

HISTORY OF 518 FIELD SURVEY COMPANY R.E.

Introduction.

No unit history exists for this unit. The following notes on various sources are in lieu of a unit history until the compilation of one is addressed. Four main sources are listed.

Sources :-

1. Notes of War Diaries held in The National Archives, Kew :-

518 Fd Svy Company War Diaries Home Forces Sep 1940 - Dec 1941.

WO 166/3783 Not yet seen (NYS)

518 Fd Svy Company War Diary - BNAF.

PRO WO 175/668 NYS

518 Fd Svy Company War Diary Jul-Dec 1943 - North Africa.

PRO WO 169/10699 NYS

518 Coy Italy War Diary - Italy - 1944?

PRO WO 170/1702 NYS

518 Coy Italy War Diary - Italy - Jan-Nov 1945.

WO 170/5230 NYS

518 Coy War Diary - British Troops Austria - Apr 1945 - Jun 1946.

WO 402/369 NYS

2. References from Brigadier Clough's monograph, "Maps and Survey", H.M.S.O. 1952, :-

Home Forces	37, 39.
Torch	39, 263-266, 269, 270, 272-274, 278, 286.
Sicily	499
Italy	299, 301, 327, 330.

Home Forces.

At the beginning of January, 1941 there were nine Field Survey Companies under Home Forces control and they were located in the commands as shown below :-

Southern Command	No. 519 (just formed) No. 516 (with 5 Corps)
Eastern Command	No. 14 (ex B.E.F.) No. 1 Canadian (with Canadian Corps)
Northern Command	No. 13 (ex B.E.F.) No. 521 (just formed)
Western Command	No. 517 No. 520 (just formed)

Southern Command No. 518 (just formed)
(Clough page 37)

"Torch"

Survey Directorates were assembled for the Allied Planning Headquarters for Operation "Torch" and for the British First Army which was to take part. 518 Field Survey Company R.E. was mobilized for this operation and ceased to be under Home Forces control. By October, 1942, the Survey organization in Home Forces was as under :-

Director of Survey, with Survey Directorate at G.H.Q. (now Colonel A.B. Clough who replaced Colonel Fryer on his appointment to Middle East in January, 1942).

A small Directorate with each of the Home Commands and certain Corps.

Field Survey Companies Nos. 14, 516, 519, 520, 521, 523 (515 in Northern Ireland), 1 Canadian.

General Survey Sections Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Field Survey Depots Nos. 3, 4, 5, 7, 10 (No. 6 in Northern Ireland).

Air (Survey) Liaison Section No. 1.
(Clough page 39)

The British survey organisation during the early part of the campaign (The race for Tunis and Bizerta 8 Nov - end Dec 1942) was as under : -

(a) Survey Directorate A.F.H.Q.

..... **518** Field Survey Company R.E. and the main part of 12 Field Survey Depot R.E. also being forward in First Army area.....

(c) **518** Field Survey Company R.E. This unit was of the normal corps type, and was equipped with the newly supplied demy-size printing machines and ancillary equipment mounted in special lorries. One topographical section reached Algiers by second convoy on "D"+4, the remainder arriving by third convoy on "D"+14.

(Clough page 263)

518 Field Survey Company, which arrived at Algiers on 22nd November, detailed one topographical section to carry out surveys for the anti-aircraft defence of Algiers, moving on to Bone at the end of the month for similar work there. The other topographical section was at first employed assisting 12 Field Survey Depot to organize the map depot and sort out the map stocks. The drawing section at once began the revision of 1/50,000 maps of the Bizerta-Tunis area from whatever air photographs could be obtained. The reproduction sections began work on 2nd December, their first task being the printing of 1/200,000 maps of Tunisia. After installing their main map depot in Algiers, 12 Field Survey Depot established a forward depot, first of all at Bone, using sea transport, and then at Constantine. The transport of **518** Field Survey Company was used for a map convoy service between the main depot at Algiers and Constantine. On 23rd December **518** Field Survey Company left its location at Menerville and moved forward to Conde Smendou.

(Clough page 265)

516 Field Survey Company R.E. arrived from the United Kingdom at the beginning of February, and moved to Draa. One topographical section was assigned for duty with U.S. II Corps, as the topographical unit belonging to that corps, 62 Engineer Topographical Company, was not yet available. It there joined up with one topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company which, having having been moved from the map depot to Bone for anti-aircraft surveys, was also assigned to II Corps (U.S.). These two sections remained with the corps working in conjunction with the field observation battalion until 62 Engineer Topographical Company was ready to take over, towards the end of March. No. 1 topographical section of 516 Company moved up into 5 Corps area along the line Beja-Medjez el Bab. Meanwhile No. 2 topographical section 516 Company carried out surveys for anti-aircraft defences at Bougie until about the middle of March, when it was withdrawn for employment on air-photo revision. The drawing and reproduction sections of the two field survey companies were employed on map revision, the preparation of special large scale battle maps, and the reproduction and printing of large numbers of maps for the fighting troops and for staff use.

(Clough page 266)

Colonel S.G. Hudson succeeded Colonel Wheeler as D.D. Survey First Army and had at his disposal the following survey units : -

518 Field Survey Company R.E., which had been with First Army from the start.

516 Field Survey Company R.E., which arrived from the United Kingdom on 1st February.

12 Field Survey Depot R.E. ,which had been available since shortly after "D"-day. This was of the standard type, with one officer, 18 other ranks and one lorry only.

(Clough page 269)

One of the principal tasks during this last phase was to establish a third-order control for artillery operations during the battle which opened on 7th April to clear the enemy positions in the mountainous area Sidi Nsir-Oued Zarga-Medjez-el-Bab, as a preliminary to the main final offensive. To enable this work to be done, the topographical sections of **518** Field Survey Company had been moved to Beja on 15th March to establish control on the North African grid before the end of the month. This was done in the area from Beja towards the north-east as far as possible along the road to Sidi Nsir, and also between Beja and Oued Zarga. One topographical was, for this operation, attached to each survey troop of 5 Survey Regiment R.A., and the co-operation between R.E. and R.A. surveys appears to have

been admirable. The topographical sections carried the control forward to keep pace with the advancing battle in face of enemy opposition and other difficulties such as minefields.

The establishment of trig control in 19 (French) Corps area was effected by one topographical section of 516 Field Survey Company in conjunction with the Army Group R.A. On completion of this task on 9th April, this section moved into 5 Corps area to carry out preparatory surveys for the final offensive. This was completed by 21st April, when one section moved north to near Grenadier Hill and the other section went into reserve.

On the completion of the preliminary surveys along the First Army front, three topographical sections were attached to 5 Survey Regiment R.A. for work in the following areas : -

One section (**518** Field Survey Company) from Medjez el Bab towards Longstop Hill.

One section (**518** Field Survey Company) around Medjez el Bab and towards Grich el Oued.

One section (516 Field Survey Company) in the Grenadier Hill area.

As soon as sufficient ground had been gained by the attack begun on 22nd April, each section carried the triangulation forward, and sufficient points were established to control the great concentration of artillery used for the offensive of 5th-6th May. The advance after that date was so rapid that the topographical sections had practically no further calls made on them.

After the cessation of hostilities in Tunisia on 12th May all topographical sections were employed on anti-aircraft surveys at Bone, Bizerta and Tunis.

(Clough page 270)

518 Field Survey Company R.E. arrived on "D"+16, and provided the only source of military map printing with First Army until 516 Company landed in early February. One of the first tasks given to **518** Company was to revise the 1/200,000 and 1/50,000 maps of northern Tunisia, using the more up-to-date French maps and any air photographs that could be obtained. The size of the unit's printing machines being "demy", it was necessary to divide the 1/50,000 sheets in two parts, and print them back to back on both sides of the paper. The 1/200,000 sheets were also printed in pairs, back and front of the paper.

(Clough page 272)

Within First Army **518** Company was available from about "D"+16 and 516 Company from early February. To provide A.F.H.Q. with adequate map printing power 11 and 12 Map Reproduction Sections R.E. were sent out by the War Office, arriving towards the end of March.

When Eighth Army entered Tunisia, and thereafter came under the control of 18 Army Group and A.F.H.Q., it brought with it 46 South African Field Survey Company and 517 Field Survey Company R.E., both of which had mobile reproduction sections of the normal type.

(Clough page 273)

Operational mapping tasks undertaken by 516 and 518 Field Survey Companies R.E.

..... These 1/25,000 maps of Tunisia were produced by First Army survey units. There was no existing French series on this large scale, and as no survey photography could be obtained which would be suitable for new large scale mapping, it was necessary to utilize, as basic material, the French 1/50,000 series which was of good quality. The detail was enlarged photographically and revision was incorporated from air photographs taken for intelligence purposes. The scale of these photos varied from 1/12,000 to 1/50,000, and there were varying tilts and overlaps, and large gaps in the coverage. A small party of topographic draughtsmen was attached to the Army Photo Centre to collect revision information from its library set of photographs.

