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2888 Field Squadron RAF Regiment

Chapter 1

We were a large family of 11 children, 6 boys and 5 girls 9 of whom survived. I was the 8th but there are only 2 of us left. Of the 6 boys, 5 saw service in the Second World War. Two of my older brothers were Regular soldiers. The eldest, John joined the Royal Scots Greys, a Scottish horse Regiment in 1929 as he was very fond of horses having worked with them on the land from when he left school at the age of 14.

Ephraim the next oldest brother to me joined the Royal Engineers in 1936. He was in China when the War broke out and when on their way back home, they had got as far as Gibraltar, the ship's Captain had orders for to turn round and go back to the Suez Canal, where Ephraim joined the 8th Army known as the Desert Rats. He took part in every attack by the different Generals and never got a scratch. He went through Sicily being one of the first off the boat so he said, not getting a scratch. Then, into Italy where he was wounded the first day. A bullet went right through him. He was sent back to the Middle East for recuperation, and then back to England. He had risen through the ranks to be a Company Quartermaster Sergeant. He had a very bad accident after the War, which meant his discharge from the Army. After all that, he died with cancer. One of my younger brothers, Philip joined the Royal Navy in 1942, and served in many areas including D-Day, when mine sweeping in the Channel.

My youngest brother, Samuel joined the Royal Engineers in January 1945. He had hoped to join the R.A.F. as he had many flying hours put in when serving with the Air Cadets, but at that time they did not want any more air crew. He rose to the rank of sergeant in less than one year as he could do blue print drawing etc. in the building industry.

I have been asked by my family to record my memories of World War II when serving with the R.A.F. and 2775 L.A.A. Sqdrn R.A.F. Regiment in Northern Ireland and 2788 Field Sqdrn R.A.F. Regiment overseas.

When it became known that all men up to a certain age group had to register on at their local exchange to be conscripted into the armed forces. This was in the early summer of 1939 when it was quite obvious to all concerned that in less than 25 years war seemed once again inevitable against Germany.

The age groups of those who had to register were given out regularly in the news bulletins on the radio, and also in the daily newspapers. The first of these men to be called up was known as the Militia and later on they were called Conscripts.

I was now coming up to the age of 19 and as they started calling up those in the later age brackets first, I knew then that I would not have to register for some time, although it would become inevitable in the end.

Time seems to fly by especially when you are not looking forward to what the outcome of your mission might be. However eventually I heard through the post that I had to report to my local labour exchange, which at that time was Tidworth, to sign on. At that time I was living with my parents in a small village called East Everleigh in the county of Wiltshire which was about 5 miles from Tidworth. This was duly done, and I was asked which of the services I preferred to join. I had seen enough of army life when working in the barracks at Tidworth, this being the H.Q.

of the Southern Command, so that did not appeal to me at all. I had never had any feelings towards the navy, so I decided to join the R.A.F. Several weeks went by and then I was notified that I had to report to Salisbury for a medical examination. This was done, and I was passed out as A1 fit for any duty.

The next thing was I had to report to Cardington in Bedfordshire for a trade test to see which branch I was suited for, and was classed as an aircraft hand General Duties. This was in the late summer of 1940. I was issued with my service number which was 1428347, never to be forgotten.

Several weeks went by, and then I was notified that I had to report to Padgate in Lancashire on June 18th 1941. We were to be based under canvas during the time that we were doing our six-week drill instruction, and after passing out to be posted to our various stations.

My mother had fixed up for a taxi to take me to Ludgershall station which was our nearest point of departure, but it never turned up so I had to start out on foot. Luckily a car came along and picked me up and took me to Andover railway station. I arrived later in the day at Padgate where there were lorries waiting for us as there were several hundred new recruits to be transported to this tented camp. The first night, we were all put in wooden huts sleeping on bunk beds, and the next day kitted out with all our various equipment.

The weather was very hot indeed which could not have been better really, as this was going to be a very different lifestyle to what I had been used to. We had to wash in the open air where wooden benches had been erected in galvanized bowls and cold water to shave in which did not meet with our approval. Red tape and very strict discipline was much in evidence and only the thought of physical training which I enjoyed made life a little easier.

