

Chapter 15

Finally: To The First Assault Brigade

Eventually, my "best cadet" award took shape with a posting to join the Assault Brigade on the 1st June 1944, a few days before D-day. The two squadrons, numbers 187 and 181, which formed the main Royal Engineer constituent parts of the Brigade, were then stationed at Aldeburgh in Suffolk, where I joined them.

The origin of 79th Armoured Division

Before relating my experiences with the Assault Brigade, it is logical to explain the "strategic background" against which we were operating.

The political campaigns during the early 40's demanding a "second front" in which many of us had for long been involved were beginning to bear fruit, but only after what appeared to be interminable delays, not only to us, but particularly to the Russians, who were, almost alone, taking the brunt of the terrible Nazi onslaughts. Meanwhile, Churchill was promoting the idea of allied attacks through what he optimistically termed the "soft underbelly" of Europe, which could, conveniently, coincide with his reactionary concerns to stifle left political developments in both Italy and Greece. However, by 1943, the American preference for striking "straight at the heart of Germany" via France and Holland had gained acceptance.

Meanwhile, Hitler had instructed Field Marshal Rommel to take charge of a huge construction project to build an "Atlantic wall" from the Scheldt estuary in Holland to the westernmost tip of France, consisting of extremely massive concrete gun emplacements, with associated complex obstacles

In '42 a highly courageous, almost suicidal trial attack on those defences was made by Canadian forces at Dieppe, which proved that the traditional Sapper operations such as major demolitions, bridging, and mine clearing were still going to be priorities but only if they could be performed from within "cover" adequate to withstand terrible fire power.

Thus, under the imaginative guidance of General Sir Percy Hobart, the concept of performing such operations from within tanks took shape in the form of 79th Armoured Division, consisting of Engineers in specially adapted Churchill tanks, having, in place of guns, "mortars", known as 'Petards' with only 100 yards range, which could throw immensely



General Sir Percy Hobart

powerful charges (nick named 'flying dustbins'), capable of breaching thick concrete walls, and facilities for carrying pre-fabricated bridges which could be lowered over gaps from within cover. The Division also included flame-throwing tanks, and others carrying revolving chains to detonate mines. All these novel devices soon earned the nick-name of "Hobo's Funnies"

The primary purpose of 79th Armoured Division was, naturally, to breach the "Atlantic wall", and thereafter to continue to tackle the numerous "extra-strong-points" which stood in the way of progress for both tanks and infantry anywhere on the route through France and Holland to Germany itself.

The unique feature of 79th Armoured Division was that it broke totally fresh ground and there was no established Army framework within which it could profitably "slot in". It had been formed at very short notice because of the imminence of "D-Day" and there had not even been time to arrange any forms of training for either officers or men, in what, for most, were totally new technologies and associated activities.

Thus, from Day One, almost every operation performed within the Division was likely to be a "first", requiring much imagination, initiative, and improvisation by both officers and men involved, representing a challenge which I, and I believe, most of my colleagues were fully ready to accept.

"my tank for D-Day"

On arrival at Aldeburgh, I naturally met the 20 or so officers from the two squadrons there at the time, including one, Major Donald Smith, who was to feature in many incidents described below. He was a transferred Territorial Army officer, and, as such, looked upon the war as an irritating interruption of his "weekend soldiering" and its accompanying fashionable social life. He was clearly not liked, and I could soon see why. (Later, fellow officers often referred to him, simply as "the shit" or "Dodger", because of his remarkable ability to disappear in the event of any sound remotely resembling that of an incoming missile).

By now I thought I was inured to the Army's capacity for "foul-ups", since they had, first, invited me by advertisement to volunteer and become an "instant officer", and then, instead, had plunged me instantly into the depths of the "ranks". Then, later, they "rewarded" me for responding successfully to officer training in exclusively conventional Sapper activities, by allotting me to a totally unconventional environment, for which I had never received the slightest hint of training.

However, I still recall something of a profound shock when Major Smith showed me a particular tank, and explained (with what seemed astonishing irresponsibility) that he had "pencilled in" the proposal that I (whom he had never even met, nor had any knowledge of my total inexperience) should take command of on the imminent great D-Day assault, due to start in less than two days time.

I pointed out, that, apart from my own demise, the likely scenario would be the loss of a valuable tank, and the lives of its five other crew.

Smith's immediate response was "Good thinking, old chap", and said he would ask the Brigadier to decide.

Brigadier Watkinson immediately vetoed Smith's proposal and ordered that I must be sent at once on an intensive tank training course, and allotted another officer to "my tank", who, poor man, was in fact killed on D-Day.

Tank training: Catterick



Catterick Barracks

I arrived at bleak, windswept Catterick camp high on the Yorkshire moors in mid-June '44, just six months after being first commissioned, and had, thus, automatically become a full Lieutenant. For various reasons, there were several other Assault Brigade officers there, who, too, were undergoing "crash courses". These had been insisted on by the Brigadier, because he wanted us to be sufficiently trained to take full part in the great "break-out" operation from the Normandy "beach head" in July/August.

The course was, inevitably, highly intensive, since it had to include an understanding of every vital aspect of a Churchill tank, covering engine, transmission, steering, brakes, tracks and their replacement, the auxiliary battery charging equipment, and the large wireless set which took up much precious space in the very cramped turret. It also included actual driving experience over the "assault course", with its 45 degrees up and down slopes. I well recall the extreme difficulty of "changing down" from second to first gears on a very steep climb, when, at the critical moment, in "neutral", and the 40 tonnes dead weight became for a split second free to roll back, and it was only possible to get into the bottom gear when the revolution counter showed that the speed of the great engine had dropped to the appropriate level.

Even more important for us as tank commanders, was time spent gaining experience of the turret revolving

mechanism, with frustratingly limited periscope vision, and giving the necessary "driver left" and "driver right" instructions via the intercom.

Organisation of an Assault Squadron: Men and Machines

There were, naturally, higher bodies such as regiments, but for the purposes of these memoirs it is sufficient to describe briefly, the squadrons and their constituent "Troops" who had to carry through the actual Actions described in later chapters.

Each squadron was headed by a Major (the "Officer Commanding" or O.C.) and was sub-divided into Troops. Each Troop was headed by a Captain, with one Assistant Lieutenant, two or three Sergeants or other NCO's, with some 30 men, comprising six tank crews of five men in each.



Preparing the charge ...

The six tanks, named (by their wireless code names) "Able" (commanded by the Captain), "Baker", "Charlie", "Dog" (commanded by the Lieutenant), "Easy" and "Fox" (each commanded by one of the NCO's). They were standard 40 tonne Churchills, without the normal gun; instead we had a "petard" (see illustration) a somewhat crude form of mortar capable of throwing approximately ten inch diameter, very effective devices, packed with high explosives (known as "flying dustbins") with a rather limited range of only 100 yards.



... for the flying dustbin gun

Our specially-converted Churchills were always referred to as "AVREs" which was "War Office speak" for "Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers" which (naturally!) conflicts with the Dictionary definition of "vehicle", namely: "a thing used for transporting people or goods"

Possibly our worst of many problems was claustrophobia, since the standard Churchill had been intended for a crew of only five, but our additional requirements called for six. These were: commander, wireless operator, mortar man, "demolitions NCO", driver and co-driver (also front-machine-gunner).