Over 80 of these 1/25,000 sheets were produced and they were overprinted to show enemy defences.

They were published in two stages. A first edition was issued somewhat in advance of the battle, bearing such intelligence information as was then available. A second edition was then usually produced immediately before the operation, containing the most up-to-date information. In some cases third and fourth editions were produced, but these were exceptional, as time was rarely available.

The General Staff (Intelligence) at Army H.Q. accepted responsibility for all overprint information whatever the source, and no attempt was made to short-circuit the normal channels by going to corps or divisions for information.

Survey, however, accepted responsibility for the positioning of the information on the maps, and for this purpose, a small R.E. survey detachment was attached to the Photo Centre, where it had access to the latest photos.

The reproduction sections of both **516 and 518 Field Survey Companies** were kept busy at full stretch on the production and printing of these 1/25,000 maps right up to the cessation of hostilities though,

towards the end, the campaign was going so fast that it outran the need for maps on that large scale. Their other main task was the reprinting of the 1/200,000 and 1/50,000 series of Tunisia for stock. When at full pressure each unit was turning out 1,000,000 or more impressions each month. For the heavy artillery concentration in the Medjerda Valley before the final thrust it was decided to produce a "barrage overprint". An officer and a draughtsman from the Army Survey Directorate went to H.Q. 9 Corps R.A. in the evening, the draughtsman drew the overprint trace on the spot, and it was flown down to 516 Company, located further back. The required number of copies were run off on previously printed base maps and flown forward to the artillery.
(Clough pages 273-274)

Field surveys by British units for II (U.S.) Corps.

.....
One topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company started work in the forward area on 17th February, but had to move back to the hills north-west of Feriana-Kasserine almost at once as a result of aggressive enemy action. They then supplied position and azimuth for artillery units in the area Bou Chebka-Dernaia-Bekhara Pass.

.....
As testified by the American artillery commander, both sections of **518** Field Survey Company did most meritorious work.
(Clough page 278)

Map depot activities with First Army.

.....
It was bolstered up at first by employing a topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company R.E. to help with the work of sorting out the bulk stocks and organizing the map depot.
(Clough page 286)

Sicily

The Survey organization, apart from that in Cairo, was as follows : -
A.F.H.Q. Survey Directorate (Brigadier R. Ll. Brown).
 649 Engineer Topographical Battalion (U.S.).
 516 and **518** Field Survey Companies R.E.
 etc.

(Clough page 499)

Italy

The survey units under direct A.F.H.Q. control at the beginning of the campaign in Italy were as under :-

British
516 and **518** Field Survey Companies R.E. (late of First Army).
11 and 12 Map Reproduction Sections R.E.
2 Air Survey Liaison Section R.E.
10 Field Survey (Stores) Depot R.E.
7, 12 and 26 Field Survey (Map) Depots R.E.

U.S.
649 Engineer Topographical Battalion (Army).
Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Eastern Base Section Map Depots.
2611 and 2697 Engineer Map Depot Detachments.
(Clough page 299)

514 Field Survey Company, after nine months of strenuous and efficient service with Eighth Army, was withdrawn, being replaced by **518** Field Survey Company from A.F.H.Q., one of the two original units with First Army during operation "Torch".
(Clough page 301)

The final stage.

.....
Up to the crossing of the R. Po on 26th April, the topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company was able to keep the R.A. survey units supplied with trig information well forward in the battle zone.

From then on, however, the retreat turns into a rout, and movement was so rapid that field survey control could not keep pace with it. The need for survey, however, fell away with the collapse of resistance, so both topographical sections were withdrawn and put on to other work.
(Clough page 327)

The opening of the Italian campaign (September 1943),
.....

Officers from A.F.H.Q. had helped to map up the troop ships leaving the ports of Bougie and Philippeville for Salerno, and a topographical section of **518** Field Survey Company R.E. did the same at Bizerta and then rejoined its unit at A.F.H.Q.
(Clough page 330)

3. "Goodbye to all this."

A souvenir booklet, Published and printed by 518 Corps Field Survey Company R.E.
Mike Nolan and Alan Gordon have copies of this publication.
This might be scanned at some time in the future.

4. "Some Wartime Memories of a Member of R.E. Survey by Richard Hussey"

A word-processed transcript of the late Richard Hussey's typescript has been commenced below. The remainder of the original typescript has been passed to Alan Gordon in Nov 2008 in the hope that he can scan and OCR it.
M. Nolan also holds some negatives and prints from Mr. Hussey which might be incorporated in this brief history, including a Cirkut Camera panoramic photo of the whole Company in North Africa, 60 x 13 cms.

SOME WARTIME MEMORIES OF A MEMBER OF R.E. SURVEY.

By Richard Hussey.

FOREWORD By Major-General J. Kelsey CBE.

Immediately after I was commissioned in November 1940, I was posted to 518 Field Survey Company Royal Engineers and joined this unit in Dalmeny Park near Edinburgh as Officer in Charge of No. 1 Topographic Section. Aged 20 and straight from university, my total military experience had been gained from a 4 months cadet course and I found myself commanding men with many years surveying experience in the Ordnance Survey and several who had seen active service in France. Among these was Corporal Hussey and we saw service together in Scotland and North Africa until I was wounded in April 1943 and evacuated to U.K. Thus I have first hand knowledge of only part of the events described in this history.

Now, over 50 years later, I find that Mr Hussey has written a most vivid account of day-to-day life and work of a non-commissioned officer in a Survey unit throughout the Second World War and as such this work represents a most valuable historical document. Above all, this history shows most forcefully that the ability of a unit to live and work effectively under war conditions depends almost totally on the steadfastness, integrity and resourcefulness of its non-commissioned officers. Clearly Mr Hussey had such qualities in good measure and I consider myself most fortunate to have had him and others like him under my command.

J. Kelsey

Preface.

A book must obviously have a beginning and an end, at least most do. Whereas many authors have little difficulty in starting the first pages, or deciding their composition, they apparently have trouble determining the end.

In this case the opposite is the problem as the end is factual and is, in so many words, the death of No. 1 Topo Section but, to make it more of an obituary as on a grave stone, "Here lyeth the remains of No. 1 Topographical Survey Section of the 518 Corps Field Survey Company Royal Engineers which departed this life in the village of Guttaring Karnten, Austria, on the 30th November 1945".

Although the date may not be Army Official it was on that date, as the last remaining officer (Non.Com.), of the Company, I took the remnants of the 518 from Guttaring to Villach, there to wait

for the journey home and demob. Therefore, as the last representative of No. 1 Topo I am able to confirm that date.

This book is not, repeat NOT, a technical publication to expound the virtues of trigonometry as applied to survey work for artillery control from 1939 to 1945. This day and age of computers and satellites such matters are dealt with in seconds but we, then, would need hours or days with our Tavistock theodolites, our Brunsviga adding machines and our natural tables. Thus there is little purpose pursuing the subject.

This book then is what one might call a collection of memories of a sapper of No. 1 Topo in his later years from start to finish.

Sutton Coldfield 1994

Suggested Reading

Birth of an Army.

By A.B. Austin

First published 1943 Victor Gollanz Ltd.

Over to Tunis.

By Howard Marshall

First published 1943 by Eyre and Spottiswoode, London.

First Blood.

By Charles Whiting

Published 1984 by Book Club Associates

By arrangement with Leo Cooper with Secker & Warburg Ltd.

Private Army.

By Lt. Col. Vladimir Peniakoff (Popski)

First published 1950 Dewey Classification

Jonathan Cape London

The Battle of Flanders.

By Ian Hay

Published by H.M.S.O. 1940

The Campaign in Italy.

By Eric Linklater

Published by H.M.S.O. 1951

Goodbye to all this.

Published and printed by 518 (C.F.S.) Coy. R.E.

No longer in print

Introduction

As so many persons have found in their later years there is more time to think and in doing so, memories do come back, moreover they are not just idle thoughts.

Attending the annual reunion in Southampton each year of the messes of the Royal Engineers (1939) Survey Battalion it became most apparent that our numbers gradually decreased as the years went by. It was also apparent that as the numbers decreased so did the memories therefore I considered that by putting all I could think of on paper some other people might find it interesting to compare them with their own experiences.

It does not hurt to gain knowledge especially from other people.

R.T.H. 1994

Chapter One 1939-1940 and the Phoney War.

To examine the history of No. 1 Topo 518 the very beginning should first be considered and also from where some of its personnel were obtained, in other words, the very origins.