One day we were promised that there would be no training which came as nearly a shock to all as we could not believe our luck and wondered what was on the end of it. We had to collect packed lunches at 8.30 am, and were then transported by lorries to a farm some miles out from the camp where we had to go pea picking for the rest of the day. Our fingers had got quite sore after about six hours of doing that, and the reward we had from the farmer was 6d, 2½p now. I will not put down in writing what most of the lads said what he could do with his tanner, as they were called then.

The first big occasion that we looked forward to was pay day. This was on a Friday every second week. Wooden tables were erected in a marquee, and the clerks and paying officer sat on chairs behind the tables. You were paid in alphabetical order according to your surname and when that was called out, you had to reply 'Sir' and say your last three numbers of your service number, salute the paying officer, take your pay, salute the paying officer again, and then ponder in amazement what you were going to do with £1 that had to last you for two weeks. Most of this was spent in the N.A.A.F.I. on tea and cakes.

The six weeks of initial training soon passed by, and we were asked where we would like to be posted to, as though that would have made any difference to the places that we had been already allotted to. There were several hundred of us there, and we were all split up and sent to various destinations. I think we must have been about the unluckiest party of the lot, having been sent to a small aerodrome at Newtownards in Northern Ireland, about twelve miles from Belfast. The living conditions consisted of mostly nissen huts and concrete billets. The washing facilities were some half mile from the camp, using galvanized bowls and all cold water—not very nice for shaving purposes. The cookhouse was situated near by, and you had to march up

the road at all times in groups of not less than ten men to get to these facilities—not very nice when it was raining.

There were only a few aircraft on the camp consisting of Lysanders and Boulton Paul Defiants. We were right on the backwash of the sea, and only a high bank separating us from the water. We were known now as Ground Defence, doing guard duties on different buildings and aircraft. The guard was mounted at 6 o'clock in the evening until 8 o'clock in the morning, and then you were allowed a half day off.

After a few weeks of this routine, we were all sent to Ballymena for a 6 week course with the army which was with the Royal Ulster Rifles. We were billeted in wooden huts and slept on double bunk beds. We had to learn the Lewis Gun, the Vickers Gun, the Tommy Gun, and how to handle hand grenades, go on long route marches, and field maneuvers.

The soccer season had by now started which was more to my liking and it was not too long before I was getting out of duties through this that I should have been doing. We could not have leave very often, and only a few were allowed to go at different intervals. Lots were drawn when this was due, and my lot was for the middle of February 1942, so I had to wait several months.

You were allowed 14 days leave plus three days travelling time. The route that we had to travel by was from Larne to Stranrear by boat, and then by train to our destination. The Irish sea was heavily mined, but there were special lanes open for this type of shipping then sent on a three weeks gunnery course to the Isle of Man having to go through the same routine as before plus aircraft recognition. The route taken for this journey was from Belfast to Heysham, then down to Fleetwood by road, and then on to the Isle of Man. It was quite an enjoyable course, being billeted in private accommodation, and the food was first class.

When the course was completed, we were then called Ground Gunners, and a badge was issued with the words G.G. on it which was sewn on the sleeve of the battle dress. It was said that the army did not approve of this because it was very much like the badge denoting the rank of a Warrant Officer.

I was put into what was called a Light Anti Aircraft flight doing 24 hours on duty, and 24 hours off duty which actually was a very good number as the guns were taken in at dusk, so we could have a full nights sleep.

The Flt Sergeant whose name was Lane, had also told us that when it came to rain we could take the guns back in the building where we were operating from. This was our only alibi when unknown to us the C/O of the station decided to inspect all the anti aircraft positions around the camp. During his inspection it had began to rain, so we took our guns in. When he got to our positions we were not there. The next thing we knew, we were being put on a charge for deserting our post when on active service. If found guilty, this meant quite a spell at Carrick Fergus. This was a dreaded place that no one wanted to end up in, equal to the glass house in the army. There were four of us in each gun position, and we were all scared stiff as to what the outcome would be. This was the first time that any of us had been put on a charge. The next morning soon came round, and we were ordered to put our best uniforms on. The four of us had agreed to tell the same story of how we had been given permission by Flt Sergeant Lane to take the guns inside when it came on to rain, we had no other reason.

