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Extract from Tom's memoirs – 'A 20th century Shropshire Lad'. Both Tom's parents died within a week of each other and Tom, aged 19, had little time to decide his future. This extract follows Tom's years as a Grenadier.

Part One.

At this stage it was complete confusion as to what my future was to be, it seemed impossible that I could cope on my own alone although the rent was not too high for our cottage. After much careful thought it was decided that it would be best if I joined the Army so this I did. I was staying with my sister at Mitcham and proceeded to Whitehall recruiting office to enlist but not before I paraded up and down the street several times still debating whether I was doing the right thing. Eventually I did pluck up courage and entered the building having decided to join the Grenadier Guards. I already had a relation in the Regiment and had seen him on leave in his scarlet uniform which I must admit did have some influence on me also joining the Regiment. I was ordered to report to the Guards Depot which at that time was at Caterham, another day that will stay in my memory. I was aware that the barracks was next door to a mental hospital and I momentarily wondered if I had entered the wrong gate. I had arrived at the very moment when a parade was in progress when it appeared that all hell had been let loose. It seemed that each squad instructor was trying to see who could shout the loudest at their respective squads of recruits. I eventually arrived at reception, many yards behind the picquet who took me to where I was to wait until enough new recruits arrived to make up a squad. In the meantime we were issued with our clothing and equipment and had various tests and at 19 I remember having five teeth removed and about nine fillings. I don't know why my teeth had deteriorated so badly because I had never been a big eater of sweets. Eventually enough recruits appeared to form a squad and we were allocated a barrack room to ourselves plus a squad instructor who was to be Sgt Wallace and a trained soldier responsible for teaching us how to clean our kit and teach us regimental history etc. Being faced with all this trauma after losing my parents and coming from the country and farm life was not easy for me and of course no-one understandably had any sympathy at my sudden great loss. Parades varied from foot drill to arm drill, physical training, school weapon training etc. Recruit training for young people, male or female, can be more difficult for some people more than others – a lot may depend on the environment that you have been brought up in, such as a country person living a rather quiet lonely existence or a person living in town or city – people cope differently, some accepted discipline, others resented it. Every evening at the depot as recruits was spent sitting astride your bed with a ground sheet over your lap, cleaning your kit. I joined the Grenadier Guards in peace time which meant that we had some equipment that had to be blanco-ed white, as well as other equipment that had to be blanco-ed khaki. It was not uncommon to see your white blanco-ed equipment end up in the coal bin, with the words from the trained soldier "When are you going to start cleaning it?" I well recall during my depot days that we all had to kneel on the barrack room floor in a line and commence scraping the whole floor with razor blades which they had to be polished with the heavy bumpers. When we finally reached the last passing out inspection and the inspection was completed, invariably someone other than your regular squad instructor took over the squad on the parade ground who immediately set about giving us all a chasing which made us all assume that we had failed which quite often was the case but sometimes we were brought to a halt and told that we had passed which came as a welcome surprise after thinking the reverse. It was a good feeling when we were allowed out from the depot for the first

time, but we first had to present ourselves to the sergeant of the guard to check that we were in smart enough condition to proceed into the world beyond the depot. On many occasions you had to return to your barrack room and correct whatever the sergeant of the guard had found was not satisfactory to be allowed out. It would have been easy to have just given up thoughts of going out but this was not allowed. You still had to report to the sergeant of the guard again. If I remember correctly we were allowed out after three weeks at the weekend with Croydon being our limit. I must have summed up some courage when I decided to catch another coach and continue a bit further to my sister at Mitcham, I managed to get away with it! At that time we had to wear puttees around our legs which had to be put on correctly to end up at side and slightly to the rear of each leg. Eventually after, I think it was 18 weeks, we were sent to our battalion and at that time we had three battalions. I myself and a few others being destined for the third battalion which at that time was based at Barrosa