So far as can be remembered, of the personnel forming the Topo Section of 518, there were at least seven from the 19th Field Survey Company RE of the pre-war years and of those, four were in No. 1 Topo. The reason all this should be borne in mind is because of the experience gained from the training at Fort Southwick in the 19th Corps Field Survey Company during 1937-38, the light-keeping and Bilby tower building and on the re-triangulation of Great Britain in various areas of the United Kingdom followed by the field work under active war conditions with the 13th and 14th Corps Field Survey Companies R.E. in 1939-40-41, provided the basis of the technical ability of the section. Dates in my possession give the formation of the 14th Field Survey Company at Fort Wallington, towards Fareham from Fort Southwick, as 10 September 1939, its move to Cherbourg as 30 September, a short break at L'Huisserie as 2 October after a dreadful twelve-hour journey in French second-class carriages, followed by the remainder of the trip in cattle trucks to Lievin near Lens as 4 October while just over Vimy Ridge were our neighbours the 13th Company.

The Section had several detachments from the Company to the Lille-Tourcoing-Roubaix and Arras areas plus one or two panic moves towards the Belgian frontier based on the assumption that the enemy was coming. On one such occasion we were housed in a cow shed recently vacated but the farmer had cleaned and even scrubbed it for our purpose. Where the rafters reached the wall by my bed head there was a cavity into which fell some of my shaving tackle, on looking for same, I found a 1917 tin of bully beef and a clip of cartridges all still in a usable state. The work was to establish, or otherwise, the value of the French trig for our artillery and so far as can be remembered appeared to be quite reasonable.

There were other jobs such as a survey covering several acres of small interconnecting mine workings about 40 feet deep apparently considered a suitable hiding place for Corps H.Q. from enemy air attacks. This place did have a serious handicap, all along the bottom on one side was an open sewer used by the village above. It was obvious where all this sewage came from but we could not find where it all went.

The Maginot Line was being extended northwards by building a line of small concrete pillboxes. Someone at G.H.Q. apparently thought that it might be a good idea to have a plan showing each box with its lines and arcs of fire moreover it was wanted in a hurry. Result was the two section despatch riders were given the job, myself being one. Much of the riding was over plough land and being winter was very hard.

Although these boxed had very thick walls they were hardly suitable for the warfare that could have fallen upon them. The walls were simply vertical off the ground and not angled above base level. No attempt had been made to disguise them or to use land shapes to give added protection. Because of the construction there was little room for the troops manning them, with a two-pounder A/T gun and other weapons sleeping space must have been very scarce. One of the boxes was situated in a hollow about 100 yards wide and that was its length of fire and the officer I/C was most concerned and on finding that I was a surveyor seemed to think I could advise but all that could be suggested that he establish strong points on a small hill 800 yards away. He was not at all happy.

As the situation later developed they were of little use as when the breakthrough occurred on the 10th May the enemy very unoblingly and inconsiderately made a different approach.

Being section D/R I was delegated the task of being Company D/R as the actual Company D/R had been sent "over the wall". The roads were covered with a thick layer of ice and I found that on seeing other road users had to make immediate plans to avoid them. One time I found ahead of me an old man wobbling about on a bicycle and further on a young boy doing likewise, my plan was that if they fell or stopped all I could do was to lay the bike on its side and hope the footrest would stop us, they did and I did, fortunately.

Something I saw while on the m/c in this weather was a company of guardsmen billeted in a brickworks yard. The only cover they had in the open were the brick drying racks draped with gas capes and groundsheets. They must have been tough.

One time a staff car came belting at me on a narrow road and I had no alternative but to go for the ditch which had thick ice over the water and I went through it. My gauntlets were full of water so by the time I reached the company office my watch was (line missing from draft).

Lievin was a reasonable sized mining town and it was there the Company was lodged in the "Equipage" a large store and workshop for the mines and where we in the Topo sections were placed in a store room made of steel frames and single thickness corrugated iron walls. The very small stove in the centre was blocked as the thick smoke indicated and even we, Engineers, could not clear it, so we had to call on the mining people to do so. They had to remove all the chimney pipe but it did result in some warmth - that became very necessary when, as the icy blasts began to blow we had thick ice forming on the inside of the steel walls.

All that did not matter when we moved to the Church Hall cum Community Centre which was equipped with a massive cast-iron stove about ten feet tall with a long chimney pipe crossing right over the hall. The bottom two feet of the stove was an ash box - the next three was the firebox and the rest a zigzag flue. As the town was "coal rich" the coal box was large and could take a full ton of the black stuff with an open end for shovelling. Just before bedtime it became the duty of an individual to charge the fire with the "nutty slack" which was all that was left by then, to keep the fire in all night.

This task had to be learnt the hard way although tricky - but eventually the drill became thus; - after filling the shovel he would stand by the side of the stove and open the fire door - then rapidly and deftly would shoot this load into the fire and **stood** well back. His action caused a flame to emit with a tremendous roar before the door could be closed. This flame was never less than six feet long and twelve inches in diameter. It must be admitted - there was a degree of competition over the length of the flame but one could never afford to make a mistake.

After my ten days of purgatory on the D/R run and having fallen off ten times it was a pleasure and a relief to get back to work. It so happened the sappers had been teaching the NCOs how to use the "Tavistock" theodolite because prior to 3 September these NCOs had mostly been engaged on field work and thus had little chance to gain the experience.

It must be assumed that the observing by the sappers proved to be rather more consistent than that of the NCOs, it could have been that youth did it. Consequently these sappers were paired off as observing teams and my partner for quite a while was "Dougy" Cooke. (Now, unfortunately, residing in the R.E. Valhalla at Brompton-in-the-sky).

He and I had several "odd" jobs. One was on Loos Hospital to the north of the Seclin/Lens road. It was an almost completely finished building and seemed to be comprised of a series of turret shaped sections 20 metres tall attached to a central circular building - all probably wards, and all this was repeated several times to make a full hospital building.

These "turrets" had a disadvantage in that their concrete and asphalt roofs were Ogee shaped and were covered with a 12-inch thickness of frozen snow. As there was no protective fencing around the edge it was no joke cutting a path through to the centre of the roof to find the trig point and after that having to chip three leg sockets in the asphalt for the tripod legs which had to be tied together with cord to prevent any movement. However, the job was completed and we were very glad to carefully vacate the roof.

The water tower near Carvin was also another problem as the access to the top was through a central concrete tube with a ladder and had a circular concrete lid at the top, only half of which would move to give access onto the summit. Above that was a three-legged lightning conductor about four feet high. It was not possible to have an off-centre point due to the roof shape so we had to occupy the trig in the centre of the lid. With much effort we chipped, with our engineer's knife three holes in the concrete - borrowed a candle and matches from the café below and established a candle wax setting for the tribrach. Unfortunately, if at any time there was a need to vacate the top - the Tavi had to be moved but we found that reinstatement did not affect the level of the instrument.

Once again we were glad to leave the very cold station and get down for a hot coffee at the café.

Whilst the detachment was in Tourcoing Doug and I made the acquaintance of "The Soixante Quatre Regiment d'Artillerie" at least of the French troops of that Regiment manning the telephone exchange in the central post office.

This was because we had visited the café used by these Frenchmen and they insisted we had some of their regimental drink. What was in it shall never be known but it tasted foul. Those Frenchmen should not be trusted too much as this drink had a nasty taste in its tail. Whilst in the café the only effect the foul liquid had was its unpleasant taste until it was time to go home and then as we met the cold night air the footpath came up to meet us very violently. How we got to our beds is not very clear but I believe there might still be some French locals with a memory of two R.E.s crawling back to the factory.

The reason the Topo sections moved to the church hall cum community centre was that some bug or other had infected us consequently we were put into isolation and were not allowed to mix with any others whatsoever. However after a week or two the ban was lifted. So I must introduce you to Paddy O'Brien who was or is a tall slim, almost thin, Irish man and as many members of the Survey R.E.

knew full well as someone to be treated with respect. On one occasion at Fort Southwick either 1937 or 1938 he sat on his bed reading his "Dublin" news or whatever the newspaper was called, it had only just arrived. Some mad or insane person crept towards him and, unobserved, put a lighted match to the bottom corner of that essential paper. Immediately the barrack room cleared in seconds and even other rooms, infected by the expectation of mayhem and sudden death, did likewise.

During the evenings at Lievin it became almost a habit for me to meet Paddy and a character referred to as "King Kong" Stevenson at the Café de la Poste. Madam there had been a governess to an English family so it was very easy to chat with her. One evening, as we arrived at the Café there was a row going on between some French customers and Madame was upset. That was something that Paddy would not tolerate and insisted they stop the nonsense and they did. However it started again with several of them ganging up on one small man and, again that was something that Paddy objected to. He leaned over to me and said "When I give the signal go and open the door onto the street". They once more started so Paddy nodded so I opened the door and Paddy put his arms round the ringleader and swung round and ejected him through the door. Thus peace came upon and Madame was much relieved for quite a while until a woman came in enquiring about a man laying unconscious on the footpath outside the door. Paddy looked at me and said "I seemed to have forgotten the steps" and there were four of them. Thereafter I was never allowed to walk on my own to my billet but always with those two even though their billet was in the opposite direction.