Our hats were taken off as we went through the door being marched in to the C/O. The charge was then read out of abandoning our post when on active service. We were then asked if we had

anything to say, the reason being given as stated. I was then dismissed, and had to wait outside until the other three had been through the same procedure. Flt Sergeant Lane was then called inside, and was asked by the C/O had he given these orders to us. His answer was 'Yes Sir'. He was then given a right going over by the C/O and told that this would not happen again. We were then marched back in front of the C/O, given a good lecturing, and the case was dismissed. What feelings of relief of how we felt at the time. Flt Sergeant Lane came along to us after and said that he could have dropped us all in the cart had he wished, but he said I could not see you four chaps going down the line, I would sooner have a good rollicking myself. He was a very nice fellow, and they were few and far between as I got to find out later on.

We were now known as 775 L.A.A. Sqdrn Ground Defence.

The month of February came round at last for my leave after having been away for 8 months. I was very pleased to see my family once again and my old work mates, and those 14 days seemed to fly by.

It was during this period that the Germans were moving down through Italy, and the Baltic States and Italy, being their Ally, soon dominated all of this area. The desert campaigns with the 8th Army ebbed forward and backwards, neither side gaining much ground for long periods at a time. The Germans had now started a new approach in their military operations by using paratroops in the thousands which proved to be very successful taking their objectives by surprise, the major one being Crete. This in turn caused great concern in the War Office because Crete was one of our main bases for operations in the Middle East. New decisions had to be made of how to counteract this new threat to think that aerodromes could be taken so easily.

A memo was sent out to all R.A.F. stations that all Ground Defence Sqdrns had to be reorganized and formed into what became known as the R.A.F. Regiment on the 1st of February 1942. Intensive army training had to be undertaken by all concerned which meant to us that we had to start all over again back to square one.

A certain Colonel McNamara was appointed to be chief of Staff in Northern Ireland, so everyone had to come under his jurisdiction. His first orders were that there was to be a month's intensive training course which was to take place in the hills around Londonderry, and that we were to be based at Eglinton under canvas just outside of Londonderry. He also said that wherever you were stationed at, you had to route march to Eglinton, making your own arrangements for billeting on the way. This caused a little friction between some of the Sqdrns, because some were only a few miles away, and others were over 120 miles away. This meant that they had to start out nearly a week in advance marching about 20 miles a day. Medical teams were set up along the way dealing mostly with foot complaints and there were plenty of those. Our Sqdrn had to march about 100 hundred miles, and I did not look forward to that one little bit.

Anyway, luck was on my side because about a week or so before we were due to start I had a very heavy cold in my chest, which was very unusual for me to get, and I had to report to the sick bay. After being examined by the Medical Officer, I had a temperature of over 100 and was immediately admitted into the sick bay with bronchitis. There was also one of the Sqdrn Corporals admitted as well, so we were not total strangers.

The medical orderly in charge of the ward knew about this route march taking place on the following Saturday, and suggested that the three of us had a little conference. He said 'surely you two do not want to go on that route march do you after being in here several days.' So we

said 'certainly not' but how can we get out of it. 'Well I'll tell you what I will do providing that you don't tell anyone', which we agreed to. Then he said, 'on Thursday night when I come round to take your temperature, I will put it up just enough for the Medical Officer to notice it, and then he will give you another extra day, and on no account will he let you go on that route march.' All this was carried out to perfection, as he had suggested. When we were discharged on the next day, we had to go by the Sqdrn all formed up ready to set off on this march, and as you can guess there was some very unpleasant remarks made, and it was a job to keep a straight face knowing the circumstances of how we had got out of it. We were most grateful for the help that we had received from the medical orderly. We were given a weeks light duty, which meant that we did not have to do anything at all, and on the following Friday we went by train to Eglinton, and were picked up by transport to take us back to where this camp was in a large meadow under canvas.

