

The Reverend E.W.C. Bale, 2788 Squadron, The RAF Regiment

At the age of 16 in August 1939 I joined the RAF as an Aircraft Apprentice to train as a Wireless Operator Mechanic at RAF Cranwell. We spent two years in learning Morse code, Semaphore, radio theory and practical servicing of aircraft radio equipment.

After experience of various aircraft, including fighters and Lancaster bombers, I was posted in May 1943 to 219 Nightfighter Squadron, equipped with Mk.10 radar to go out to North Africa in preparation for the landings in Sicily. The squadron was over-supplied with technicians just to get them overseas. So I was very much a spare and in August or September I was posted on to 2788 RAF Regiment Squadron, a unit which was equipped and trained to defend airfields. We had three flights of infantry, called gunners, a Support flight with mortars and I was in the Headquarters flight which consisted of clerks, an armourer, mechanical transport mechanics and three of us on wireless. We had three Morris armoured cars equipped with aircraft radios and the gunners carried army wireless sets that I had never seen before.

We were based at Hammamet for a few weeks before joining 205 Group, a bomber group equipped with Vickers Wellingtons—"Wimpys" to us. To my dismay I was given army boots, a Sten gun and route marched for days on end at Light Infantry pace because our commanding officer had been with the Ox & Bucks Light Infantry before transferring to the RAF Regt. I was allowed to fire my Sten gun once but felt like a fish out of water. I was an infantryman and I had no aeroplanes.

At Christmas we moved to Bizerta to await a ship to Italy. It was very cold, very wet with incessant rain; we could not erect tents for we might embark any moment. Everything was makeshift, the tea tasted of diesel and we slept where we could—I did well on the very narrow seat in the back of a US army lorry.

We boarded at New Year and found the warmth of our LST wonderful. There was even coffee on tap throughout the ship! We sailed in convoy to Naples, disembarked and drove in icy weather across mountainous country via Ariano Irpino to the Foggia airfields and found billets in a school in Orta Nova. There was little for me to do while the gunners did their guarding for the Wimpys.

With spring approaching we were summoned to move up nearer to the front line at Cassino. I gather that the idea was that we should wait for the breakthrough to happen whence we would proceed to Rome to take possession of the Luftwaffe HQ there. So we moved over to Naples, headed north up Route 6 to its junction with a road leading to Venafro. There we set up camp across the road from a US Unit with a beautifully kitted Mobile Signals Workshop. There we waited.

Wanting something to do one day, a Gunner Sgt. said he was going to take a Jeep up Route 6 to see what he could see. We were some 15 miles from Cassino. I joined him and we sped up the road, passing encampments of British, American and other units as we went. The US "Speedy II" Division was in the line. As we drove north, encampments gave way to shattered houses, little groups of graves and tanks sheltering out of sight alongside ruined cottages. It looked bleak. We came over a rise in the valley and suddenly could see in the distance the Benedictine Abbey on the top of the hill. We reckoned if we could see them, they could see us and decided

the time had come to turn back. The silence in our immediate vicinity, the rumble of distant guns, and the graves was all very awe-inspiring.

Then one day a third of the squadron was assembled to go nearer the front and I delegated myself to be the wireless man. We embarked in lorries, were taken up to Venafro where we turned north up the mountains. Dusk was approaching as we de-bussed on a hill top. We marched along a mountain top field, right under the barrels of heavy artillery which fired as we passed. I jumped out of my skin and took a while to calm down. Then began the descent along obviously newly prepared tracks down and down into the valley, occasionally passed by transport with windscreens lowered in case they reflected light and could be seen from the distant German hilltops. We got to the end of the slope and turned right into a small valley, a dead end with a few damaged houses on the reverse slope. A 25 pdr. Battery was across the valley. There we found tents, erected over shallow holes, meant to give us protection against artillery fire. Shortly after we arrived, the battery fired many salvos over our hill, but on ending I was surprised to see the gunners running for their lives to our side. And for good reason: there was immediately counter-battery fire and the whole valley was the target. I heard the screams of one wounded man who didn't make it, an unforgettable sound. They missed me though I got a hole in my greatcoat. Obviously the German 88 battery knew exactly where we were.

We were "in support". With nothing else to do I was invited to join a REME workshop servicing infantry wireless sets. There was a panic on. The 38 sets were not working and though the sets and the batteries were checked again and again no fault could be found. It could not be the interconnecting leads: there was nothing that could render them faulty. In desperation I took one apart and discovered that the one I had had been wrongly wired in the first place. I told them what I found and straight away we started checking them all and found most were faulty. They had been made in India. We set about rewiring them all and the REME folk made a great fuss of their RAF corporal. Even my CO commended me.

One night we were to receive the West Kents coming out of the line. I had a post at the top of a path and directed the tired men over to their rest place; they came in platoons, then in small groups. Then as dawn approached there came a bedraggled, tired little bunch with a tall man in the middle, carrying the Bren gun. (The Bren was an uncomfortable and heavy thing to carry: It had too many sharp corners.) As they came up to me I saw the tall man was the Padre.

After a week we changed places with another third of the squadron and were taken to a British "Bath Unit". This was a tent with pipes in its roof, sited by a river and equipped with a water pump. We undressed and were told to stand in the tent. A corporal shouted "Soap up, lads, wa'er on!" and down came this icy shower. Then "Wa'er orf" as we washed and a final "Wa'er on, rinse orf" as we got another icy shower. Then back into our kit.