In the midst of winter I was on guard at the Rollencourt, a sports field in Lievin, used as a vehicle park for the Company and right opposite its entrance and pay boxes was our company office which also housed our Sgt/Maj and Q/M. I knew they were out on the town so had to keep a careful watch and eventually spotted them approaching so hid in the other ticket box the brightly lit brazier being in front of the first one. I could hear them whispering "Lets catch him out" and when they found I was missing from the first box were greatly pleased until I cocked my pistol and said "one move and you are dead" they consequently froze. After that I was never popular with certain persons but it did lighten up my guard stint.

Chapter Two 1940.

Being a lucky one I went on leave starting the journey on the 8th May 1940 and therefore heard the news of the German breakthrough on the wireless while having a nice cup of tea in bed at home on the 10th. It was staggering and I immediately thought I would have to go back straight away so that same morning contacted the Military Police at the railway station but was told to enjoy my leave so I did. At the end of my leave I returned from my home town, Farnham, to Waterloo station where I was grabbed with many other troops by M.P.s and rushed to another platform and put on a train which promptly started off for Southampton. Once there we were shipped aboard and that night were on our way to Cherbourg. Our arrival there on May 21st was very different from previously. Then it was a welcome for heroes, now it was very restrained.

The stay at Cherbourg was only an hour or so when we, a group of about 200, marched in hot sun to St. Mere Eglise, of U.S. Airdrop fame in 1944, it was something like 18 miles. I had met up with a driver from my own section so was pleased to have company. On arrival at a château the usual army confusion was very prevalent but we did, in due course, receive food and after which we had to bed down in a wood. It was comfortable as the weather was fine and there was an ample supply of dry leaves to make a bed.

Next morning we met three young survey sappers from the 19th Company (no names unfortunately) so we kept together as a group. The fact that I was armed with a 0.38 pistol attracted the attention of an officer - he, apparently being without a side-arm - demanded that I hand it over to him. This would leave us five with one rifle and five rounds of ammunition. I refused his request by saying that I would have to have a receipt issued by a senior officer - not him - and this was done but it somehow resulted in all five of us being allocated a space on the top floor of the chateau and becoming members of the staff in the new formation of the "Cherbourg Lancers".

News was coming through that all was not well up at the front. There was talk of Sedan and a breakthrough. It must have been about May 23rd when we moved to Blosville and there we five were asked to prepared plans for the defences of the Carentan peninsula. The only maps available were Michelin road maps of a scale unsuitable for planning fortifications so had to be enlarged on foolscap typing paper and allowing an overlap for pasting them together we got on with the job and had reached the halfway stage when an announcement came through that we would be on the move again. The defence of the peninsula was a non-runner and also as our C/O had been posted, the name of our organisation had now been changed to "The Cherbourg Chasseurs".

Until then I had imagined that my old section would have been doing just as previously on the “flaps” to the Belgian frontier and carrying on with the old survey work as before. Now, with the odd reports trickling through, it seemed they were really in trouble and the circumstances would be very different and chaotic.

However, at that time my mind was really concerned with our own circumstances and I felt I had a responsibility for the lads with me. There did not seem to be any real form of direction from above so we just had to accept things as they came along.

The following morning, May 25th, bright and sunny we entrained with absolutely no idea of our destination and the transport turned out to be the usual “12 horses or 40 men” cattle trucks. Someone had even found a copy of the Daily Express a few days old and that really depressed us. It appeared that the armies were in retreat towards the coast and Dunkirk but what alarmed us more was the speed of the German advance.

After a long and tiring journey with little food the destination was reached, Porniche, on the estuary of the Loire on the Biscay coast. It was a reinforcement camp and much to my surprise to find in the despatch office another Survey R.E. I am sure his name was “Ginger” Wilson and he was most helpful in many ways except with food and that was very scarce.

We having established a sort of reputation previously were now called upon to act as pay clerks. It seemed simple enough to pay all N.C.Os certain fixed rates and divide the remainder between the Ors evenly as possible but to have nothing left, and that requirement was unobtainable. We tried very hard but due to the value of the notes could not balance out as zero. There was always something left.

Eventually the officers decided - share what is left between you five - but the O.R's did not like that. It did help us though as it enabled us to purchase food either from the N.A.A.F.I. or by sneaking into town. Food was the biggest problem for all, you would be lucky to get a piece of bread and a cup of tea at breakfast and three men had a loaf of bread with a spoonful of stew each at midday, but the loaf was mouldy and when all the mould was cut away there would only be a two-inch cube left.

Living in bell tents with the weather roasting hot and little water available was a bit much, but we were able with “Ginger's” advice to move from one “unit” to another. It appeared that an NCO with a couple of men would be sent “up country” with a truck and limited petrol and explosive to blow certain bridges. Fortunately I met one such group on their return and was horrified at their tale, they were, in fact, not expected back, the amount of explosive was insufficient to “blow the skin off a rice pudding” and both petrol and rations did not last for the whole journey and they had to “scrounge”. Not only that it was fortunate they found an M.P. detachment from whom they learnt that the enemy would not be coming their way at all. It was only with the help of the MPs they were able to return to camp. I don't mind blowing things up but a reasonable chance of success is paramount to such an exercise.

“Ginger” called to see us - There's a chance to get away by sea - a ship, laying in Saint Nazaire was to be loaded with 5,000 men and to sail in a day's time. Somehow I did not like it, I could not say why, so told the others of my feelings and that I would not go but suggested that they make up their own minds and that they could go if they wanted to. It was very lucky they decided to stay with me. As we learnt later, as that ship steamed north it was bombed and, I believe, was torpedoed and 2000 men lost. Again our luck held, it was now the 11th June and once more had orders to move, this time to entrain in Porniche so as soon as we reached the town we set about buying food and were not very successful.

The haul was a two-inch cube of margarine, two tiny tins of sardines, a loaf of bread (fresh) and two bottles of brown beer. Once again cattle trucks were going to convey us but that was better than carriages, taking us north, we hoped, and to a Channel port. A careful note was kept of the towns we passed through but were not happy about direction until we passed through Avranches.

It was here as we waited in the main station a lad in the truck ahead of us obeyed the call of nature and got down between two trucks - at that moment a train full of refugees pulled in alongside us - also at that same moment our train began to move so out he came clutching his trousers as best he could and with help clambered up into the truck. The women and children crammed into the corridors were doubled-up with laughter.

A little later we had a spot of bother after we came through St. Lo when we were turned towards the east and Caen at a signal box and the train stopped. The driver and his mate obviously knew this line and came back along the track in a very concerned state of mind and had a discussion with our officers which resulted in all of them going to the signal box after which we were reversed onto the original line and we once again headed north. It was said that the signalman was shot as a fifth columnist but I am not at all sure of that.

It was again a sunny day the 7th June when our train reached Cherbourg about midday but there were no ships in sight except those on the bottom of the harbour destroyed by bombing. A Padre was dashing backwards and forwards from the town with a van dispensing tea and many apologies for not having any eats left. He was a marvellous man with no thought of himself nor, apparently about the

advancing Germans. I wonder what happened to him, we hoped he got away. Having got thus far my thoughts went to my old section, the Daily Express, still reaching us but no food, informed us about the mass evacuation from Dunkirk, a new name in our mind. I could only hope they reached home but it left us with no one but the French between us and the enemy. As the senior decisions were left to me I suggested that we prepare to walk from Cherbourg in a westerly direction should no ship come in. For some reason or other I decided on 2.30 pm as the start time, and we set to, changed our socks and washed the others under a nearby stand pipe, hanging them on a wire fence to dry. We had no cigarettes so, just in case, I purchased a tin of St. Bruno pipe tobacco from the Padre, being all he had. That tin became very useful, later, in the 1st Army. I thought that by walking west we would come across some small fishing villages where we might beg, borrow or steal a boat and get home. We had come too far and were too near home to give up now.

My watch was reading 2.30 so we got up from a rest and began to move out from the harbour and as we turned a corner there was a ship coming in. What a relief that was. About turn we went and headed back into the harbour at the double and after much pushing and shoving got up the gangway and reached the forward saloon below the bridge where we found a table with seats for us all. With one lying on the table we could all sleep some how and if the ship was to be bombed we had no intentions of being caught below decks. How that ship managed to cross the Channel and come in broad daylight I'll never know.

We passed scores of small craft of all sizes loaded with troops heading home all giving us cheers and victory signs. So soon we were steaming up the Southampton Water into the docks a month after we had previously left. My mind was not functioning properly, it would have been a simple matter to have contacted someone in movement control and explained that all they had to do was to give us a rail warrant to Portchester station just below Fort Southwick.

As events had it we just obeyed orders and climbed into a train waiting in Dock Station with very comfortable carriages to wait for a full load - we were unaware of the tremendous disruption the authorities were trying to handle with so many men. While waiting someone noticed that within a few yards of the platform were stacked cardboard boxes of crab, lobster and jam. We had had a little food in Cherbourg and that was the last, while here was a little more. A few of the lads were soon passing boxes into our compartment where they were hidden under the seats and hardly done so a watchman appeared kicking up merry hell. He soon reappeared with two officers in tow and took them along the platform but as they went by they were waving their hands behind their backs to indicate for the "borrowing" to proceed.