We were each given a palliasse which we had to fill with straw and a cloth pillow which was also filled with straw. The tents were round, having duck boards for the base, six men in each tent. Reveille was at 6 am, P.T. at 6:30 am, breakfast at 7 am, and the first parade at 8.30 am. The food was terrible which was cooked in big urns outside fuelled by wood and coal. Big queues soon formed in no time, so by the time you got it, it was all cold. To add to the misery, the weather was atrocious—rain nearly every day. No wonder they call it the Emerald Isle. There was an R.A.F. band in attendance and they used to play us out each day on to the bogs and hills around Londonderry. We stayed there until about 4 o'clock having taken packed lunches for our mid-day meal, and then we had to march back home again. We went to Londonderry at week ends if we were not on duty, and on one of these occasions we went round the docks. There happened to be an American submarine berthed at the time, and after having a chat with some of the crew, we were invited to have a look over the submarine which was very interesting.

The month's course soon went by, and after a large parade where we were given a farewell talk by the C/O, we made our way back by train to our various stations. All Sqdrns now had the figure 2 put in front of their previous Sqdrn numbers so we were known now as 2775 Sqdrn R.A.F. Regiment. The uniform that we had to wear was just the same as the army, army boots, and khaki spats fixed around the ankle, and khaki battle dress but we had flashes with R.A.F. Regiment on which was sewn on to each shoulder. We also had an Air Force forage cap, and in some cases, an R.A.F. blue Beret and an R.A.F. blue overcoat..

The summer was now passing by, and it came round my turn for my next leave, which was in August 1942. This of course was always looked forward to which seemed to go by so quickly.

We used to go to church most Sunday nights, when not on duty in Newtownards. The reason for this being that there was always tea and cakes served free to all servicemen afterwards, and being rather hard up at times, this was much appreciated. I can well remember one Sunday night in particular because it was their Harvest Festival Thanksgiving Service. There were lots of flowers and fruit which attracted different species of insects, and in no time I was stung in the neck by a wasp, which as you know can be quite painful, and that was on October 15th 1941. This date was recorded by my mother in her diary. She also kept nearly all of my letters which I wrote to her when in Northern Ireland. I still have all of them, totaling round about 70.

We used to go into Newtownards during the evening when not on duty and indulged in a couple of pints of what was called 'porter'. This was classed as seconds, the left overs from the Guinness which was quite good when you had acquired the taste for it. The price for this was 5d a pint, and if you could manage three pints you did pretty well, because it was quite potent.

There were quite a number of pubs in the town, and in most cases you stood around the bar. There was a small rail that went around the floor at the bottom of the bar about a foot out acting like an old fashioned fender which had about three inches of sawdust in which was used as a spittoon. This was not which one would call very hygienic when you were about to finish your last drink up when the chap next to you had rather a nasty chesty cough and decided to make the most of this spittoon. You just put your glass down and left.

Sometimes at the week end we went to the nice little seaside town of Bangor which was about 4 miles or so away. Although rationing was very much in evidence, a lot of food stuff found its way over the border the Republic, being neutral, and you were always sure of getting a good meal there, eggs, bacon, fried bread rolls with plenty of butter, and tea—all for 1/.

Now on this particular Sunday in late August 1942, we went for our breakfast as usual and for some unknown reason which was not the usual routine knowing that the food always good on a Sunday, we went over and read the menu for that day. I always used to like the soda bread as it was called, and the tea for that day seemed rather appetizing, so we decided that we would stay in camp and enjoy the fruits of this tea which was about 5pm and then go out afterwards. When we had nearly finished enjoying all that was available, and feeling very well satisfied, the silence was broken when over the tannoy system came an order that all of our Sqdrn was to report to the orderly room as soon as possible. This took us all by surprise especially on a Sunday, so we guessed that there was something special on. On the way back down to our billets, we called in to the orderly room where we were met by the adjutant who wanted the first 20 single men and several corporals whether they were single or not. We were told then that a full kit inspection was to take place at 6.15 pm, and when that was completed, we had to pack all of our belongings and be ready for to move off first thing next morning back to England. This I suppose was where fate stepped in, if one could call it that, because if we had not looked at the menu for that day, we would have been in Bangor as usual, therefore not knowing about reporting to the orderly room and having to stay on that camp for a longer period. We all were very pleased to think that we were on our way back home, so to speak, but to where we did not know. Early Monday morning, we were taken to Newtownards railway station and were soon en route for Belfast. From there we went by boat to Liverpool, and from there we went to Wilmslow in Cheshire which was a holding station for R.A.F. personnel, but for how long we did not know. I had several week end passes from Friday night until Sunday night so I was able to go home on each occasion, although I had to pay my own fare. You were only allowed two free travel warrants each year which was when you had your regular leave. The work rate was very minimal as to what we had been used to there being so many on the camp. You could see the details of what was taking place the next day by looking on the daily routine orders board, and on this particular day, I noticed that there was to be an assault course.