Each Troop also had: an armoured "scout car" with driver, a motorcycle with dispatch rider, a "15 hundredweight" truck

with driver, a three tonne truck with two store men and driver, one fitter, and one batman. Thus, the Troop captain had responsibility for the general welfare of some 40 NCO's and men, besides the efficient working order of the tanks and wheeled vehicles.

Major 'dodger' Smith ('the shit') a painfully bad leader

I believe it is probably a truism which can be taken "as read" that any society generally expects its army officers - as indeed any leaders of all kinds of human activities - to be exemplary human beings, displaying integrity, imagination, humility as necessary, readiness to listen to and take advice, and the like. The reason I make special mention of Smith here is that he epitomised the absolute antithesis of all those important attributes of a good "leader of men".

As explained in Chapter 15, it was of course Major Smith who - had it not been for the Brigadier's fortunate intervention - would have sent me, a tank and its crew of five to inevitable extermination on D day.

Major Smith was in fact Officer Commanding of 87 assault squadron RE of which I was a member throughout all the operations described in Chapters 16 to 26 along with my fellow lieutenants and captains (with all of whom I had excellent relations), who all shared the same frustrations of working under his command.

The whole situation in fact represented a classic example of the way human organisations of so many different kinds evolved, often in highly efficient and effective ways, but all too often without that crucially important ingredient, namely some "built in" form of "whistle blowing" mechanism enabling "bad apples" to be readily identified and side-lined.

Although we never knew for sure, it seemed that there must have been some - possibly even unwritten - army regulation which relieved all officers of the rank of major or above of the obligation to put themselves at risk from enemy fire, which was why the decisions of both our Colonel and Brigadier to themselves take part in the D Day landings made such enormously favourable impressions. By contrast, I cannot ever recall seeing Smith even enter a tank.

Once during an early rafting exercise, in preparation for the Rhine crossing later, on a French river, Smith bluntly refused my advice and ordered me to proceed, when I knew the bank of the river was far too soft and muddy for the restraining anchors to take the terrible strain of holding the raft back to the bank as a tank climbed on to it. The result was catastrophic, resulting in the tank (a brand new 40 tonne Churchill) becoming a total loss, and its driver within seconds of death from drowning.

While waiting in pitch darkness for daylight to enable us to launch the new extended Bailey bridge over the road crater

at Xanten, described in Chapter 22, my driver insisted there was a tiger tank - with its dreaded 88mm gun - just ahead of us. I, mistakenly, believed him and ordered my supporting battle tank to open fire on the "tiger", which, with daylight coming shortly after proved to have been not a tank at all, but a chicken house. Major Smith had been "monitoring" all this on his radio, and in spite of my explaining that we were all too tired to distinguish anything clearly, he later gave me a severe reprimand for "wasting ammunition".

Smith was a vain and pompous snob, who doubtless boasted that one of his lieutenants was an old Carthusian (which he could see from my records). At our mess in Eersel, he insisted on giving a dance and hosting officers from other units to make an impression, during which I took delight in the opportunity to "inadvertently" open a curtain sufficiently to reveal the sister of his dancing partner in a highly compromising embrace with our somewhat lascivious mess cook.

The fundamental reason for us being in tanks was, of course, to preserve lives and enable us to 'live to fight another day' I used to continually emphasize that fact to men under my command and undoubtedly it did save both lives and casualties, both of myself and many others.

Regrettably, because access to a tank usually involved lifting heavy trap doors and then standing up in a highly exposed manner, meant that it was essential to minimise the occasions on which one left the tank at all, which naturally exacerbated the problems of answering 'calls of nature'. I believe, had there been any mechanisms for encouraging suggestions that I might well have suggested that purpose-made (preferably plastic) urinal bottles (similar to those in common use in hospitals) could have been supplied, which could easily have been emptied through one of the side escape doors, or even the trap in the centre of the floor of the tank

Chapter 16

France!

In our tanks, we had embarked somewhere near Portsmouth, and the scene aboard the L.S.T. (Landing Ship Tanks) was as close as can be imagined to Dante's Inferno, with the ship's extract fans struggling with the exhaust fumes of some ten or fifteen Churchills, and the fiendish din of all their engines. Next morning, we moored alongside the famous "Mulberry Harbour", and were, before long, able to "go ashore" at Arromanches.

Still in our tanks, we then joined a long column of all manner of vehicles heading east for Caen. There was terrible

environmental damage everywhere, but before long, we were able to pull in to a lay-by in beautiful woodland. It was a glorious, hot sunny morning, and it was difficult to resist a feeling of pleasure at being in lovely France again. Then, suddenly, the wireless crackled, and the unmistakable order came through for all forces to assemble immediately at Caen for the start of "Operation Totalize" intended to break out of the Normandy bridgehead and aim for Paris and victory. Without a doubt, this was IT!

Panic Stations!

Immediately, I was gripped by terror; and the imagination went berserk: severe wounds loss of limbs worse, even. And the nervous system controlling the bowels took immediate control, and within a trice, I was behind some trees, where, to my horror of horrors, I heard the tank engines starting up. In my absence, to avoid holding up the whole column, the sergeant had ordered my driver to move on.

Frantically pulling up trousers, I managed I know not how to climb onto my moving tank (a highly dangerous operation, definitely not to be recommended, even with trousers already up!).

With hindsight, I still find it astonishing that the imagination can be so spontaneously vivid as to absolutely take control of one's actions, when there were, later, so many actual incidents involving genuine terror, which, fortunately, I was able to cope with without any such embarrassing effects.

When we eventually arrived at the marshalling area, south of Caen, we faced an astonishing panorama, reminiscent, (in the imagination at least) of scenes before great "history book" battles, such as, perhaps, Agincourt. The "backdrop" was a huge, comparatively flat area, of open, grassy farmland, which appeared to be almost totally covered with Allied equipment of all kinds, including the new Canadian and Polish Armoured Divisions, with their numerous, fast Sherman tanks.

Our orders were to do everything possible to keep the way clear to Falaise for the battle tanks. To that end, "fascines" were ready for use. These were simply massive, rolled up bundles of chestnut fencing, weighing two to three tonnes each, which could be mounted on top of our tanks, and then rolled off to fill awkward bomb craters and the like. I also had two prefabricated bridges ready for mounting if we needed them for wider gaps.



Fascines on Churchill Tank

Footnote 'an ill-timed telegram'

Readers who have come this far will recall that, in chapter 1, I explained that my sister Alice had met a French man in London who had been a physics professor at the Paris Sorbonne and had escaped occupied France and come to join the staff of General De Gaulle's Free French Army in London. She was, unfortunately, already married to an actor called Beriffe, so when she became pregnant by the Frenchman named Georges, there arose the likelihood of illegitimate children. Alice had already asked me then to intervene with Edwin ('Pa' as we called him) and try to pacify his expected outrage which was, as expected, impossible.

By this time (around 1943, with the war well advanced), she learned that her pregnancy was twins. Where-upon she sent me a telegram, which was delivered by the driver of the truck, which had just brought our fresh ammunition for the tanks outside Caen, prior to the imminent action with the code name of 'Totalize', which proved one of the fiercest of the war to date. That telegram simply read 'It's twins, please tell Pa' I was, of course, stunned by her news but in no time, decided that I could not possibly fight her battles anymore, being naturally, somewhat pre-occupied with my own which was 'looming large'.