barracks, Aldershot, battalions who were there were mainly to be able to do field training manoeuvres etc. We were to be stationed in London in the October of 1939 but of course the Second World War was declared which changed our world around. I remember that Sunday the 3rd September we were loading or unloading ammunition and I cannot remember for sure which and we were suddenly rushed back to barracks to hand in all our ceremonial uniform and equipment and were moved out to a place which I seem to remember was Hoggs Back. I think the reason for this was that it was suspected that army barracks would be an early target for enemy bombers. Very shortly after that we were on our way to Dover, boarding a troopship to cross the Channel to France as part of the British Expeditionary Forces in the 1st Guards Brigade in the 1st Division with General Alexander as the Divisional Commander. We landed at Boulogne and were piled into cattle trucks, like animals, with straw on the floor, not knowing where we were bound for but eventually landed at a place called Bernay in France. I recall that we all had to assemble in a field for a lecture from the battalion M.O. which mainly was to try and make us aware of contracting VD. Someone asked the M.O. if it was possible to contract VD from a toilet and the M.O. replied that it was possible but a damn silly place to take a woman! One of the tasks that I used to dread while we were on the Belgian border was to be detailed to be the cook for the men that were manning the anti-tank gun in 64 blockhouse. We were issued with a piece of beef, vegetables etc. but I had never even made a cup of tea at home. Fortunately someone was kindly able to assist me in this task. I cannot remember how long we stayed there but eventually we ended up on the Belgian border at Bache. We were billeted in empty houses and life remained uneventful as regards any war action. There was a long tank trench already prepared and anti-tank gun blockhouses which the battalion occupied. Our particular blockhouse was no. 64. The rest of the time we were preparing trenches almost first world war style with a firing step etc. and wattle fences to prevent the trench wall collapsing. There was also a Belgian frontier post which we took our turn at holding and I remember on one occasion we were on duty and it was about mid-day and we were in the guardroom which was an old barn on a farm except of course the sentry outside and suddenly it was panic stations when the word was passed "Guard turn out". It was a scramble getting our things together and properly dressed and we all ran out and formed up beside the sentry and it was none other than the Duke of Windsor who inspected the guard and duly departed. No-one had warned us that he was in the area at the time. I think that it was probably in the February or the March of 1940 that the battalion was detailed to do a spell of duty in front of the Maginot Line in the outpost of the Saarbrücken area. It was the coldest weather that we had experienced including later on in the war when we were high in the mountains of the Appenines in Italy, even our tea froze in the mess tin and we were in trenches with dug out affair attached. This was to be where the battalion had its first casualties in the second world war. The Officer commanding one of our platoons had the men lined up

outside their trenches when the Germans sent over air bursts, when the shell explodes in the air throwing shrapnel downwards. Two Guardsmen were wounded and they were taken to the rear on sledges. As far as I remember both were to survive. I remember their names Crossman and Watling. While we were in front of the Maginot Line one of our Company (who for one reason or another did not accompany us to the Maginot) had visited the town of Orchies and on his way back had been on the railway line and was knocked down and killed, fate is a funny thing. Had he been with us he could still be alive today. We returned to our billets from the Maginot area and suddenly I was detailed for the firing party for a military funeral at Douai cemetery for the unfortunate guardsman who was killed. I was the youngest guardsman in the Company for age and service and had never done any when there were several men in the company, ex reservists etc. who had done funeral drill. I was actually to be on guard anyway that day but they put the other men on guard in our place. There were about six or eight of us on the firing party, plus a bearer party. However a drill sergeant appeared from HQ and gave us a short while on funeral drill and that was it. Fortunately I managed, including firing a volley of blanks over the grave. A few months later my name was drawn out of the hat for ten days BEF leave to the UK so once again it was to my sister's at Mitcham and again I shall always remember the morning that I was up near Streatham Common station and I noticed on the placards Holland, Belgium invaded, so I thought that for certain I would be recalled, but this was not to be and I reported back to Victoria Station as detailed and was told that anyone who