My first thoughts were how I could get out of this one having been doing this so many times in recent weeks which had got a bit boring. I had to think fast of how to dodge the column as we said. My luck happened to be in for once in a while because just recently I had noticed that one of my back teeth needed a little attention. This prompted me into reporting dental sick in great pain. You had to report sick and enter your name and details in the sick book by 7am, and then you were excused the first parade which took place at 8.30 am, and any other duties which might occur before 11 am. This was done correctly, and I reported to the dental sick bay. After being examined, the dental officer said that a filling was needed in that particular tooth which he would proceed to do. As soon as the drill started to work, the tooth cracked beyond repair which he said he was sorry about, but it now had to be extracted. This did not take too long, but

the pain which I had to endure for the next couple of days made me wonder if I had made the right decision in the first place. I could not eat anything, and to try and get some sleep was out of the question. I had to report back twice to the dental officer for to have it plugged, which must have learnt me a lesson for the future because this was early September 1942, and the next extraction took place May 10th 1991. A few weeks went by, and then with several more airmen, I was detailed once again to go to the Isle of Man, on a Twin Browning Machine gun course. This gun was used in the aircraft, but in future they were also going to be used as Light Anti Aircraft guns which we were to have later on.

Towards the end of October, all leaves were cancelled so we knew then that things were on the move. We were given orders to pack, and after dark on this particular day we boarded a train at Wilmslow, but to where we did not know. We eventually arrived at Liverpool and boarded what I suppose must have been a troopship called The Duchess of Richmond which we were told was of some 20,000 tones, and that there would be some 5000 troops on board. Once this had been completed, we set sail moving up the west coast arriving at the Clyde then down into Glasgow. Here we assembled up with many more troopships, and other ships of various sizes before heading out into the Atlantic ocean as dawn broke. This convoy was said at the time to have been the largest one ever to have set sail on the high seas. We sailed north for to start with, and then we veered left, and then due South. At this point no one knew of where our destination was to be. The conditions were not what one could call first class with so many troops on board and finding some place which you could call your own for a nights sleep which was usually on the floor. Also by now, most of the troops were sea sick and in no way could they get to the toilets which were overcrowded so I will leave it to your own imagination what things were like. We were all issued with life jackets which had to be carried at all times, and there were several alarms for life boat drill, where we had to go to a certain station in case of emergency. During the evening there was the occasional housey housey sessions which I think is called bingo now, and of course a game of cards, and a few drinks if the pocket allowed. The food was not too bad I suppose under the conditions at the time. Tripe seemed to be a favorite for the evening meal which was said to be a soother for to calm the stomach down. In all of my travels on the sea when going to and fro to Ireland etc, which at times could be quite treacherous, I was never sea sick, and this one was no exception either, but I did have a nasty attack of tonsillitis which did not go down too well I can assure you under such conditions. After we had been to sea about 11 days, as many as possible were mustered up on deck and given a little talk of where our destination was to be which was the invasion of North Africa. Part of the fleet would go to Casablanca, and the rest including our party would go on to Algiers.

Chapter 2

As we passed through Gibraltar under cover of darkness, we knew by now that we must be nearing our destination. We could see the lights of Tangiers brilliantly lit up as they too were neutral. By the next day we were well into the Mediterranean sea and so far we had not encountered any enemy activity. We made Algiers on the 12th of November 1942 at about noon, and I can remember quite well the smell of fruit consisting of grapes, oranges, and tangerines as the heat and breeze wafted the smell out to sea.