By then we were wondering about our possible destination - Aldershot or Tidworth as military establishments seemed likely and these impressions grew when we stopped at a small station outside Romsey. A girl on the platform was dispensing lemonade from a large glass container on a trolley with lots of small simple tin cups. She disappeared with wild shrieks under a welter of troops - but shortly reappeared, somewhat dishevelled but smiling, without a drop of lemonade nor a single cup.

We were extremely tired and almost asleep but when someone produced a lot of army biscuits, tins were opened and a part of our hunger was satisfied. Also some plain post cards appeared, about three each, so they were written to our nearest ones and thrown out of the windows every time we passed people beside the track. Many of them reached our homes eventually. Then we fell asleep to wake at the next stop at the bottom of some gardens on a loop line. People climbed over the fences to tell us how sorry they were they had no more food left - so many troop trains had come there. These people of Bristol had tried to help all of them.

Promptly the lads all along the train were handing out boxes of crab-lobster and jam.

At long last June 10th we arrived at Hereford and after a mile march to the race course were allocated a bell tent, two blankets, a huge bully sandwich, a hard boiled egg, and a large mug of hot sweet tea.

We, the five, subsided into a deep sleep. Bell tents and hard race-course turf did not appeal to us and a return to our units and our army beds would be more to our liking - so I collected all the money we had, French of course, and went to the office and, after much arguing, got them to change it into English. There was sufficient for me to send a telegram to my father that morning but all that could be said in it was "S.O.S. - L.S.D. this office" and gave my name. The answer arrived late that afternoon - showing the efforts being made by all those "behind the scenes" people to help us. It was a telegraph money order for five pounds. So into town we went, stopping at a pub en route where, no matter what, you could not buy a drink at all. You could drink as much as you wanted but could not get to the bar. It was lined two-three deep by the locals and pints were handed out to those who wanted them.

In the town we found a small restaurant - it was packed - but a very helpful waitress found us a table on a landing and immediately brought us a large pot of tea with all necessities followed by a large meat plate of bread and butter. We ordered steak chips and tomatoes but had to wait a little while for that but it was worth it.

From there a visit to the cinema was indicated so got into a queue at the entrance. Right away the doorman and the local folk in the queue insisted we go in without waiting and with no charge so settled ourselves down in the warmth and comfort. Two full programmes later the doorman woke us to say they were closing down, we had not seen a single thing - just slept.

The next morning, still bright and sunny, I paid another visit to the office, they knew me now so it was easy to explain that if they would give us a rail warrant I could take all five of us back to our unit.

Thereby continuing our travels reaching Southampton, again, by mid afternoon of the 22nd June. The three young lads were, like myself, of the town so sent them to their homes, with bus fares, and instructions to be back for the four o'clock train. My driver was a Londoner and my home, then, was in Farnham, so we could only phone our folks.

They all turned up in time complete with parents so had a good send off. I explained that, in all probability, they would get some more leave soon and see their mums and dads again. Eventually we reached Portchester Station and on being confronted by the steep hill up to Fort Southwick and it being about supper time did as the station master suggested, phoned the fort. A vehicle was requested for five very tired sappers - which was refused by the office orderly so I had to request a word with the Orderly Officer who immediately sent a truck down for us and we were now back in the war. I still had no news of the section so was very apprehensive about what might be found on reaching the Fort. We had learnt much from the newspapers about Dunkirk and the army authorities at Hereford obviously knew nothing about other units so I was hopeful on getting into that truck to meet my pals again.

Chapter Three **1940-1941**

Probably in this day and in this age the effects of the happenings to the B.E.F. would be referred to as trauma and counselling would have been prescribed. At that time the word would have had no meaning to us but the real feelings were that we had had a nasty blow and we had been knocked down - but significantly not out. There was no feeling of utter defeat - there was more of a sense that we would win - in the end - possibly a long time hence - but that we would.

It was such a relief to find the section still intact but without a single piece of equipment but they did not seem to want to discuss the events over Dunkirk. They seemed to be much more interested in what had happened to the driver and myself. One event gave them some degree of pleasure describing the dumping of my kit into a lake and I deplored the action until I heard that the same thing was done with everybody else's to avoid it falling into the hands of the enemy.

Events at the Fort after Dunkirk etc. were not, in my opinion, conducive to promoting a new effective fighting force. For some peculiar military reason it was considered that all we needed was some backbone stiffening by means of much foot drill on a rough "square" and were marched backwards and forwards with little variation for hours at a stretch. Somewhere along the line the physical condition of the men from the lack of food and sleep, let alone the mental state was ignored. I hasten to explain that the three young surveyors were sent home on a four-day pass so missed all this. Not one of the section objected to any form of exercise except large amounts of boring foot drill, but would have preferred P.T. or football or cross-country running, even marches. It was clear the officers appreciated our feelings and tried to initiate other forms of employment such as digging anti-tank ditches across the tarmac approaches to the Fort but luckily the brain somewhere, thought it impracticable and transferred us to a more useful pastime making Molotov cocktails.

Without survey gear there was no survey work and the rest of the Company was in a similar state with the printers having no machines and the M.T. section no transport. Consequently a lot of effort went into finding something to keep us occupied. Myself, muggins, landed the job of establishing a test and training place for gas-masks, in an old bunker just off the parade ground in the parapet of the Fort. Still, it gave us some fun and, at least, allowed some of the others to get acquainted with gas and the real value of gas masks.

For the Topo sections liberation arrived quite suddenly in the shape of replacement survey equipment and transport. The poor old printers and M.T. had to carry on with whatever could be dragged up for them. Our "new" conveyance was a bit varied and ancient consisting of a Rover saloon 1928 vintage, two small vans, one large van and a shiny black limousine, a Ford Zephyr with a V-8 engine. Thus we went to Norwich it now being July 13th, still with only a few side-arms and some rifles which had to be shared for guard duties. Our new billet was a T.A. drill hall and, in spite of the lack of comfortable bedding we were very glad to be back at work. Survey results for many 6" guns along the Suffolk and Norfolk coasts were soon completed much to the anxious battery commander's pleasure. One morning about 6 a.m. we nearly received a bomb from a "hit and run" raider when he dropped two in a bus

station only yards from the back of our hall. One landed in a street leading to the station and the other through the driver's seat of the bus lifting it up leaving it leaning against the building. Fortunately, although it was morning rush time, passengers had not yet arrived and the bus crews were either in the office or the canteen.

I was lucky when I was sent to Chelmsford as section D.R. with a very old Norton, the same model as the one I rode in France. On a section of curved road between fields the machine began to snake. I straight away thought I had a puncture and stopped but could find nothing wrong at all. I remounted and set off with no signs of trouble. A mile along the road I came to a pub that had only just been hit by a bomb a matter of minutes before I got there. I have always considered that I could have been passing the pub when it was hit so gave thanks to the old bike for saving me.

Our next assignment was at Colchester, accommodated in a brand new hutted camp where we had a grandstand view of the Battle of Britain taking place over the Thames estuary. One Heinkel came crashing down and looked as if it might land on our doorstep. Luckily it landed about half a mile away and blew up with its load. There was little left of its occupants and the blast really shook us.

Once again the work was mostly concerned with coastal guns but as more 3.7's were arriving our work load increased considerably but there was something that really was interesting begin to appear near the A.A. gun sites. It was the new radar sets. Compared to the original ones near Dover they were very small more like a small caravan but placed about three feet above ground with a large rectangular aerial. It would also be surrounded by a horizontal area of chain link fencing likewise three feet above ground which acted as a ground effect.

Any work on the east side of London, during the daylight bombing, was a bit dodgy so one had to keep one's eye skyward and to make mental notes of likely funk holes. In the meantime the Company, to the relief of the printers, had moved to Hayes, Middlesex, to the factory of Harrisons the printer of postage stamps. It was probably the print machines the Company was after so they were soon producing maps. Our move to join the Company just about coincided with the end of the daylight battle and Goering began his night bombing. Because of that orders were issued that "if you were in camp after 4.30 p.m. you had to move into the air raid shelters" and would likely stay there all night. It was obvious, the thing to do was to be out of camp at that time. The practice one had to follow was to walk along streets as close to high walls as possible. The ordinary shrapnel from 3.7's wasn't too bad but the 4.5's would send down some quite large lumps at times. Evenings out in London could be exciting at times but it was advisable to know of some good cellars in the area.