lived in the London area could go home and report back in the morning and troops who lived up north would be put in a transit camp. I very quickly boarded a train back to my sister's and the concerned look on my sister's face said it all. I said that I was not going back but of course I quickly told her the truth, much to her relief. However, thinking back this surely would have been a glorious opportunity for anyone to go missing. I reported back the following morning and was shipped back to France with the rest of the people who had been on leave, navy, RAF, army, etc. We were really not fully aware of the situation and that the BEF were already retreating to Dunkirk and were already cut off and no possible chance of us returning to our Regiments. An effort had been made but they did not succeed. Suddenly they decided that we should fall back and try and form some sort of defence of Calais but, fortunately for us, someone realized the folly of that idea and we boarded a troopship home and I rejoined what was left of my battalion at Wakefield in Yorkshire, approx. 200 out of nearly 1000 men not all killed, many wounded and prisoners. This indeed was a lucky break for me and it was not due to any of my plans it was just luck, making up in some way for the tragic happening of losing both my parents in the same week. These were indeed very serious times but I don't think that many of us really fully grasped the situation. We were placed in civilian billets with the Yorkshire families who were very kind to us and understanding. Our battalion was quickly made up to strength by reinforcements from the holding battalion who very quickly cottoned on to what had happened and proceeded to try and convince the locals that they too had been at Dunkirk getting many a free pint on false pretences. We were then sent to the North East Coast to prepare ourselves for the expected German invasion, each morning doing dawn patrols in civvy buses all camouflaged. We had lost all our transport in France. This meant plodding along farm fields and eventually returning to our billets near Louth in Lincolnshire, our boots covered in mud but we had to try and get cleaned up for a drill parade when pretty well everyone was booked for dirty boots. Winston Churchill visited the battalion at that time. We moved eventually to another town called Brigg when we were issued with tropical kit and to this day I've no idea what the plan was. We were then sent to Scotland to Pollock Camp where we were to commence invasion training and were anchored in troopships on Loch Fyne, Inverary, and doing practice landings on the beach with the commando units acting as enemy. Some of the training at Inverary was done at night and some by day. On many occasions,

especially at night, when approaching a beach in the Assault Landing Craft we became aware that the ALC appeared to have reached the beach and we prepared to disembark, only to discover that we had landed on a sand bank which was often several yards from the beach. We found ourselves stepping out into quite deep water. We then proceeded to run up the beach, get through the barbed wire obstacles to advance up the mountain to capture and consolidate the position. Each platoon had a platoon bicycle and it must have looked a comical sight seeing the bicycle emerge from the water. Eventually the order was given to withdraw, when we usually ended up doing a forced march, probably to help us get dried out before returning to our troopship. Two or three years ago when my daughter and myself were in Scotland I wanted to pay a return visit to Inverary and Loch Fyne, where I stood for a while thinking back over the years and of the men who were with me then but have sadly been lying in war cemeteries in North Africa and Italy for the last 60 years or more. While we were in Scotland I persuaded my daughter to take me to pay my respects at the grave site of Major General Sir John Nelson. After much searching and many a long mile we came upon Appin Cemetery. We stood at the grave for a while and I mentioned to my daughter that Sir John and I had never spoken together – she was puzzled as to why I had felt the need to make such a long pilgrimage to his grave when Sir John had not known me or that I was even in the battalion. While we were at Pollock Camp we were detailed to go help the local farmers which was no problem to me but some town lads had never been on a farm before. We set off each morning in army trucks, dropping one or maybe two or three guardsmen off at each farm and then being collected again in the evening. On occasions an officer would do a snap check at some farm to see how the lads were getting on and on one particular farm where two men had been allocated he discovered that they had never appeared there, and when the two men checked in at the guardroom at night they were put under close arrest. They had spent the day in Glasgow. I do not remember what punishment the men received. Life continued in that vein while we were at Pollock Camp and when we were due to leave the Provost of Glasgow, Sir Patrick Dolan, came