Then the New Zealanders arrived and we found ourselves included in a very different atmosphere with generous rations, a more relaxed discipline and wonderful Maori music at a concert their battalion put on. All captains were called 'Pete' and the only commissioning was via the ranks and proving a man's worth in active service. Now our CO apparently said "It would be good for our men to have some experience in the line".

So it was my turn again, and again we were transported through Venafro up the mountains, but this time down the hill in our lorries for we were to march overnight across the Rapido valley. The truck came to a halt in a canyon, and as I leapt out I could see the Monastery as in a V sight

between the walls of the canyon. No sooner had my feet touched the ground than .88 fire arrived and we dived for cover round a small bend. My lorry was already ablaze. This is where we lost young 'Tommy' Atkins, one of our gunners. Don't ever tell me the Germans were not in the abbey. If they were not in it, then they were in its lea, using it as cover. It loomed as a threat. It was the only place from which we could have been seen.

In the lull we formed up, our guide arrived and in the darkness we set off along a narrow road across the valley. Suddenly we heard the tearing sound of approaching shellfire and we threw ourselves flat on the ground. As the salvo ended, I looked up to see our guide laughing. "That was a long way off, mates!" Sheepishly we got to our feet and marched on. At the next salvo, we all stood up, got showered in earth and saw our guide was flat on the ground. He got up, brushing himself down and said "You'll learn." We did. Obviously the enemy knew there would be men and supplies using these roads all night so he stonked us at regular intervals. I was aware often of an awful stench and realised it came from dead mules left at the roadside. Human remains would come later. We crossed the valley, turned up through a ruined Caira village and climbed the S-bends up the mountain called Cairo. Half-way up it, our HQ was in a cave and we found ourselves shelters where we could. Mine was alongside a low stone wall. Daylight came and we hid and slept when we could. We dared not move in daylight.

As night came we collected rations and set about our posts. The gunners were in large foxholes or sangars at intervals about the hillside and my job was to make sure each was in telephone communication with the HQ in the cave. It meant every night checking the wires. Often an outpost was out of touch, but the fault lay in the foxhole where the gunner had failed to make a good 'earth return' connection—a wire from the telephone to his bayonet stuck in the ground. It kept me creeping about at night, ducking occasional shellfire, being constantly challenged by whisper with the password for the night—something like the challenge 'Rice'; answer 'Pudding'. We were equipped with full webbing, steel helmets, boots with 'blakeys' (metal bits), rifle and Sten gun slings that rattled. Try as we might, we just clattered about the hillside. The Kiwis, however, sent their patrols through us wearing gym shoes, soft woolley hats, no harness but a grenade in each pocket, no slings in their weapons and they moved as silently as shadows. We were not trained or equipped for this.

This was an unforgettable experience. The constant apprehension, on the qui vive all the time, listening for the first sound of shellfire, looking out for any danger, ready to hit the ground, dive for cover. It transformed my feeling about darkness. The night was my friend, I could not be seen. I have never since dreaded the night. If I wake in the night I am comfortable and happy to lay and rest until day comes. But we got used to shelling, hearts thumping if it was close (little or no warning), but accepting it was normal if it was yards away.

Our hillside gave us a view, in daylight, over Caira village, Cassino town and on our same level the Benedictine Monastery. It loomed over everything. Then one day we heard the sound of large formations of aircraft and I saw the abbey destroyed by aerial bombardment. It was an unforgettable sight. I had mixed feelings. It was a beautiful place and people of faith had built it. But to us it was a threat and we were pleased to see it attacked. But I wondered—is this what mankind has come to? Is there not some better way? I believe the seed was sown there to lead me into the ministry for the Kingdom of God in later years.

A week later, exhausted, we made our way back across the valley to safety and eventually back to camp. This time we were taken to an American Bath Unit. This consisted of a lorry, with tents attached to the cab and the rear. We went into the front tent and undressed, putting our

personal things in a small black bag labelled with our names. Then we climbed up steps either side of the cab into a canvas corridor with hot, steaming water coming down from the top, little canvas pockets in the side for soap. As one man got off at the rear, another climbed up from the front. It was wonderful. We descended into the rear tent to find benches, tables with a radion going, talcum powder, towels, new fresh uniforms and our little bag of personal possessions. This was a different army.

I had one more trip up the line. I was aware now of Poles and Ghoums and Italian Alpini troops added to our cosmopolitan lot. At the end of our time our squadron transport came up and we moved to the right, crossed over wonderful German positions, beautifully furnished with carpets and looted cupboards etc. and moved up the road toward Atina. On the way we paused to liberate a hillside village (was it Belmonte?) where I was given charge of two German soldier prisoners and received the plaudits of excited villages, which we really did not deserve. Graciously, we had been given a very quiet sector. Eventually, by degrees, we passed Rome to the airfields at Tivoli, where we came under 244 Wing equipped with Spitfires. With them we moved on through Civitavecchia to sail for Corsica and then to the invasion of the South of France, to land on the beaches near S.Raphael. But that's another story, for by that time I had been posted back to the real Air Force, to 105 Mobile Signals Unit.

I was not in the centre of the fighting in the town and I am grateful for that was not my calling. But I saw it from a distance and I have tremendous admiration for the men who were in the thick of it. I am grateful to be included in their association.