We anchored a little way out from the harbour where we stayed all night and luckily there was no enemy activity. We disembarked off the boat the next morning and were told that our destination was to be the aerodrome at Maison Blanche which was one of the largest dromes in

North Africa. Our kit bags were taken by lorry, but we had to march there which was quite a distance from Algiers in full marching order, small kit, steel helmet, gas mask, rifle, and fifty rounds of ammunition. We were given strict orders not to drink anything that was handed to us on the way in case of it being contaminated. We never heard this so to speak, and when stopping for a break, there was no shortage of wine being offered to us by the French people which helped us on our way, as it was becoming very hot for marching. We arrived later in the day at Maison Blanche and were taken into a huge hangar. After a makeshift meal we were told that this would be our base for a few days until things had got organised. We all had two blankets, but sleeping on a concrete floor with no pillow made one wonder what was to come. We were also told not to go outside the hangar that night because word had been picked up that enemy aircraft were due for a visit. Sure enough about 7.30pm we were being strafed by low flying aircraft. The advice given of not venturing outside of the hangar went unheeded by a young Irishman of the R.A.F. unit who we were attached to, and he paid the penalty, and was taken by our chaps next day to Algiers where he was buried.

The C/O soon had us out of this hangar on to the outskirts of the drome where it was a little bit safer, but a more permanent base was needed for all of the stores that were being handled at the time. Another base was soon found, however, which was on a farm nearly 20 miles from Algiers of several hundred acres. It comprised of oranges, tangerines, lemons and grapes. This place was ideal with huge barns in which the whole unit, including the Regiment lads, was housed. The R.A.F. unit that we were attached to was known as 131 A.S.P. (Air Stores Park). This unit supplied almost everything that was needed for every department even down to a shoe and boot repair section. All of this equipment came by sea and was unloaded from the ships all along on the sea front as quickly as possible in case of enemy air raids. This was one of our jobs for to collect all of these stores on articulated lorries that had 131 A.S.P. markings on them in large letters.

We were not overfed during this period and besides the equipment which was unloaded on the sea front, there were also tons of field rations unloaded as well. They were all marked with different code numbers as to what their contents were. We soon got to know the ones that contained tinned fruit, different tin puddings, chocolate and sweets, cigarettes, etc. so this was a golden opportunity that could not be missed. As soon as we had collected all of our own equipment, the lorry driver would pull along by the side of these rations and a quick half dozen boxes soon made their way on to the transport being used, and a hasty get away was soon made. We used to go several miles along the road and pull in where we used to go through all the contents that we wanted and give the rest to the French and Arab people. Wherever you seemed to stop along the road, the place seemed deserted, but in no time you were soon surrounded by some hungry children who no doubt had not tasted such luxuries for a very long time.

On one of these regular visits, there was what looked like tea chests which were how the tea used to come loose in the 1920s and 30s and no one seemed to know what these chests contained. They were sealed up very strongly with steel bands around each corner. Some army chaps were also there who also thought that there should be an investigation made as to the contents of these cases. On this occasion we had one of those big thornycroft lorries, and it was suggested that we get one up into the lorry and solve the problem. A crow bar was needed for this operation, which was soon found and in no time the mystery was solved. Once the steel bands had been removed and the outer case opened up, we came across a thick layer of straw which was packed in tight round a huge thick glass jar. At the top was a large cork bung and no

one as yet had any idea of what the contents were. We had to continue our mission which was getting quite serious; the bung was then removed, and it turned out to be none other than neat rum. This was enough evidence for the army lads who soon had a case for themselves. Now whether these army lads had spread the news around of their good luck, we never knew, but on our next visit as usual, no chests were to be seen at all.

The military police (Red Caps) were also in evidence now and had sealed off anything of importance, which put an end to our free loot. Once we had got back to our unit news soon spread around of our find and a night of merry making took place. What with wine and rum you did not know whether you were on your feet or your head. Most of the lads had by now made some sort of a bed with pieces of board which was around the packing cases, and hessian which was stretched across the board and nailed down firmly to the side. This made quite an adequate bed more comfortable than laying on the floor and we spent three or four months there until the whole of Tunisia was under Allied control.