Chapter 17

Six Actions: Normandy To The Rhine

i) The Hell of Falaise: The Worst German Defeat Since Stalingrad

It had all started with "D-Day" in June 1944. Since then, partly through our (British First Army) efforts, jointly with Canadian and American Forces, and partly through Hitler's own stupidity in countermanding orders given by his own top commanders (some of whom had recently almost succeeded in assassinating him), the original German "fight back" initiative had been largely reversed.

Then, in August '44, when my crew and I became closely involved again in operations, the Germans showed fresh signs of asserting themselves and were fighting harder than ever to try to regain their earlier superiority. We had moved to the marshalling area just south of Caen, and our orders were to do all possible to keep the road to Falaise open for the battle tanks by filling craters or other obstacles, land bridging if necessary'

The order had been given to issue the rum ration all round, a sure sign that severe fighting was expected. Rum was intended to provide "Dutch courage" but in fact probably only aggravated alarm. Our "fascine" had been mounted and we were ready for the "off". My troop captain, Reg Watling, led the way off in "Able" and I followed in "Dog". Before long, on the wireless, he sent me an urgent "SOS". "Able" had been hit by a dreaded 88mm armour-piercing shell, which was capable of passing through the front armour of a Churchill, but its part-spent energy was still sufficient for it

to spin around inside the tank and do hideous damage. Reg himself had escaped with severe lower leg wounds, as had the wireless operator, at the same level in the turret of the tank.

To assist, it was necessary for me to wriggle out of Dog's side escape hatch (between the upper and lower tracks) and drop on my stomach to the ground, fortunately on the "lee" side from the enemy. Then, to reach the stricken "Able", it was necessary to experience the same terror as must have been commonplace for "Tommy's" of the 1914/18 war, namely wriggling, hugging the ground, while machine gun bullets whizzed by terrifyingly close to my head. Reg had just been able to open his escape hatch, which revealed a devastating sight of mayhem. The driver, gunner and mortar man were all three clearly dead. A young sergeant, whom I knew from exercises, was just alive, and I recall bitterly that his bright eyes pleaded for release from his terrible immobility (both his legs had gone) a look of utter desperation which I was reminded of decades later, when Desmond Bernal once looked at me after he'd suffered a severe stroke.

Meanwhile, the wonderfully courageous stretcher bearers had arrived in their un-armoured "half track" vehicle, and together we tackled the gruesome task of pulling out torn bodies.

Looking around, there was such "post-battle" devastation with piles of dead from both sides that it was impossible to walk more than a few yards without treading on human flesh. There were estimated to be 10,000 bodies on that battlefield and "hardware" Allied losses apparently including over 150 Sherman tanks. The fact that it had apparently been the worst German defeat since Stalingrad simply underlined the utter stupidity of war. That stupidity is further accentuated by the likelihood, in all the desperate confusion, of suffering death and destruction caused by one's own side, a predicament officially and callously now termed "friendly fire" an example of which we had just witnessed very clearly when some American "Flying fortresses" mistakenly bombed the Polish Division.



Falaise Carnage

We were on the huge open area of grassland with almost no natural cover and highly vulnerable to attack from the dreaded "Tiger" tank with its lethal 88mm armour piercing gun (such as had just knocked out Capt.Reg Watling's tank "Able" in fact quite probably the same one). Its presence was still a cause for considerable alarm, but fortunately my highly skilled wireless operator had just succeeded in making contact with the nearest R.A.F."Typhoon" fighter pilot (call him pilot "X") and had described both our own and the Tiger's position to him. Moments later-to my amazement and delight I was speaking to pilot "X" who assured me that he could see the Tiger clearly and promised to target it very soon. That news naturally brought us great jubilation and relief. The next day we witnessed the burnt-out shell of the "Tiger", which proved that pilot X had fulfilled his promise.

Many post-battle assessors agreed that the Rocket-firing Typhoons had been the decisive factors in the Allied victory that day. It was significant that the direct contact with us on the ground (whether infantry or in tanks) by wireless (radio) was fundamental to success, and resulted in that brave group of "Typhoon" fighter pilots becoming known as the "cab rank" which, though a nick-name probably given light-heartedly, was in fact highly appropriate in the circumstances.

Clearly irritated by their severe defeat, the Germans with their Luftwaffe, decided to give us a rough night with bombing. We responded by digging a shallow rectangular area, about the size of "Dog" between the tracks, in which we, (my crew and I), laid our ground sheets and sleeping bags, and then got our driver to position the bomb-proof Churchill over us. In due course our attempted slumbers were interrupted by a dozen or so terrified Poles, who were stroking the tank saying "Nice Churchill, nice Churchill" and then driving us all out and occupying our safe sleeping spots themselves. I had no option, along with my crew, and I took my precious slender rubber mattress and sleeping bag and bedded down nearby in the open. Before long, a strange sound woke me so that I could see, just in front of my nose, an arrow carrying an anti-personnel bomb which must have landed in a fairly soft spot and thus failed to explode. At first light, I asked my sergeant to dispose of it, and we then said goodbye with good wishes to our uninvited Polish guests.

Since "D-Day" there had been numerous very hard-fought battles resulting in many thousands of dead, and a huge number of unburied bodies, both human and animal, resulting in much of Normandy becoming permeated with the terrible, unforgettable smell of death, exacerbated by the summer heat. That heat also prompted the Normandy farmers to bring out their huge horse-drawn cider barrels on wheels to slake their labourer's thirsts. Unfortunately, the Germans soon realised that rather than shooting or shelling them, it was far easier to kill off Allied troops by poisoning those great barrels, and Canadian troops particularly suffered terribly in that way.

The trouble-prone hip flask

I had started army life with my trusted aluminium hip flask, which was of course both light and relatively unbreakable. However, as mentioned in chapter 12, at Low Moor Barracks there were no cupboards or facilities of any kind for personal items, let alone anything lockable. I later learned that in that respect at least, provision for officers was in fact little better than for "the ranks".

It was perhaps, therefore not surprising that at Low Moor, my old hip flask soon went "walkies". At Falaise, anticipating (correctly, unfortunately) a highly stressful day, I had borrowed a "miniature" whisky from the officer's mess store, which was about the size of a hip flask and just fitted in a trouser pocket. In the (extreme) heat of the moment I had of course forgotten that-being glass-the "miniature" was anything but unbreakable, which had a highly unfortunate result.

After receiving the "SOS" from our second tank, and I was crawling out of the side escape hatch, the "miniature" broke in my pocket which became filled with splinters of glass, and my trousers smelled of whisky for days afterwards. Worse still, the whisky had run down to the centre of "Dog" and the sickening stale smell haunted us for days.

ii) Boulogne & a Mad Mission Aborted

Following the Allied success at Falaise, the way ahead lay clear for the main push to Paris and beyond. However, the "lines of communication" were continually being stretched, since most of the vast requirements for the advancing forces were still being met through the original Normandy bridgehead. Thus the obvious strategy became the capture and "freeing up" of the various channel ports: particularly Boulogne and Calais. Further, the area surrounding the latter, including particularly Cap Gris Nez, was home to the many launch sites for the "buzz bombs" and "V1 rockets" currently plaguing London. Hitler had given express orders that each Channel port should be considered a "key fortress" and defended to the last. He had insisted on the top commander of each, actually signing a formal document, committing himself to such a scenario. Soon after, when we searched the most senior officers amongst the 10,000 or so prisoners of war, we found they all had neatly packed suitcases ready for the prison camp. Unlike their commanders, however, many of the German troops were "committed Hitler Youths"; fanatical fighters who gave our Canadian infantry comrades a lot of trouble in dislodging them, in much close quarter fighting. We were able to support the Canadians with our "petards", particularly in respect of largely destroying certain "strong-point" gun emplacements throughout Boulogne and its immediate surroundings, which normally, the Canadians would then "occupy", while we withdrew temporarily, for example for a night's rest.