Cambridge became our next area of operations and, so far as can be remembered consisted of checking trig stations and establishing errors due to the old county boundaries. It did give us a chance of pleasant pastimes, like hiring horses for a few gallops (and getting thrown off) also while living in a private house was an improvement on the previous billet. It was there I was acting as "Chuck" Avenal (Cpl)'s assistant, he was always most correct in his dress and always sat up in front with the driver in the Ford Zephyr while I sat in the back. It was not long before I realized that soldiers on the side of the road were putting up salutes. It was such a shame to disappoint them so I just had to return the salute. They obviously thought that a General was on board.

From Cambridge it was a short visit to H.Q. at Hayes and then on to Hythe on the south coast of Kent, I should think about the 7th December. The weather was beginning to get cold but work was very interesting as apart from a 9.2 in Dover harbour there were no more coastal guns to fix. More 3.7's were appearing with also several of the new radar installations but, to me, the really interesting job was the marking of the rail track of a 9.2 railway gun of 1914-1918 age. It was on a heavy carriage about 40 to 50m feet long on 32 wheels and to give it a full traverse was on a quarter circle of rail. Its own traverse was only about ten degrees. The location was at Lyddon Spout four to five miles north of Dover. I had been allocated the task of establishing marks at every ten degrees round the outer rail of the quarter circle, but a singular difficulty arose. The quarter circle was not of a constant radius so as time was of essence, the gunners had arranged a test shoot in the next few days, I ran a traverse round that outer rail with short legs and interpolated the required marks from that, to give bearings for the tangent lines. I was invited to witness the trial, possibly to have me on site should anything go wrong for the solid shot was to be fired over Dover into the sea just east of the harbour. The locomotive appeared and shunted the great mass of steel into position over a selected mark then lined up with its limited traverse and the gun loaded. All the wheels were locked the loco and ammunition wagon moved well away and I was advised to watch from well away to the rear. It was fired with a gigantic roar and I could see the shell leave the barrel through a huge smoke ring. After that we all waited for the phone call but not to fear, it had landed just as predicted.

Further surveys were to complement that already done for the 16" and 18" cross-channel bombardment guns in St. Margaret's Bay. It was, to us, of considerable interest to be shown their calculations being

rather more complicated than ours. After allowing for humidity - the wind strength and direction plus cloud height and depth then for the rotation of the earth as the shoot was almost due north-south. A sudden request for our services resulted in a move to Brighton - more 6" coastal guns. The accommodation was in a seafront hotel, but that was all that could be said about the place. We shared it with a battery of coastal gunners brought down from the Western Isles of Scotland where they, apparently had had a very bad time. Messing with them was a dangerous pastime and was not up to our own standard. So far as we could find out several of their officers were in trouble. The weather was bad enough with very cold winds and snow but our nightly sleep was often disrupted with the sound of floor boards, up above, being ripped up for firewood. Under the circumstances it was not surprising our work was rushed through in a couple of weeks and we gladly returned to our detached house in Hythe on or about the 19th January. There was, however, a slight drawback, the enemy was now sending over 43cm shells at Dover and Folkestone during the night and it sounded more like a train of coal trucks flying through the air. We did have some entertainment, it was possible to read a newspaper by the light of the bombe bursting on the German invasion preparations on the other side of the Channel.

After all that freedom of detachment from the Company we again returned to H.Q. and the London blitz on the 29th March, which was acquiring a steady regular practice, in fact had become a habit of life. Even going out for a drink required a tin hat as the occasional large lump of shrapnel could damage a lidless cranium.

Apart from John Armitage and I breaking the Olympic record in a dash to a surface shelter on an evening out once or twice and myself falling into a bomb hole while riding a motor cycle in the dark, the days passed in a normal fashion until April Fool's day (the first of April) we were rushed up to Tadcaster in Yorkshire in an almighty hurry.

It was not until after we arrived we found the reason for the move. Our fellow Company the 516 was due to move abroad to Norway as some believed and we had to take over the survey obligations. The new billet was the polo stables at Toulston Lodge, owned by one of the Smith brothers of brewing fame. Mind you it was the grooms' quarters we occupied and did not disturb the horses.

Meeting old friends was just great fun but on this occasion an arrangement had been made of a blind date for me at a dance. Now, I knew few young ladies and did little dancing so had words to say to my friend Chas Lucas, the culprit, who obviously knew more about this move from London than we did. I had to find excuses, one being that I had no shoes, which was true. But Charles came back with four pairs and as one pair fitted I had to go. As things turned out eventually my blind date made an honest man of me by marrying me.

The work there only lasted a month enabling us to visit familiar places from our activities in 1939 on light-keeping for the retriangulation of Great Britain. All that we did do did not need any rushing about so we enjoyed the "holiday".

516's trip to Norway became a non-runner so our faces, once again, turned southwards - to Dunstable, but it was there that, for three of us, our adventure with 14th (CFS) Coy R.E. came to an end.

A posting to Ruabon, the Survey Training Centre for promotion, so it was said, reaching there on the 19th May 1941 a year after the German break through at Sedan. The three lucky ones were John Armitage, "Titch" Elks and myself, as the dates show we were not sent to the 518 until the 2nd June so we must have been given some posting leave.

Chapter Four

June 1941

It was with some trepidation as we took the long journey north, to that wild Scottish Land, such war time travel was very tiring after being used to our own transport. It was fortunate that it was a friendly driver who collected us from Waverley Station in Edinburgh and he obligingly gave us a run down about the Company so it was pleasant to find out that there were quite a few persons we already knew there. However it was a nice welcome and, as always, a good meal was very much appreciated. So commenced our first and only posting for John and me.

First impressions on joining 518 were a little vague for we three from S.T.C. Ruabon and except for two members of No. 1 Topo we knew very few of the troops. It would take some time for new friendships to develop and for us to be absorbed into the Section as full members.

As no record or little memory exists about the beginning of No 1 Topo 518 some history can only be jumbled together. It should, however, be sufficient to give a reasonable picture of the preparation that stood the section so well in its future role.

It was Sergeant Bill Cutmore, our immediate authority to look to. The Section Officer, Lt. John Kelsey, was, at that time a vague figure in the background and, I believe he was finding us to be in a similar state. He had probably only just joined the Company even as we had.

Very soon we were at work on A.A. and Radar defence of Glasgow, Rosyth, Edinburgh and Gourock with a fair bit of coastal defence put in for good measure with a touch of aerodrome defence for good luck.

While being involved in the Glasgow blitz a rumour was spreading about that the A.A. boys were looking for assistance and it had been suggested that other troops in the area would become involved and help them load the guns. This was quite understandable for they were equipped with the old original 3.7s where the round had to be pushed right up into the breech by hand. They had no mechanical ramrods on these guns, London and the Home Counties had all those. To some it might be a matter to treat with scorn but those critics should first try picking up 3.7 full round before casting such a stone. Never the less we were glad to avoid such a possibility when we were moved to work further north.

Some of our jobs were not all pleasant. Such as the camp or depot site at Dalmally set in a wide expanse of boggy ground where a visit to the pub was an experience all on its own. It was a large timber shack, possibly like a community hall, but had no furniture whatsoever with no sign of a counter or beer pumps or barrels. It was only when a local appeared, clad in his kilt and sporran, so we decided to see what he would get up to.

His actions were simple but surprising, he went to a hatch in the middle of one wall with a small shelf and placed his money thereon and tapped the hatch then stood with his back to the wall. The trap opened - the money went in - the trap shut - then it opened again - a glass tot appeared and the trap shut. After downing his drink he went through the same procedure and then departed. It was obvious, we must follow the same pattern and did but this time it was not a tot that appeared but a rosy bearded face that glared at us momentarily - the trap shut - opened and a pint made an appearance. It took some time before we all had a glass in our hands.

Another job was a new hutted camp on a hill on the side of Loch Fyne but in the middle of winter. There was no mess room so you had to stumble up and down steps from and to our barrack hut by which time our breakfast which started fairly hot was definitely not when we ate it.

A further trial of our ability was a forty eight hour participation in an exercise. Pretending to land from Loch Fyne at Strachur on the east side of the Loch immediately opposite the winter camp job, our instructions were to provide road maps, not necessarily dead accurate, with some contours to show something of the hill features. This could only mean plane tables - ray and With odd shots into the be remembered no one told us off. So we must have provided all that was required.

One particular effort did not involve the whole section, it was just "Geordie" McBain and myself. We had to be on a specified section of foreshore at Largs, on the Firth of Clyde, by 5 a.m. after travelling from Dalmeny. We were somewhat puzzled - the instructions were for us to board a ship and yet here we were on a gently sloping shore with no jetty, no quay, what next? The answer became very clear as a very large ship hove out of the morning mist and made straight for us. To all intents and purposes it was going to run aground and so it did. As it did so - enormous bow doors opened - ramps went down and vehicles came trundling out. We were watching the very first tank landing ship and our purpose was to show that the Skipper was correct in his contention that the ship was ten feet longer than shown on the ships plans also that his water supply tanks were 35% less capacity than indicated.

As the ship would continue its exercise of landing off and on to various landfalls around the firth we had to become members of the ship's crew for that duration and could put away the rations we had brought with us.