to our camp and thanked the battalion for their behaviour while they were there and hoped that we would all continue to consider Glasgow as our second home. Our next move was to Dalbeattie in Kirkcubrightshire. I am not sure whether it was looked on as a town or just a large village. It had one long main street, a cinema, pubs, a station but not many shops, but what it did have much to the delight of the battalion was an ammunitions factory which employed many hundreds of girls from all over Scotland, the girls easily outnumbering the troops, need I say more? However the fact that it was rare to see a Guardsman on his own in the street was not only because all the rest of the troops were enjoying the company of the girls. It would be because you could find them in houses with old people who had kindly invited them in for a cup of tea, a chat and a smoke, reminding them of home comforts. A favourite haunt of the Guardsmen was “The Rose Garden” which surely could have been renamed “The Grenadier Rose Garden”. Normal field training continued, some of which was in conjunction with the local Home Guard. Some of the married men obtained sleeping out passes and their wives joined them. I remember one time I was on guard with another Guardsman, whose wife had joined him and we were surprised when she appeared at the Guardroom with a huge bag of chips enough for all the Guards, which needless to say was thoroughly enjoyed by us all. Another incident which is hardly worth mentioning while we were at Dalbeattie was that one of the men had befriended one of the local ladies and proceeded to leave our billet every night to stay at this lady’s house, making sure that he always returned to billets before our first parade, which is what is known in the Regiment as Breakfast Parade, when every man shows himself to be up and washed and shaved, which was a punishment laid down by Queen Victoria when a sentry on duty at Buckingham Palace was found to be on duty unshaven. The punishment for the regiment being 100 years but the parade as far as I know is

still being continued. All went well for the Guardsman who I referred to earlier until he did not return to billets in time for the breakfast parade and was temporarily marked absent. When he did eventually return there would understandably be some form of punishment and I understand that when he was asked to explain why he was absent his excuse was that he had been in the habit of going to this particular house every morning to give the people an early call and had been given a cup of tea. But on this particular morning he had fallen asleep in the armchair, a likely story and I do not know what punishment he received. Another break from normal duties while we were at Dalbeattie was that myself and other Guardsmen were detailed to do a Royal Navy HQ Guard at Largs. I don't suppose that many of us had bothered to make a studied detail of Naval Officers' uniforms and on one occasion one of the Guardsmen was on sentry at the main entrance to the HQ building when he noticed a Wren approaching and came to attention, sloped arms and gave a smart salute to the Wren, who immediately approached the sentry asking why he had saluted her and I presume that his answer would be that he thought that she was an Officer, but she went on to say that she was only a Leading Wren!! Surely a case of being better safe than sorry. I'm sure that many Grenadiers of our battalion will never forget our first Xmas and New Year in Scotland which was while we were still at Dalbeattie. Many of us had never heard how the Scots celebrated what is known to them as Hogmanay. At 12 o'clock midnight doors were thrown open and troops were invited in for a drink, something to eat and of course kisses beneath the mistletoe. I cannot remember whether the Company Commander turned a blind eye to all this because our leave passes were generally only until midnight. I have forgotten to mention that on our return from the Naval HQ Guard we discovered that the battalion were away on manoeuvres in atrocious weather so we had missed that. In the evening we had been out for a drink and returned to our billet when suddenly we were awakened to find smoke filling the billet and discovered that the Sergeant of the Guard's straw pillow was alight. At that same evening one of the Guardsmen had proceeded to get out of his two-man bunk and trod on a broken tumbler, badly gashing his foot and I remember that he had to go about for quite a while with a section of a car tyre on his foot to replace his boot. Eventually once again we were to be on the move again and I'm sure that there were many broken hearts, some permanent and some temporary. Our next move was to be for myself the luckiest happening of my whole life, including missing Dunkirk. I shall be forever grateful to whoever decided to place our battalion to Perth, in the spring of 1942, where I was to meet and eventually marry the most wonderful, true and loving person any man could ever meet. Our courtship sadly was to be a short one when in the November 1942 we were to leave for North Africa to land