Those "strong-points" often contained stocks of French wine and other liquor, stolen by the Germans, and, on one occasion I recall the splendid, ever-thirsty Canadians got so drunk that the Germans were easily able to retake the strong-point, which we then, in turn, had to re-take in the morning.

There was a group of scientists at the War Office ("boffins" to the general public) who were supposed to provide us with ideas for items of "assault equipment" which we could utilize in actions. Regrettably, they had heard that there were extensive mine-fields surrounding Boulogne which could provide a testing ground for their latest idea on mine-clearing technique, and I had been given responsibility for trying it out. The idea, named "Conger" involved us towing a Bren gun carrier (a light tracked vehicle) converted to holding a tank designed to contain a liquid explosive "822C", above which was mounted a rocket launcher. The intention was to fire the rocket, carrying a fire hose off a reel, across the mine-field, and then pump it full of the explosive which could be detonated, thus clearing the mines. We all agreed it was a wildly optimistic "Heath Robinson" idea, which was in keeping with many others which that group of "scientists" had plagued us with, since they had little or no idea of the actual difficulties in the field, particularly when under fire

Unfortunately their idea had appealed to some of the "top brass" at the "War House", who in turn had enthused my own "top brass" at our regimental headquarters, who had already "jumped the gun" by ordering the various necessary engineering modifications, and, much more seriously, a delivery of sufficient "822C" for trial purposes although it was already known to be extremely sensitive stuff. Sure enough, when the delivery arrived, the truck struck a bump in the road, and over 30 men were killed instantly.

That news, naturally, caused fundamental damage to morale, not least to that of my own tank crew, who had, of course, by now heard a rumour about our possible involvement.

Apart from the extreme volatility of 822C, I had serious doubts about the practicability of the whole idea. However, such was the "top brass" pressure that I was ordered to proceed towards one of the Boulogne mine-fields for the trial, which we did, with trepidation and very slowly, until an unprecedented event put a stop to everything.

Concurrently, both my driver and wireless operator had suddenly collapsed, into what appeared to me to be unconsciousness, which I could only assume was due simply to paralyzing fear. I then just managed to get through on the wireless to my headquarters and ask permission to "abort the action" which in the extremely exceptional circumstances, I was highly relieved to receive.

Meanwhile, one of my fellow troop commanders, Scotsman Jock Ramsay, reached the Boulogne German headquarters and demanded that the German garrison commander should formally surrender, which, fortunately he agreed to do - despite Hitler's strict instructions to the contrary!

Following permission to abort the 'suicidal mission' my fellow Captain, Dick Ritchie and I were sitting together chatting on the floor of my tank 'Dog' in an exposed hilltop position when it received a direct hit on the turret from a heavy duty artillery shell. The shock of the impact and the ensuing explosion ruptured the welding supporting the cumbersome and very heavy mortar launcher for our vital 'flying dustbin' explosive charges which fell between us, narrowly missing what might well have been fatal head blows.

iii) The Hostile Scheldt Estuary



Canadian Sappers liberate some Boulogne Cigarettes

Calais and Cap Gris Nez had just been taken by the Canadians, so the fall of Boulogne left the way clear for the next logical objective: the freeing and opening up of the approaches to Antwerp.



Although the city of Antwerp had already been in Allied hands for some months, it had not been possible to exploit its tremendous value as a port because of its entry being via the Sheldt estuary, both of whose river banks were in enemy hands.

My memory of that entire region is one of a topographical nightmare, especially for tanks, because of the many streams, canals and endless mud, and the occasional flooding resulting in battles in waist-deep water, all compounded by heavy rain and extreme cold. Tanks often bogged down; strenuous towing rescues were attempted, but "write-offs" were sometimes inevitable. Further, there was constant uncertainty as to where "the line" was, so that we suffered severely from indiscriminate, wanton mortar and shell fire.

The only redeeming feature of the region was that the near-by holiday resorts such as Blankenberg, offered plentiful billeting accommodation for both officers and men, and

"places of relaxation".

Anticipating Allied attempts to move eastwards, the enemy had blown an enormous crater in the main east-west trunk road through the region, and I received orders to reconnoitre the possibilities of bridging it.

That "recce" involved a long night drive, inland first, and then returning towards the west, down the central spine of the region, all in totally unfamiliar territory, which might, or might not, be enemy occupied. I was in the "scout car", and my driver was struggling without lights to keep on the narrow tarmac, while I struggled to direct him, from an alien map.

Eventually, we reached the neighbourhood of the crater, where there was already a Canadian "occupying unit" whose sergeant had already had to show the way to a previous visiting officer, and was clearly very reluctant to return, and I soon came to understand why. The Germans, anticipating Allied surveys of "their" crater such as mine, had set up a machine-gun before dark, pre-arranged to fire on "fixed lines" and thus eliminate anyone studying the crater. With the sergeant's help, I found a slightly elevated safe spot, from which I was able to see that the crater's diameter so far exceeded our possible bridging capacity, that further surveying was pointless.

iv) "craig's Bridges"

Following clearance of the Antwerp environs, a major British offensive was planned for the push eastwards from Eindhoven towards the Rhine crossing points. The Germans had taken advantage of two successive canals forming natural barriers against the obvious Allied advance route, by demolishing both road bridges crossing them, near a small town named Sluis.

In the absence on other duties of three troop commander captains, the brigadier had given me, still only a lieutenant, the unusual responsibility of a "special mission" to provide adequate bridging to enable both armour and other equipment to cross both canals for at least the duration of the main attack. Time was short, and I was therefore fortunate to be able to move all nine of the required tanks involved on transporters, to beyond Eindhoven, before proceeding to Sluis on tracks.



The Napoleon Canal, Sluis

I had been able to choose the likely best crossing point of the first canal from air photographs, but I needed to make a close inspection to determine the exact bridge span required. I had infantry support from the 51st Highland Division, and one of their sergeants "covered me" while I measured the width of one of the lock gates, which of course, when doubled, gave me the bridge span required. Unfortunately, the nearby enemy sentry loosed off his sub-machine gun at me, while on the footbridge, but missed in the failing light, and then clearly prepared to throw a grenade at me across the lock, so I threw myself prone and luckily escaped the shrapnel.

At first light, I returned with a bridge mounted on "Dog" and was now sufficiently familiar with the site to be able to lay it quickly and successfully, under sporadic shell and mortar fire. I then "backed off", and returned to our temporary "harbour" area about a mile back from the front, where my troop had assembled another bridge and the carpenter had prepared a notice board on his own initiative reading "to Craig's bridges", complete with arrow.

Further invaluable air photos had shown me that the necessary second canal obvious crossing point appeared reasonably similar to the first, so I decided to take the chance that it would be a near replica, and we set off. In fact, the site proved to be rather different, but not sufficiently so as to prevent a second successful bridge laying, again under more fire. One of my troop sergeants then followed on with a successful "third bridge", near to the first one. Meanwhile, my faithful tank crew had proudly positioned the notice board at the point where the considerable traffic needed to leave the main road.