That arrangement definitely had our approval for the food there was really something. On queuing at the galley one received a plate with steak larger than it and the vegetables had to be parked on the top of it while at other meal times the bread was white and fluffy like the French bread.

Measuring the ship's length was a little awkward because of the deck houses and gear but proved the skipper was right. The water tanks were a different matter, they were below the main deck and as the ship was still cruising we had to be bolted down after descending through a manhole to the space with three feet of headroom below between the keel and the deck. Although rather claustrophobic we soon had that done after checking several times to make sure because we would rather not go down there a second time and once again he was correct.

We could not return to shore until that particular cruise was over so enjoyed a sort of holiday while doing a few odd jobs for the skipper round the ship before returning to Largs.

After I had enjoyed a week's leave - returning to Dalmeny on the 19th July - the Section moved again on detachment to Bothwell, south-east of Glasgow first, and then to Bishopbriggs on the north side.

All this was related to more A.A. defences of the city but this time included more radar. The section accommodation consisted of a large comfortable wooden hut of the social club type and stood in an extensive parking area. Bill Cutmore was not concerned with vehicle parking but thought this large area the very ideal for P.T. so had us out in gym shorts, vest and shoes before start of work each morning.

The weather being pleasant no one really objected - especially when a young lady on the balcony of a house backing on to our area kept us company in time with our exercises. The instructor with his back to the vision - clad in little or nothing wondered why we were not paying him much attention.

From there, after paying a visit to the H.Q. at Dalmeny, the work took us north to Oban - to fix odd coastal gun sites on various sea-facing peninsulas - one being "Rubha Garbh-Aird" and the first to occupy our energies so our "camp" was situated in Lochnell House nearby. It was a fine typical Scottish house of the Victorian era built adjoining a small ancient ruined castle. It belonged to the Campbell's and apparently had a curse upon it from the McDonalds of Glencoe to burn down every seventh year. In fact the Laird had secured a ban on any aircraft passing overhead to prevent such a chance of starting a fire.

So far, little mention has been made of our Section officer apart from at the beginning when he seemed to be a vague figure in the background. That, he no longer was - and certainly not shadowy but very much in evidence and it was very much a pleasure working under his command. We felt much more involved with him and in the Section generally.

Lochnell House itself had never burnt down although it must have been about 100 years old but the castle had. Secure in the middle of the ground floor, at the bottom of a spiral staircase was a small room with no windows and one door being used as a telephone exchange for the battery on Rubha. It was manned all twenty-four hours by two men who never ventured out after dark. We were intrigued as to why? I found out on the first night as I drew the short straw. It had been decided by all members of the section that to have a full guard on would upset the work programme the next day, be better to have one man on all night and let him have the following morning off. The kitchen, with a nice large fireplace, was to be the guard room just off the stone-flagged passage-way from the back door to the "little room" and had a big cooking range and a large wooden bread-making bin complete with a wooden lid which was about four feet long, two feet wide and high. Once supplied with a table, chair, fuel and food I was ready for the night. By 10.30 all had settled down so I made a circuit of the premises, lit the fire, made some tea and thus prepared for anything that might happen. At least, so I thought. Midnight came and went so the next circuit was made and as I sat there began to think of the spooky stories the two gunner telephonists had told us. Then I realized I had company, two rats appeared, took a long look at me and wandered round the kitchen so I threw the broom at them. At that they scattered but came back to sniff the broom so I considered it better to live and let live but before I could say that about six or seven more appeared. Apparently the bread bin was the object of their attention for they just chased each other round and over the bin. At about 12.30 a rattling noise was coming from the wall behind me. It sounded like a rat moving along a passage way inside the wall and each direction was moving a stone backwards and forwards. This was most intriguing but with my nice fire and food was not bothered except when the clock showed 2.00 and all my little friends disappeared and I was suddenly cold so much so that when I tried to warm my hands at the fire could feel no heat at all. This began to alarm me but thought it might be the psychological effect of the tales but then heard sounds of foot steps. Some one with soft shoes was coming into the house from the back door. I then thought that a person had performed a necessary function and was returning and expected him to call in. I listened carefully when he did not but I could hear the sound of a fabric like taffeta of a woman's dress. After a while the footsteps came back and went out of the back door. At which moment all my little friends were back playing and I was warm again. That did not seem to be the reaction to the funny tales. I then decided to leave any exterior inspection until daylight.

Another tale told by the telephone lads was of a visit by someone with large clumsy boots, they thought it was a lad from the battery who went up the spiral stairway to the room above and clumped around and then left the building. On contacting the battery by phone it transpired that no one was sent from the battery.

Arrangements were made for men to be at each end door of the room above them when "clumsy boots" arrived and on a given..... (line missing?)..... reason the telephone lads never came out after dark.

After hearing more of the tales some of our chaps while walking nearby decided to ask a local woman at a garden gate if there was any truth in these tales. After opening the conversation with her they put the question and she was about to answer when, looking up the road saw a figure approaching, at least a mile away, and immediately she fled indoors slamming the door. The conclusion reached was that she had been about to confirm that there were happenings at the house and castle. One thing we did learn was that a young woman, not a Campbell, had died in one of the early fires so I presumed that it

was she who walked past my door that first night. The trouble is that our training had never allowed for a situation like this.

After Oban my memory is a trifling blank and there are no dates available but Inverary is mentioned. Why, is not certain but it is in a sequence after another return to H.Q. and there is nothing in my memory of work in that area except the possibility of us being involved in an exercise. Placing this exercise into a time scale has always been difficult but features about it spring to mind when on the first night it rained like mad and we had no shelter except under the trucks. My awakening was accelerated by a pressure on my face from my gas cape being full of water.

While in that field a local grocer sold us some bread, bacon and tomatoes so on the next stop we cooked them. It was necessary to think quickly when Mr. Kelsey asked about the pleasant smell and I had to say that we were "living off the land".

The end of 1941 was approaching fast with winter beginning to show in the chill winds but it does lead to the visit to Dunbar and Berwick-on-Tweed. The purpose does come to mind easily but there were a few coastal batteries newly placed and sited to cover likely beaches considered suitable for invasion by Adolf from Denmark or Norway. I am more inclined to think the effort was to think our services were needed to fix a new long range radar on a hundred foot tower. The range was apparently two to three hundred miles.

These radars were being installed all along the east coast and small group of McBain, one other and myself were sent to Aberdeen to lodge with troops at Fort Torry and to do all that was necessary to fix the new one there. There was a little trouble with the levels coming from an O.B.M. a mile away but that was soon resolved. Soon everything was finished except for one essential long range and bearing point. Sea fret was obscuring it no matter what time of day we reached the station, even when we got there at dawn. Being concerned with the delay I phoned the Company hoping to get Mr Kelsey but was put onto Major Harris, and I can still hear him thumping his desk as he said "I don't care if it takes a day - a week - a month - or a year, you will finish it. So we did stay another week. Travelling further north to Lossiemouth we discovered that the tower there would not be started for some time and even the actual position had not been decided. That meant a return to Company H.Q. at Dalmeny.

While at Dalmeny we began to have "war games" to toughen us up - for what? We asked. The work kept us tough enough. This energetic pastime involved the local Home Guard and the R.A.F. Regiment on aerodrome defence and resulted in exciting "battles" in village centres and round aerodrome perimeters using much blank ammo with the throwing of "bombs" of stew tins full of sand with a length of safety fuse. The Company printers got taken prisoners by the Home Guard on one "do" but they produced a hidden pistol at the right time and turned the tables on the guard, thereupon escaping taking some prisoners with them.

One training episode utilised a fifteen hundredweight as a tank and the class was being trained in the use of a "sticky" bomb as an anti-tank weapon. Everyone was instructed that on the final approach to the "tank" the metal cover of the glass bomb was not to be removed in the interest of economy. However one bod did remove it and with great enthusiasm smashed the glass on the side of the truck and vigorously rubbed the sticky mess onto the truck. All in the vicinity vanished including the driver bearing in mind the instructors comments on what would happen. All waited for the bang but it did not occur. So we all ventured out - it transpired that the primer in the handle had been removed so we all breathed a sigh of relief except the driver who was demanding "who is going to get this mess off my truck?".

Leith on the north east corner of Edinburgh and adjacent to the docks became our next training area for street fighting. After getting a great deal of instruction that dwelt heavily on the safety factor we began the exercise by throwing plastic grenades (69)? At bedroom windows across a street from a doorway. These grenades had a screw cap on the bottom which when removed revealed a tape wound round and attached preventing a lead ball from moving. The idea was that as the grenade was thrown the tape unrolled allowing the ball to detonate the bomb. In most cases the think just blew the case to duct but the lead ball could still prove dangerous as Mr. Kelsey found out as while sheltering in a doorway one came across the road at high velocity and ran across an area of tightly stretched khaki - must have burnt somewhat. The next event was to repeat the series with the No. 36 grenades and for that purpose some of us sheltered in the house which was being bombed. Having settled down on a floor by a front window I waited for the first bomb but while doing so realized there was quite a draught on my right leg and found a large hole in the wall and as I looked the No. 36 arrived but bounced off the wall and rolled along the road and into my sight. Very gently it rolled down beside the kerb before going bang. The following evening it was decided to hold a night event with some sections defending others attacking. We were in the building when the attackers let off smoke bombs and one of us did likewise resulting in total blindness for all. Getting out of the place with many floorboards missing was almost a disaster but luckily no one got hurt but many were sick.

