfied himself with the knowledge that not even God is good enough to become a Pioneer. ■





Coming up in the next newsletter ...

- Forthcoming events
- Your stories
- Letters
- Photo Gallery
- News from 23 & 168 Pioneer Regiments
- Another unpublished complete story
- Reviews
- Medal Parade and march through Bicester
- And much more!



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ThePioneer



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