Although our main tasks had been accomplished, we were kept extremely busy, night and day for the next 36 hours, maintaining all three bridges and their muddy approaches, until our duties ended by having to lift all three bridges for

re-use, all performed in extreme cold, and at times, under fire.

A 'Mention' is generally held to be the approximate equivalent in 'Merit. To a 'Military Cross' , (MC). That decoration (The MC) was in fact awarded to my fellow captains in the Assault Brigade: Capt. Dick Ritchie and Capt. Jock Ramsay

v) Siegfried Line



Siegfried Line - the anti-tank Dragons Teeth

After three weeks in the UK it was a terrible wrench to board a ferry at Tilbury, bound for Ostend. One of officer's privileges was the right to return to your unit after leave in "your own time" (whereas "other ranks" had no option but to travel back in the transport sent for them). I had met a friendly infantry lieutenant on the boat, who was as reluctant as I was to return to the "front", both of us knowing it was then facing the dreaded Siegfried line. At the time, in the optimistic context of somewhat better war news, it had become the subject of a popular song in England which ran: "we'll be hanging out the washing on the Siegfried line", which, at that time in fact, proved somewhat prematurely optimistic.

The lieutenant and I decided to make our way back to our units, now both just inside Germany, either by bus or hitching lifts across Belgium and Holland, visiting numerous friendly bars on the way.

Situated in the Reichswald forest, the Siegfried line consisted of immensely-well reinforced concrete gun emplacements, reminiscent of those at Boulogne. Our work was the familiar filling or bridging of craters or other such obstacles, but we were also in great demand for pulverising the worst "strong-points" with our petards and flying dustbins.

Weather conditions were hellish, with much snow and temperatures consistently below zero, meaning that if you touched a tank without gloves, you risked losing finger skin. Living in what was, in effect, a forty-tonne ice box was nasty, but the alternative was not living at all; the shelling and mortar fire being relentless, since the enemy were still fighting like fiends. Smarting from the recent failure of their massive attempt at counter-attack in the Ardennes, the fanatical young "Hitler "Youths" troops were clearly determined to continue and even intensify their increasingly hopeless struggle.

An Unforgettable Experience

I believe the most bitter of all my experiences in battles was that at the Siegfried Line when my newly appointed, barely 20 year old, Lieutenant suffered appalling stomach injuries from shell splinters. He was unable, himself, to take the beautiful crucifix from his neck, so he begged me to take it and get it safely to his wife (who I knew from his records was both young and pregnant). The incessant din from both mortar and shell explosions made decision taking more urgent and more agonising, because to agree to his request was tantamount to accepting that his wounds were fatal and terminal.

The medically trained stretcher bearers then took the decision out of my hands by taking him away to the field hospital.

When I visited that 'hospital' later I found that the crucifix had been stolen from his shattered body

Then, as with many other similar situations, I was faced with the agonising problem of composing a letter to the "next of kin" to break the terrible news of yet another young life sacrificed to the evil god of war, when even finding pen and paper was a real problem.

It had been nearly six months since we left Normandy, and in all that time we had hardly even seen a bed, nor any of the other generally accepted pertinences of civilised life, and were all totally exhausted. So it was a constant struggle to keep my men's morale from slipping below rock bottom, especially as our casualties both wounded and killed were already horrendous.

On top of the very real personal problems, our amazing old tanks were in a desperate state through such intensive use over so long, without adequate maintenance, and that, of course, compounded all our other problems.

The battle of the Siegfried line etched on my memory an enduring picture of the senseless agony and cruelty of war in conditions comparable with those endured over very many months by the Red Army during their heroic resistance to the cruel Nazi invasion and occupation of their country, and their powerful, final routing of the enemy at Stalingrad, for which the world owes them an eternal debt of gratitude.

vi) Crossing The Rhine

Before becoming involved with the actual crossing of the great river, we had one last bridging operation to perform in order to re-open one of the key approach roads to the main Rhine crossing points at a place called Xanten. There, the enemy had blown a defensive crater in the main road, which, at 50 feet across was just within the theoretical capacity of the entirely new, hitherto untried "Bailey mobile bridge", and I had been given responsibility for its first trial use.

I had already seen some preliminary, rather sketchy details of the revolutionary new idea for exploiting the versatile Bailey technology to achieve both mobility, and, significantly increased span capacity of around 60 feet, compared to the frustratingly short 30 feet maximum of the tank-mounted small box girder bridge, which we had used for so long in numerous locations.



Small Box Girder Tank Bridge Mark II

The newly designed bridge, for which the specially needed equipment had already been prepared and made available, was mounted on, and fixed to, an enormous pair of tracked rollers, which involved the tank pushing the complete bridge until the front half, at least, was well over the gap and the big rollers could go no further. The unique new idea then was to deliberately "break the back" of the bridge at a point over the great rollers, allowing the front half to drop onto the far bank, thus forming a "hump-backed" bridge, over which traffic could then proceed once the tank had moved out of the way.

As I saw it, the main disadvantage was that the "back-breaking" procedure was so complicated that it could only possibly be performed in the open without any cover. I had already developed ideas as to how the proposal could be improved upon especially in respect of making the procedures possible from within the tank, and I was naturally glad of the opportunity to see at first hand how the idea worked in principle. By astonishing good fortune, by the time we reached the crater, the enemy had retreated eastwards, and I was thus able to bridge the gap successfully (not without considerable difficulties) using the procedures proposed, and hundreds of tanks, trucks and other equipment was then able to cross the crater successfully. Following that experience, I was able to design and experiment with modifications, when "harbouring" at Eersel.

Addendum

Our valiant 'small box girder' bridge had served us extremely well when required during all five of the operations described in sub headings (i) to (v) of chapter 17, and experience in pre-assembling and then laying it often under fire, had always been appreciated. However, it had almost always been necessary to compromise to some extent over the ideal solutions to those operations because of the maximum span capacity of the 'SBG' being only 50 feet.

Since the width of the Rhine at appropriate crossing points (determined by approaches at either side) was normally quoted in miles rather than feet it had long been clear that any question of using the SBG bridge for the main crossing was entirely academic and that it was natural to consider alternative uses for our general sapper experience in handling heavy gear of many kinds, often in very difficult environments; and therefore allotting to us a rafting role became logical, if not to our liking, because of the extremely limited training facilities possible in the brief time available

Russian roulette with floating mines



Class 50/60 Raft on the River Rhine

Our rafting role in the main Rhine crossing operation had been decided on some months previously, and we had, accordingly, been attempting on a few occasions to train on some very poor substitutes vastly narrower French rivers.

Our
gallant
field



company comrades had of course already provided the main, conventional pontoon bridge crossings successfully, but regrettably, they were terribly vulnerable, especially to bombing. The rafting equipment at our disposal consisted of immensely heavy pontoons, with Bailey superstructures to provide the approach ramps and decking. With the aid of mobile cranes, we were able to assemble and launch several rafts, each capable of ferrying significant loads.

Although the rafts themselves were potentially capable of performing their tasks efficiently, the method of actually propelling them to and fro was far from perfect. The intention had been to install a winch on the "far" bank, with its cable attached to the "bow" of a raft, and another on the "near" bank with its cable attached to the "stern". The idea was that the "far" winch would pull the raft across while the near winch kept paying out its cable without slack to prevent the raft being swept downstream.