Moving well into 1942 the Company suddenly up sticks and moved to Peebles about twenty five miles south of Edinburgh but there seemed to be no logical reason why as we were quite happy at Dalmeny. The place had become our "home". A moderate amount of work was carried on there but not with the same intensity. More effort went into physical education and we even played a few games of seven-a-side rucker in the field alongside the parade ground, much to Mr. Kelsey's approval, he being a Cambridge Blue. It was becoming obvious that all this was leading up to something. Some obscure purpose was in the minds of the Gaffers was obvious when a series of events took place.

One was the intensification of physical training like both Topo Sections clambering up very steep Scottish hills with heavy weights in our packs, the other, a little later, when leave was dished out, not in the usual ones and twos but in batches. As many as half of each of the Topo sections were going together.

In the hills, after having been up and down a couple of these menaces we crawled up the last one on our hands and knees and after a gasping rest were shown how to assemble a cordtex net (F.I.D.) which was laid over one or two land mines which had been somebody's load up the hills. Next - we were to lie with our heads towards and behind a stone wall. There was an almighty bang we all jumped and lumps of the wall came crashing down - fortunately only landing on one or two of us with only minor injuries. It was plain that somebody or other wanted us to get used to these nasty bang things should it ever Occur that we might even be in such a vicinity.

As the days went by lectures were given about our work and so on, we even practiced sun and star shots actually getting pretty good at it. With the weather being quite reasonable night work was pleasant but also we knew we had the next morning off duty.

Once the section complement was restored with returned leave members several small parties were made up in groups of fours with an NCO in charge and were sent off to local farmers in the area round Peebles to help gather in the harvest. Being in Scotland the harvest could only be oats or barley.

As one might expect the weather promptly turned to rain and with that the job of following behind the reaper and binder stooking the stooks could hardly be worse. We, in my section, were housed in a cottage just down the lane from the farmhouse and although we had the means of making tea all the food was supplied by the farmer's wife at the farmhouse. Porridge was for breakfast each morning and it was surprisingly good and after that off to the fields we went. Gloves were supplied by the farmer but in the wet they only lasted a day or so - the stooking was extremely boring but it got done, I think the anticipation of the open air lunch of bannock and cheese with plenty of tea and the evening meal in the farmhouse of plain but real cooked food was what made up for it all.

The farmer paid us about a pound a week over and above the army pay but also had to pay the army for each soldier.

At the end of the two weeks of hard work we considered a pint or two had been well and truly earned also it meant our return to Coy. H.Q. The land girl was invited to come with us even though it would mean a long walk along a railway line of four miles. On reaching the village found it so crowded with troops engaged in pursuit of a similar pastime it was impossible to even find a pint. All the pubs had sold out their quota so we had to retrace our steps farmward.

The return to the Company opened our eyes - many more people were on leave and those of us who could drive were allocated the vehicles of drivers on leave so that in the event of a vehicle being required somewhere else it could be moved there. The large truck I inherited was normally driven by a short slightly built Lancastrian who I had seen changing gear as easily as I would in my Austin Seven. The truck was a Scammell with a roof to the cab and no windscreen while behind was a large cabin that could be opened out housing a massive print machine - in other words - a print trailer. Not only that, hitched behind, it had a 350 amp generator on a trailer, the engine of which was larger than the Scammell engine.

After a careful start, with a companion to help me to keep track of other people on the road, we managed to get the thing moving but without its generator. I found my greatest problem was changing gear. I could not emulate the real driver but had to stand up and use both hands on the gear lever. Still, by the time the Scammell "owner" came back I could even reverse the thing and he was most pleased that (a) it was still in one piece (b) had not been taken and loaded on a ship or such.

All this was causing the word "embarkation" to become a much used speculation so when the following events happened it became very positive, at least to our minds but nothing official was said.

First, all our Chevrolet 15 cwt trucks were called in and exchanged for Bedfords which, unlike the Chev's were equipped with small aero screens much to the drivers' disgust. They were far from new and it was thought we had been given a load of junk, but the checking by the M.T. section showed they had been completely rebuilt as their later dependability showed. Secondly was the order to fully load all vehicles, lower the hoods for lashing down and prepare them for, "yes, you heard" embarkation.

My wise move was to include my own camp bed in the full load of the section's H.Q. truck.

With the loss of the vehicles all future movement in the Peebles area was somewhat restricted, so much was made of lectures to occupy our time. There was some evidence of our destination from the health talks when they dealt with “nasties” in hot countries. Of course, our minds were endeavouring to think of a likely place we could be sent to. So ‘hot Countries could not mean Scandinavia nor very likely to be Europe, assuming we would be leaving Scotland.

Many letters got written in those last few days - time dragged - we knew little of Peebles or the folks there as our stay had been fairly short and much of the events occupied our attention. So speculation was digging away at our minds - was this to be the ‘big adventure’ or was it not?

Chapter Five

November 1942

It must have been about the 8th November when our journey from Peebles to the Clyde began. There was nothing particular about the train trip but there was much being thought about by the lads of 518. This was very much out of the ordinary but everyone was fairly quiet - wondering what was to befall us - news had filtered through about something happening in North Africa - talk about “Monty” the Eighth Army - Alamein - Rommel being pushed back - so the guess was that we might get involved somehow - but it certainly gave us a reasonable supposition as to our likely direction of travel.

On reaching the “open” sea at Gourock there - before our very eyes - was a flotilla of large passenger ships anchored offshore so it was very evident we were in for a long trip - and not a cross-channel type either.

Some of us had experience of Army transportation by sea previously to the Dunkirk incident but almost all the others had only seen the odd ferry or two - so clambering up the side gangway of this massive great “boat” they became excited as a lot of kids on a Sunday-school outing.

After exploring as far as we were allowed or even further - we stowed our kit - rigged our hammocks - note the navy type reference - for those who wanted them and claimed a little floor space for those who did not. A little later each section received a lecture by our respective officers which did not, at that time, reveal all - at least not to our satisfaction. The weather was clear but overcast and not particularly cold so we all would have liked to get up on deck for a look-see but our first meal was about to be put before us and two members of each table were appointed to collect same. The cabin was about 20ft x 20ft and was furnished with three tables lying parallel with benches either side to sit 22 men at each, with a reasonable space from them to the door wall. When we set about getting beds ready although some people were in hammocks floor space was at a high premium so one had to take what could be found which included under or on the tables.

As the two delegated hands fetched our first tea up came the anchors and our “boat” set sail. This resulted in a rapid disappearance of the meal as we were told we could go “up top” for a short and last view of Scotland we had got to like very much. Clearing Dunoon off to our right we passed between the tip of the Isle of Bute and the Great Cumbrae Island and on to leaving the Isle of Arran off to starboard and Ailsa Craig to port swinging round the Mull of Kintyre to pass north of Ireland into the Atlantic.

It was going to be a long time before we would see the shores of our homeland again. As the convoy moved into lines as it sailed into the Atlantic what we noticed most was the absence of any naval escort. From newspapers and such there much said about convoys and escorts and the battle against U-boats consequently we expected the same. The wise ones made murmurs of the escort being over the horizon but later it transpired that, being a fast convoy, no escort would be required. Such information was not accepted as being reassuring.

The first day was pleasant and a boat drill organized, it was almost entertaining as it consisted of attending on a stairway for 30 minutes. In all it took 45 minutes to reach our boat station and as the sea was, in nautical terms, beginning to ride and many made a hasty retreat to the ‘head’ or loo. Later that night we began to appreciate a considerable change in the weather conditions and, down below, where all dead lights over the portholes were fastened down tight, no lights to attract U-boats, the claustrophobic atmosphere did not mingle with seasickness very well for those affected. Our ‘nice’ boat for all those unfortunates was not a nice ‘boat’ any more.

The ship, the “Strathallen”, was starting to dive-twist-climb and turn constantly without a let up. We were, by dawn, in a full Atlantic gale. There were now very few of the “Sunday school outing” lot on their feet and the 22 per table was reduced to 6 only. It should be noted that those 6 rose honourably to their duty to dispose of the other sixteen rations in a suitable manner which did not necessitate throwing them over the side.

John and I found that by creeping along certain passages, in the officers’ quarters, they being rather ill, we could reach the after deck under the stern gun, and could do it in less than the boat drill time. First