at Algiers on Operation Torch, together with American troops later to join the 1st Army. While we were in Perth there were once again two or three different tasks to be done again giving us a change from the usual field training and I am not sure now in what order the tasks were performed. We learned that a Guard of Honour was to be provided for the then Princess Elizabeth's 16th birthday when she would also become Colonel of the Grenadier Guards. This was to be held at Windsor Castle in the April of 1942 when 42 men from each of our six battalions plus the Holding battalion and Guards Depot would assemble in the Quadrangle at Windsor Castle. Myself and three other guardsmen were selected from our company to join others from each of our other companies and after a few rehearsals proceeded to leave Perth by train on our way to Windsor where we stayed overnight at Victoria Barracks in readiness for the next day's big parade. We were lined up and inspected by H.M. King George VI and Queen Elizabeth and the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. This was followed by a march past and a return to barracks. In the afternoon we were invited to attend a concert in the Castle and entertained by Tommy Handley's TMS show plus Vera Lynn and I believe that this was Vera's first appearance before Royalty. After the day's proceedings a dance was held which HRH

attended during which one of the battalion drummers was dared to approach the Princess for a dance and probably to his surprise she duly accepted. During our visit to Sherwood Forest when there was time for a concert to be held in a marquee the same drummer decided to recite a verse "our sergeant major's got a crown upon his arm and he thinks he's got it on his f..... head" for which he was duly placed in close arrest.) I managed to make a quick dash to my sister's at Mitcham in the evening, before leaving the next morning for our return to Perth. Our next surprise, though as I said earlier, probably not in the right order, we were suddenly whisked off and found ourselves at The Isle of Wight, where we were put in chalets at what in normal times had been a holiday camp, named I think The Savoy Holiday Camp. Again very suddenly we found ourselves on board a troopship off Cowes and I think that the rumour had been spread around that we were to be doing a landing against the Home Guard at some point to test the defences. However we were to get a rude shock one morning when we were detailed to assemble on the ship's top deck and were told that at a certain early hour the next day we were to land on the coast of France with two companies of Coldstream Guards, two Companies of Grenadiers and two Companies of Commandoes, the objective being to try and capture some apparatus that was causing problems when our RAF aeroplanes approached the French Coast. We were promptly issued with live ammunition, primed grenades, rope-soled boots for quietness, loads of aerial photos to study where we would hope to land. Needless to say these were anxious times as we all awaited zero hour when we set off and would be taken so far and then eventually transferred to ALC's (assault landing craft) and proceed silently to the French coast. It probably came as some relief, although maybe only prolonging the agony, when we were told that the operation was cancelled for twenty four hours. That period of time passed and once again the operation was cancelled for another twenty four hours. The reason given was owing to low cloud and rain squalls in the English Channel. We were told that if it did not go when the next twenty four hours passed the operation would be cancelled as the moon and tides would not be suitable for the operation to continue, so I'm sure that everyone breathed a sigh of relief especially later when we saw the tragic outcome when the Canadians were slaughtered at Dieppe, hardly any of them ever making it off the beach. We had been promised ten days' leave if and when we returned from the raid and this was to be from Southampton. As the raid did not materialize we all assumed that we would surely forego our leave, but it was decided that we would be granted the leave after all. Now, when I see continual rain I often say thank God for the rain because I'm convinced had the weather conditions been suitable I would not be able to write this wee story now. As usual, in the summer of 1942 Guardsmen were distributed around farms in Perthshire. Yet another break to make a change from the training routine it was decided that we were to board HM Destroyers at Rosyth Dockyard to accompany Merchant Ships through the notorious E boat alley, a graveyard for merchant ships sunk by the surface E boat raiders who attacked quickly, destroying many ships before any defence could be organized. I am told that how we came about to be chosen for this unusual task was because of a tradition held by our 3rd battalion who served as marines in HM Ships hundreds of years before. We were distributed on the destroyers so many men in the forward area of the ship with the electrician, and some at the rear with the stokers. My party was on an old American destroyer renamed HMS Leeds and were to do rear escort duty and the leading destroyer was I think HMS Warwick. We each got our tot of rum and were issued with duffle coats etc. and did our watch on the guns which were Yankee point 5's which, needless to say, we didn't have a clue how they worked. During the day we had some fire practice, firing at the masts of the many ships that had been sunk, with their masts protruding out of the sea. Each morning our destroyer would race up the company, making a count that the convoy was complete and instead of making a long turn around it seemed to turn on a sixpence, leaning over at what we