Theoretically, the idea should have worked, but unfortunately, instead of being provided with new, adequately powerful winches, we were given second-hand ones which had previously acted for simply controlling barrage balloons.

Further, for success, the idea depended, crucially, on the commander of each raft (i.e. one of us) being able to control by radio the "far" and "near" winch operators. I had the assistance of a section of the Corps of Signallers for this



Class 40 Pontoon Bridge with Bailey Superstructure

purpose; but they were fighting a losing battle against constant interference from both atmospheric static and the general background noise. While commanding our first successful crossing on a raft carrying two Sherman tanks, I soon realised that our greatest hazard was the critical risk from floating mines dropped upstream by the Luftwaffe. Collision with one would have meant not only the total loss of both raft and cargo, but of numerous lives as well.

Having seen a mine approaching, a decision had to be made very quickly as to whether to order the "far" winch to pull faster (and, concurrently the "near" one to pay out faster, or vice versa) depending on my estimation as to whether the mine was most likely to float past ahead, or behind us, a very

real nightmare.

We were glad to move on from the Rhine, and, just as we did so, none other than Field Marshall Montgomery stopped to greet us, saying it "was all over bar the shouting" which was a little premature, because, shortly, some more violent fighting erupted in Osnabruck the German equivalent of Aldershot.

At the time, the roads were packed with thousands of Poles, French, Yugoslavs, Russians, Dutch and others all freed forced- labour workers, who greeted us so warmly it made us feel like real liberators, which was deeply moving.

Chapter 18

Life in "the Line"

Escaping bullets and shrapnel was, naturally, largely a matter of luck. But, how we survived the rigours of just day to day "existence" "in the line" remains an enduring mystery bearing in mind that for most of the first six months we virtually never experienced adequate shelter, nor even a modicum of warmth nor indeed a single one of any of the "creature comforts" which we daily take totally for granted, such as a proper bed, a "square" meal, and a shower.

Conditions were, naturally, greatly exacerbated if we were actually involved in an action of some kind involving being on the "receiving end" of either gun or mortar fire, in which case enormous care had to be taken when either entering or leaving the tank. However, even between actions, life was not markedly different, and either way sleepless nights

were routine. Mostly, I would sleep under some sort of bivouac tent, on my two inch thick foam rubber roll-up mattress (originally bought for climbing expeditions) laid on a ground sheet. With great good luck we would sometimes find a barn or similar structure sufficiently undamaged to be at least partially weather tight, to bed down in.

Once a captain, I benefited greatly from having my own "batman" (whose services I shared with my lieutenant, if any) and he looked after my "bed roll" and a few personal possessions which travelled with him in my troop's three tonne truck, which also carried all the men's bed rolls and kit bags.

My batman was a diminutive Yorkshireman named Rhodes, and thus (as with the surname "Miller") he was always known as "Dusty". Dusty had a splendid, dry sense of humour, which was always a great tonic for flagging morale. Once, when I complained that the ground for my bed roll seemed unusually hard, he said "shall I call the RAF over to soften it up for you sir?" He then went on to say "take care sir, there's a cat dogging your footsteps". Then, as he passed later, I heard him muttering to himself "can a cat dog a man's footsteps?"

Also, one day, we were joined for the first time by my newly-appointed lieutenant, who was all of 30 (many younger ones having been killed) who had the most astonishing spread of thick chest hair from chin to navel I had ever seen on a man before. When he appeared, stripped to the waist for the morning wash, Dusty, never at a loss for words, said "Christ, sir grow your own tobacco?"

Of course, one of our greatest "saving graces" was the almost in-built British propensity for making tea at any moment. Thus, on innumerable occasions, including in any brief lull during an action, my co-driver/front gunner would jump out with the small paraffin stove, get round to the safe side of the tank, and make a "brew-up" from the standard issue "TSM", a mixture of tea of highly doubtful origin, sugar and powdered milk, a mug of which at least was warming, and he would, somehow, make sufficient for all of us in the tank.

Sapper Johnson (the tea maker) was a typical self-assured Cockney, with I always felt sure a touch of gypsy blood and with an astonishing capacity for finding anything edible wherever we were, including not just the obvious such as fruit, but also chickens etc, which he would prepare and cook in no time, and then share around, naturally to our great delight.

On cold mornings in the open to help me get started, Dusty would bring some hot water for shaving, and a little later, a mug of TSM "char".

The various officers comprising the squadron of course had their own "mess" which comprised a cook, with certain equipment and stores including liquor, and its own 1500-weight truck, but I do not recall that normally making any

difference to our daily meals which I believe were as bland and boring as the men's, with nothing fresh and mostly tinned. Only when we (very occasionally) were in semi-permanent billets such as in Eersel (Chapter 20) did the officer's mess really take shape and provide acceptable meals.

"comforts for the troops"

One day, near Rouen, the divisional medical officer called in to say (almost triumphantly) that he had succeeded in making arrangements with the nearby brothel, and the farmer whose field we were "harbouring in", and that we could inform our men (and the neighbouring Canadian infantry) that the services of four women, all suitably checked as FFI (free from infection) would be available to them at the farmhouse at the corner of the field during the day. By mid-day the queue had formed which stretched around at least three sides of the field, and I can recall feeling embarrassed looking at it, as if I was in some way invading those men's privacy. While it was in no way as dramatic as a battle-field scene of agony and carnage, it nevertheless pointed up another tragic side effect of war. I could not help but think of the wives and partners of all those men, desperately missing their warm embraces in the empty bed spaces next to them, and then of the men themselves, about, perforce, to make do with second hand, spoiled merchandise, not forgetting the four poor women themselves, about to become the recipients of their repressed onslaughts.

Chapter 19

A Visit To The Red Army

In early May '45, we had occupied the German town of Lubeck, and I had appropriated a local school to provide accommodation for the troop and myself.

By chance, at that time, the War Office was indulging in one of its economy drives, which resulted in all our men being issued with the new ultra-light-weight "cheap and nasty" machine-gun known as "sten", which had a notoriously badly designed safety catch mechanism.

On the 5th May, a "Cease-Fire" took effect throughout the north western front, and, naturally, widespread spontaneous celebrations very soon developed. However, we soon received a grim reminder that jollifications and guns do not mix, when one of my tank drivers, a young Scot, barely 19, on sentry duty at the school door, broke into a celebratory highland jig, and his Sten gun fell from his shoulder, and, hitting the ground, fired accidentally, killing him instantly.

Thus, my personal celebrations were seriously marred by the emotional strain of having, most unexpectedly, to have to compose yet another bitter letter of condolences to his next of kin, especially as the accident had been a dreadful case of death by so-called "friendly fire", in this case caused by defective equipment.

Meanwhile, Churchill had lost no time in reverting to his inherently deeply reactionary personality by turning his back on his erstwhile gallant Socialist allies and delivering his infamous "Fulton" (Missouri) speech which, effectively, sparked the beginning of the "cold war".

For some days, I had considered the possibility of trying to visit the Red Army and realised the opportunity to do so might well be short-lived. Sure enough, Churchill's new "iron-curtain" stance, soon filtered down, and Montgomery issued an order throughout the whole first British army forbidding any contact with the Russians from the following day on, and I realised then that a visit would need to be "now or never".