We set up two positions with the Twin Browning guns, one by the entrance to the farm buildings where the stores were kept and one in the orange groves. We did a 24 hour guard around the buildings and gun positions, and then 24 hours off duty and 24 hours in reserve in which case you could not go out of the building. There were what we called liberty runs to Algiers on your day off duty which made a good break from the daily routine. A French farmer employed quite a number of Arabs who slept on the premises in what could be described as stables. Their bedding was straw and their weekly wage was 30 francs. We got 300 francs to the pound at that time. The nearest village was called El-Arba just over a mile out where there were several little shops and wine bars and also a bakery.

Every morning a small cart pulled by a pony with lots of what looked like whole meal bread arrived. The loaves, being flat, were nearly the size of a dinner plate. These Arab workers had to queue up by the side of a house occupied by a French family, and were handed one loaf each out through a window, this I suppose being part of their wages and this was their ration for the day. They used to go into the orange groves and eat this with oranges they took from the trees. We got quite friendly with some of them and gave them the rations that we did not want, also some cigarettes which they thought were wonderful. They in turn knew where the Jaffa orange trees were and would bring us back a regular supply. Some of them were so big that you had a job to finish them all at one go. We were issued with about five free cigarettes each day which came in handy for this bartering as I had never smoked.

The food was quite good considering the circumstances. We had had no bread since we left the ship in November, but we were promised some on Xmas day. We were living on army biscuits which in some cases needed a hammer to break them. It must have been a bit of a problem with those who had false teeth. All the water which we had to use for drinking cooking, etc. was brought in by a bowser, as they were called, which was also chlorinated. We could fill our water bottles from this tank. There was also a very large tap in the building where we slept which was used by everyone. Xmas day arrived, and we were given a slice of bread as promised as the mobile bakeries had arrived by now and from then on we had bread every day.

The 1st Army to which we were attached was making rapid progress into Tunisia, and the 8th Army was doing likewise along the whole front in Libya. It was only a matter of time before these two armies linked up. The port of Algiers came under constant attack from the German Air Force at night and this was heavily manned by heavy anti aircraft guns and also from the heavy guns

from the ships when they were in the vicinity. It was almost like Guy Fawkes night with all the tracer shells and searchlight batteries lighting up the sky.

We kept in touch with the outside world with an old radio set which one of the wireless operators had rigged up, and I well remember the speeches that Churchill gave which were a tonic to us all. Churchill came over to North Africa one day when we were on the drome at Maison Blanche, but for security reasons, nobody knew of his arrival. We did not see him, but we did see his plane when it took off again.

The weather by now was getting much warmer and the unit of 131 A.S.P. to which we had been attached was going to be disbanded as they were no longer needed, seeing that the North African campaign had ended with both the 8th and 1st armies meeting up round about the Gulf of Gabes some 100 miles or so south of Tunis. This meant that we were no longer needed for our duties, but to where our next move would be we did not know. First of all we were sent to a transit camp just outside Algiers which used to be the race course. We did not stay there too long though and were soon on our way heading for another aerodrome called Blida some 60 miles south of Algiers, once again under canvas on the outskirts of the drome.

Our duties here were to guard the aircraft doing a 24 hour guard, 2 hours on duty and 4 hours off duty. Sometimes we got up into the aircraft and had a good look round, and we used to sleep under the wings on the ground, that is if you could call it sleep. We were not allowed to go near the aircraft when they landed first thing in the morning until they had been checked out for security and safety measures. They were nearly all Lancasters which had been bombing Italy and any other target of importance in Southern Europe. They usually arrived about 8am in the morning having left England about 7pm the previous night, so they had rather a long night.

Some of the aircraft had been hit by shrapnel from the German anti aircraft guns and could only belly flop when landing. If they were air worthy they were then reloaded up with bombs and ammunition ready for the return journey. This all depended on what the weather conditions were like over the area which was going to be their target on the return journey.

I shall never forget watching them going round in circles waiting for all to be air borne before they took off heavily laden knowing that whatever their target might be for that night, it would be laid flat by the morning. We also knew that some of the aircrew would be lucky if they survived the return journey home intact.