thought was a dangerous angle and that the ship was about to capsize!! We duly reached Sheerness and boarded the liberty boat and went ashore and proceeded with the crew to what had been a regular meeting point at a certain pub. After drinks and an enjoyable evening we set off back to return to the point where we would board our liberty boat to rejoin our ship. On the way someone decided that we should form up and march back as a party but again someone decided that we should exchange hats but were promptly stopped by a Naval Patrol and told to wear our own headdress. When we reached our ship we realized that one of our men was missing and it was a man who had obtained special permission to visit his wife who lived at Chatham, which was not very far from Sheerness. This man was on his way back to join our ship when there was an air raid and all transport was stopped. Fortunately he got his pass stamped by the MP's and eventually he rejoined us but still had to go before the Captain of the ship in true navy style, cap off, etc. We enjoyed an uneventful return to Rosyth and to our Company in Perth. Our Company was billeted in a small village called Almondbank, where there was a Royal Naval Store Depot. We were in Nissen huts in a quiet secluded area. One of our company was at one time a drummer in the battalion corp of drums but for some reason was what we called being "returned to duty" when he joined one of the four duty companies. Someone thought it a good idea that he should be issued with a bugle so that he could blow reveille for the company each morning. This he duly did but one morning, instead of getting himself dressed he decided to open the window and blow reveille from that point and then promptly got back into bed and was still in bed when the duty officer entered the room which resulted in a charge. In bed after reveille when he himself had blown reveille. Many years later I was in Shrewsbury with my young son and my son pointed out to me that a policeman was following us and I saw no reason why he had any interest in us, but my son kept an eye on him and said that the policeman was still following us, so I decided to stop to satisfy my son's curiosity, only to learn that it was the man who had blown reveille in our camp at Perth. He, like myself, was an ex Shropshire lad and had joined the Shropshire Constabulary. When we first arrived in Perth I don't think that we were really fully welcomed with open arms, probably due to the fact that we were to replace the Polish troops who had become very popular with the local people. Eventually I think that they did tolerate us and there were several Grenadiers who eventually married the fair maids of Perth. However there was one very stupid incident that occurred in our own company at Almondbank. A pair of swans had inhabited the river Almond for many years and were a part of the population until one day one of our men decided to shoot one of the swans. Apart from the crime of shooting the king's bird it meant that we were all held responsible for the stupid incident when only one had done it. While the Guardsman in question was in close arrest he further aggravated the situation by striking the NCO in charge of his escort. Again I am not sure what punishment was dished out to him but it may have been that he was not allowed to stay in the battalion and was sent to the holding battalion in London where probably the continuous bombing after the peace and quietness that we were enjoying in Perth was too much for him. He entirely on his own accord, without obtaining any permission from the Regiment, boarded a train in London to Perth and reported to the guardroom saying I presume how very much he loved the battalion etc. and pleaded to be allowed to return. He was allowed to stay and came with us to North Africa and later Italy but one night as we were going into the line once again he disappeared and I didn't see him again myself, but someone had seen him while on leave, out with a working party in the best of health. Once again we were to be on the move and again sadness especially myself saying goodbye to Jean, not knowing when, if ever, I would return. We left either Gourrock or Greenock and I shall always remember seeing the coastline gradually disappearing in the evening dusk and a sinking feeling in my stomach. I am not sure how long the journey took before we saw the shimmering white buildings of Algiers in the distance, where