The "Economical" Sten Gun & 2 magazines



US & Red Army soldiers meet

A young new lieutenant, who had just joined us, said he would like to join me in an effort to contact, and pay our respects to our very gallant allies, and we set off in my jeep.

We were already on a main east-west highway, so we simply drove eastwards until we were stopped at a guard post by a Red Army sentry, who appeared suitably confused. However, with much hand shaking and back slapping we eventually made it clear to him that we had just come to make an informal visit, whereupon he led my fellow officer and I away, leaving my driver to mind the jeep.

We soon arrived at what was already a clearly boisterous celebration party, and a group of about 20 Red Army officers gave us a really warm welcome. Fortunately, one of them, a young teacher from Kiev, spoke French so it was possible to understand that they were part of an infantry battalion which had been involved in the actual battle of Stalingrad itself,

and subsequently had fought all the way to Lubeck, and he was one of the very few to have escaped alive and without wounds.

We were in a large, bare room in a German farmhouse which they were using as their "mess", and it soon became obvious from the make-shift furniture and lack of drinking glasses etc that they lived very much "off the land", and had none of the comparative luxuries of our mobile officer's mess, with its own furniture and wine glasses etc.

We were soon joined by two "Free French" officers searching for French ex-prisoners, who, by chance, were carrying two bottles of "Pernod" which they happily added to the abundant stock of vodka, which all good Russians appear to be rarely without. I presented them with a symbolic bottle of "Scotch" from our officers mess stock, which clearly pleased them greatly.

Appropriately to the occasion, toasts were soon proposed, with much noisy support, to Roosevelt, Churchill and de Gaulle. I think it must have been one of the Frenchmen who proposed a toast to Stalin, which did, of course, receive support, but which, I do vaguely recall, did not seem quite so whole-hearted as the others. With hindsight, I can only think that Stalin's terrible shortcomings, and indeed atrocities, were actually better known than we realised at the time, even before Krushchev's ground-breaking speech, which revealed the awful truths.

I still remember, vividly, that atmosphere of very real bonhomie (fuelled of course by the very liberal quantities of spirits) which I recall feeling somewhat embarrassed by only because of knowing that those splendid, courageous men had endured incomparably greater sufferings than we ever had.

For, once records had been clarified, it had in fact become established that, approximately 40 Red Army men and women died for every fatality amongst British or American troops.

Chapter 20

Eersel: A Welcome Winter "harbour"

Eersel was a typical small, orderly Dutch town, just off the highway from Antwerp to Eindhoven, which we moved into in early December 1944.

In our travels, we had found, amongst ordinary, French, Belgian and Dutch people that the Dutch were consistently welcoming and helpful, (for example, a Dutch resistance fighter, had once ridden with me in the tank to guide us through a minefield) and the good people of Eersel were no exception to that rule.



Eersel Today

As a result, I was able to find richly-deserved "individual family accommodation" for all of the 40 or so NCO's and men in my charge for the whole month of our stay. We were able, in due course, to make at least a gesture of thanks, by getting together and hosting an enormous children's Christmas party, for all children from the town who wished to attend.

Further, I was able to take over a large, clearly well-to-do family house as a "mess" for our eight or ten officers, in which the kitchen and its equipment were not used. Instead, our mess cook moved his cooking and other equipment in to a large conservatory, adjoining the living area.

We never saw either father or son, and it transpired that the house was in the hands of the four or five daughters. Of these, the older ones appeared most interested in my more senior colleagues, while the youngest not to be outdone indicated her determination to show that I had a place in my heart for her by insisting that she sewed on the two extra shoulder "pips" required on my "battle dress" jacket to show I had been promoted from Lieutenant to Captain.

After so many months without any "creature comforts" (chapter 23) it took several days to acclimatize to the "culture shock" of a proper bed and regular, acceptable meals. I was soon able to give some time to the important task of maintaining morale by interviewing each man in turn, bringing his records up to date, discussing future hopes and so on. Following one such interview with a young sergeant about to leave us for a better posting to another unit he thanked me warmly and said "he had never met an officer my equal", which was of course, very rewarding to hear.

Brigadier Watkinson had, it seems, always considered the "Craig's bridges" operation to have been a "model" one in terms of the reconnoitre involved and the general carrying through by my troop, and he insisted on my giving a lecture describing it to some thirty officers and about 400 "other ranks" in a hall in Eersel.

However, the most useful activity I was able to pursue in the peace and quiet of Eersel was designing and experimenting with modifications to the totally new Bailey mobile bridge (chapter 17 (vi) first paragraph), for which I had taken over a small drawing office, in which, invaluable, I was able to install one of my sappers a trained draughtsman.

The task involved two stages, first of which was a field trial of my proposal for modifying the War Office suggestion for "breaking the back" of the Bailey (to create a hump-backed bridge) safely, from within the tank by using a small explosive charge to remove steel links which would replace the normal pin (which would be highly dangerous to try to

remove in the open). Both Colonel Shepherd and the Brigadier were keenly interested, and insisted on bringing fellow "top brass" to witness the trial in a large open area adjoining the town. I was genuinely concerned for their safety and asked them to withdraw several hundred yards. However, they declined, insisting they would be alright, and virtually ordered me to proceed. When I fired the charge I was horrified to see (as I had feared) one of the lethal steel plates flying towards them, whereupon all six in their immaculate uniforms with their unmistakable bright red lapel insignias dropped face down on the ground, which my crew naturally found hilarious.



Sir Donald Bailey

However, the trial itself had been a success and proved that my proposal was both viable and safe to operate under fire. This had the great "spin-off" advantage that it gained official support for my "second stage" development work for even more fundamental improvements to the "Bailey mobile bridge" concept, which, eventually, resulted in the highly desirable outcome of my being sent to the UK with my drawings to discuss them with none other than the inventor, Donald Bailey himself, with some home leave thrown in, (just prior to the Siegfried line chapter 17(v)).

Chapter 21

"clearing Up" In Germany

After months of daily high-pressure activities, the peace and quiet following the general cease fire, although, of course, universally welcomed and cherished inevitably came as something of an anti-climax, and naturally posed the question as to how best to occupy the time of the "other ranks".

Naturally, physical training sessions continued to maintain fitness. And a comparatively new departure for the army was introduced in the shape of "ABCA" the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, which sponsored discussions of many assorted topics, whose success naturally depended on the imagination of whichever officer had either volunteered, or been appointed to lead them. At a time when a general election in the UK was looming these proved popular.

We were fortunate at the time in May '45, to be "harbouring" at Kiel, where we had taken over a large house overlooking the famous canal, which provided adequate accommodation for the whole squadron.

My early experiences of yachting then prompted me to think of assembling a group of pleasure craft taken from the Kiel



The battleship Graf Spee on the Kiel Canal - 6 years prior to our occupation

yacht harbour which could be moored on the canal just below the big house. Before long, we had a somewhat old-fashioned 30 foot petrol-engined yacht, which immediately became the "Queen Mary" and was suitable for towing in whatever smaller craft took our fancy.

By now we were in a position to mount a "regatta" on the canal which naturally involved all manner of competitions and often hilarious diversions. All these nautical activities naturally passed the time enjoyably, and may even have provided some of the men with an inkling of seamanship.

I was allotted two "Sapper" operations at Kiel both being demolitions. The first involved razing (hopefully) to ground level what had been a huge waterside seaplane hangar. This involved much calculating of the optimum types and strengths of the charges required to cripple the numerous

steel stanchions and beams involved, which proved not as successful as hoped, and left an enormous area of extremely tangled wreckage.

The second required demolition was fundamentally different, being that of a huge reinforced concrete dockside air-raid shelter/bunker. It was subdivided into about forty ten foot square by eight foot high "rooms" with no windows and just a single narrow access stairway. Unlike with the hangar, I knew it would be impossible to obtain adequate explosives from our own stocks, so we visited the nearby abandoned bomber base where there was known to be the biggest arsenal of large bombs, and brought sufficient back with us to place one in each corner of every "room". My hope was to take advantage of the unique, virtually airtight nature of the strange building to destroy it by "compression". Once we had carefully wired up every single bomb together to one circuit, we retired about a quarter mile to a vantage point (having ensured there were no innocent civilians nearby) and then activated the circuit.

Unlike the hangar task, this one proved 100% successful. The only casualty resulted from the ten foot thick solid reinforced concrete roof flying some 50 yards and landing on a medium sized cargo ship at the dock side, which immediately sank until only the mastheads remained visible.

One of my responsibilities at Kiel, which took up an inordinate amount of time, was defending one of the tank drivers on a court martial charge of rape - an obligation an officer, once chosen by the accused, cannot refuse. I neither knew nor

liked the man, and had difficulty fully accepting his defence. However, I did my best for him, in spite of which he was found guilty and given hard labour. I then appealed in writing for him and learned six months later that it had been accepted and he had been discharged.

For several further months I was involved with army intelligence units in the somewhat eerie task of inspecting armament factories producing mines, and listing and assessing their remaining outputs.

About this time, Belsen concentration camp had been found and I was invited to visit it. I had, of course, seen the innumerable illustrations that had already been made available, and saw no point in my viewing such a devastating sight, and furthermore I felt keenly that it would be demeaning to the few wretched skeletons just hanging on to life to be "viewed" unnecessarily, so I declined the invitation.

Chapter 22

Back To 'Civvie Street' (1946)

In early 1945, because of the desperate housing shortage in the United Kingdom, following a huge backlog of unfulfilled housing programmes, exacerbated by the widespread bombing losses, a scheme called 'B-Release' was introduced, which enabled architects and others to quit the forces 12 or more months earlier than expected on production of an offer of employment related to the provision of housing.

Thus on November 30th 1945, to my huge relief, I was able to hand in my army uniform in return for a 'civvie suit' and start work in the Borough Engineer's Department of St Marylebone Council in London. At the time housing work was still the responsibility of the borough engineers; numerous council architects departments were instituted within the following ten years.

There was no question of totally new permanent housing schemes being started but rather, a pressing need to revive whatever was conceivably possible for actual or potential modest scale 'ad-hoc' housing.

A quick survey of the St John's Wood district revealed a fair number of large 19th century houses which seemed to have partially survived the bombs and it became apparent that the only hope for 'quick returns' would be to try to convert some of them into flats. Such a design process of sub-dividing large dwellings into small ones, of course



V1 damage in St John's Wood, near Lords

represented a profound break with normal architectural tradition and called for some imaginative innovations.

Regrettably, many of the buildings considered to be 'possible candidates' for conversion had in fact suffered far more from being exposed to the elements after being bombed than was readily apparent. The worst enemy had been dry rot far more lethal to buildings than wet rot and equally more difficult to both distinguish and eliminate, since its spores could both pass through eighteen inch thickness walls and travel, airborne, considerable distances from one building to another.

I learned about it the hard way through my first proposed conversion design in which I sub-divided a first floor room to allow for a bathroom, and the unseen floor joists had suffered so badly from dry rot that when the bath filled for the first time, the whole would-be bathroom disappeared down to the ground floor.

In my spare time I continued working towards my final architectural qualifications under the guidance of a well established elderly architect 'crammer'. Eventually in '48, the time came to sit the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) final examination for which a comprehensive set of both design and construction drawings for a pre-set subject had to be brought in for submission.

I had always been very bad at all kinds of drawing and I was unbelievably lucky when a friendly architect, one Kenneth Campbell, whom I'd only just met, offered to produce a whole set for me (naturally totally illicitly) which he in fact spent a whole night or more preparing.

It was an open secret at the time that the R.I.B.A. was in such bad financial straits that it was very keen for candidates to succeed so they would soon be obliged to pay the full associate's fees. Nevertheless I was seriously worried by the impending dreaded exam and Kenneth's support at the time was wonderfully reassuring.

Kenneth was then senior architect at the newly formed Miners Welfare Commission (primarily concerned with the introduction of pit head baths) who before long became Chief Housing Architect to the then London County Council.

At the time of the final exam I was able to manage the written parts of the exam which, together with 'my' magnificent set of drawings, got me through and I emerged as a qualified registered architect. As time went on, Ken Campbell soon became and remained my closest friend and remained so until his death at the age of 92 in 2002. His wife, Frances,

was a great friend of both Thora and myself and we all four spent many happy times together.

As a natural result of people's desperate need for any kind of accommodation, if only for basic shelter from the elements, the 'squatters' movement developed throughout the UK and particularly strongly in London. In my position at the Borough Engineers Office in Marylebone, a wealthy area including many large empty properties, I was well placed to advise squatters leaders on potential targets for occupation, and a number of successful 'squats' resulted.

I stayed on with Marylebone for six months or so doing whatever frustrating and piecemeal jobs were possible, to make minor improvements in housing conditions, but the atmosphere in a staunchly reactionary borough was hardly conducive to permitting the side-stepping of bureaucracy that was so often required to get any results.

So I decided to leave in order to devote as much time as possible to help generate political pressure on central government to institute a critically needed housing programme, through organising conferences etc, as described below, particularly working through the Association of Building Technicians (Chapter 26).

I then decided to take a job in the small private practice of architect, Arthur Stewart, in South Kensington, with the primary aim of expanding my Curriculum Vitae or 'CV' which I knew would be essential when the opportunity eventually arose to apply for a job which I felt confident I could both do well and enjoy (see Chapter 31).

In that office, beside Stewart himself and his secretary, there was just one experienced assistant named Frank Brown; a tea-making junior, and myself. The design work for a very humdrum series of buildings, naturally involved a number of usual plans and details, and in producing my quota of these I was every bit as lucky as I had been with Ken Campbell over the actual production of the drawings - in that Frank very kindly produced copies to which I could append my name.

Although I am confident that Stewart could never have guessed that 'my' drawings were not in fact all my own work, he gave me such a lukewarm letter for my CV that I would have been better off without it. Thora was so infuriated by his attitude that she demanded an improved version from him - which we did in fact later receive (and in the fullness of time I did indeed get the job I wanted, see Chapter 31). Meanwhile, the family had dubbed him "Orrible Arthur". Frank Brown was not only an accomplished architectural draftsman but also a very capable and imaginative cartoonist and he worked producing cartoons every day for 'The Daily Worker'. He soon became a close friend of the whole family and used to come with us on holidays in the 'first bus' (chapter 23.8)

Stewart occasionally took on "overflow" jobs from architect Colin Penn, who was an old Communist Party Member who had been commissioned to re-design the ground/entrance floor of the Communist HQ at 16 King St, Covent Garden, for

which he used what were then revolutionary, solid but translucent "glass bricks" which were also vandal-proof.