we were to land fortunately at the dockside in the normal way and we were not aware that the Americans had landed earlier on the beaches virtually unopposed. We quickly disembarked and marched a few miles out of Algiers to a place called MaisonCaree where we assembled two man bivouacs that is that two groundsheets were fitted together to make a two man tent. However it was November and probably the rainy season and the area was swamped by torrential rain so we were placed in a large unused building which was as far as I remember an old radio station, at least we were in the dry. Again it was Guard of Honour time in Algiers with several high-ranking French Officers present. Some men took the opportunity of a few tours in Algiers they having to wear belt and side arms (bayonets) and rifle and five rounds of ammunition. Probably some visited the red light area bearing the names of "The Sphinx" and "The Black Cat". We were glad that we had left our troopship as there was a German air raid on the docks and we wondered about the crew who had brought us safely all the way from the UK to Africa and also if our transport would survive which we would need to wait for before we continued on our way to Tunisia. We were ordered one day to parade for a route march but with our large packs to be empty and we were to find out later that it was to visit an orange grove where we were to fill our empty packs with the most luscious oranges that I have ever tasted. Eventually our MT arrived and we set off on our way through the winding and precarious roads over the Atlas Mountains, heading for what was to be the front line area at Medjez el Bab. At first we only travelled by day, stopping in harbour at night and sleeping on the ground under the olive trees. One morning one of our Officers awoke to find that his boots were missing and three eggs neatly put in their place. We had been warned to be aware of the Arabs who were very clever at this kind of thing, mainly probably due to their very poor existence. I noticed a very small Arab being surrounded by a few of our men mostly standing over six feet in height, the intention being to try and discover who the culprit was who had stolen the boots. The poor little Arab was trembling from head to foot not knowing what they were going to do to him while he himself would have been completely innocent otherwise he surely wouldn't have stayed around had he been the thief. Eventually he was allowed to go in language I would not wish to repeat and I have never seen any man run faster, even in the Olympic Games. I don't know if we had got behind schedule but we did travel at night as we neared the front line area and one night we were suddenly told to get out of our trucks and we wondered if we had contacted the Germans. But instead it was to find one of our trucks carrying one of our platoons had completely capsized, unfortunate though it was it could have been worse as in lots of places if you once went off the road you could easily have rolled down in the deep ravines below. As it was there happened to be a flat piece of ground alongside the truck. One of our men sustained a broken back who we were never to see again and I've no idea if he survived. It could be said that, unfortunate as it was at the time, it could well have saved his life because he may well have been killed in later action. We eventually continued our journey but not very long afterwards we were told to leave our transport and proceeded on foot through heavy rain and it made things a little awkward when we had to pass some French Cavalry and it was a tricky moment passing so close through the already startled horses. We could have ended up with a good kick, at that point the road was several inches deep with water, following the heavy downpour. We reached a farm building where we were told to remove our cap badge and dispose of our caps, which we were never to see again, and from then on it would be steel helmets and stocking hats (cap comforters). We were then detailed to cross a ploughed field which we found very exhausting as owing to the rain the ground was very soft. Unfortunately the sole became detached from my right boot, making it very difficult to walk as the sole kept folding under my boot. We proceeded to dig slit trenches and we assumed that we must be near the front line area. This, as in many times later, was all in vain as no sooner had we completed the slit trenches than we were told to move and we

continued on towards Medjez el Bab. Beyond Medjez there is a plain which, if I remember correctly, is called the Majerda Valley. On either side there are a range of hills, on the right hand side was to be the Grenadier position, later named Grenadier Hill. On the left side of the plain the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards occupied the position but were immediately involved in a very fierce battle and sustained many casualties. They did, as far as I understand, capture the feature which was to be named Longstop Hill, probably because it remained an obstacle in German hands until the Spring of 1943. Eventually the Coldstream were relieved by the Americans who unfortunately never occupied the highest position making it easy for the Germans to re-occupy plus the rest of the feature. Fierce fighting continued and on Xmas Day 1942 we, the Grenadier Guards, were ordered to leave our position on Grenadier Hill and endeavour to give some assistance to the Coldstreams. This resulted in moving in daylight in view of the German positions who quite understandably took advantage of the situation by shelling us for most of the way. Our Commanding Officer, Col Heber Percy, promised us at that time that he would guarantee that we would get our Xmas dinner when the campaign ended, which in view of situation at that particular time our chances seemed very remote. However the Commanding Officer was as good as his word and the battalion sat down to enjoy an enjoyable meal at Sousse thanks to our battalion cooks and there was an ample supply of Vino to drink, so much so that eventually there became evidence that the proceedings may tend to get out of hand and the battalion RSM, who was a very popular man, decided that it was time that we all returned to our camp which was in bivouacs under the olive trees. Bill Hagel, the RSM, enlisted a guardsman to help him round up everyone and load them into a truck. This particular guardsman, Gdsm Elms, was a well-known character in the battalion for various reasons and the RSM was not prepared for the next move when Guardsman Elms said "Right sir, we will begin with you first" and promptly grabbed the RSM in a fireman's lift and hoisted him into the 3 ton truck! Eventually Longstop Hill was left to the Germans and we made our front line positions at Medjez Station and nearby position from which all we were able to do was send out patrols but we were also subjected to intermittent shelling, causing many casualties. One of our patrols to Longstop Hill ran into an ambush as they were going up a gully (ravine) when German machine guns which were situated on either flank opened up, killing three Guardsmen and strangely enough in alphabetical order Guardsmen Atkinson, Beale and Carruthers. Later on, in another action, the next man that got killed was Guardsman Draper. Once again I have forgotten to mention that the 1st Guards Brigade consisted of two Guards battalions, Grenadier and Coldstream, when what we described as a line regiment which in the 1st Guards brigade was the Hampshire Regiment who unknown to myself and probably the rest of the Guardsmen were ahead of us and had been caught in the open in the Majerda Valley and sustained so many casualties they had to be withdrawn from the battalion to be replaced by the 3rd Battalion Welsh Guards. From Xmas onwards it remained a static front owing to the heavy rains making it impossible for armour to operate, without which any advance could not proceed. We were still short of infantry on the ground, consequently we were moved up and down the front whenever the Germans attempted a thrust. Someone in a poem later described us as plumbers and phantoms. Eventually in the spring as the weather improved and more divisions available the 1st Army did at last make a move following criticism for not moving earlier, especially by the 8th Army but our terrain was mountain, one mountain after another to be attacked separately while the 8th Army were at least on the level. When the front line became static at Medjez-el-Bab we managed to have a few days' leave in a transit camp at the North African port of Bone which incidentally we referred to as "dogs dinner". A few of us inadvertently strayed into an out of bounds area and were promptly approached by the Military Police who took all our names. A sailor was with us and the M.P.'s said that he could go free but the sailor insisted as he was one

of us he wanted his name taken as well. One of our party resented being booked as we were out of the line for a short while and he started a fight and was put under close arrest. We were standing in a cinema queue a day or so later when we were approached by the M.P.'s and asked "were we the people who had our names taken earlier?". When we said yes they said to forget the charge, which was a relief, but we did wonder if it was because it would have meant the M.P.'s would have needed to come up to the front line for evidence! We were involved in several actions during the drive to capture Tunis involving many casualties but were never on a scale to be worth mentioning at home even though they were as dangerous and unpleasant as any larger action. BouArada was one area in question where we got a severe shelling prior to a German attack. The whole hill was shrouded in dust but fortunately our split trenches protected us and there was only one man killed - Guardsman Draper who I mentioned earlier - but several men were wounded very badly and never returned to their Company. One or two men were wounded by air bursts when the shells exploded above the trenches. Prior to us being at BouArada there had been an even more severe action and some Irish Regiments were badly mauled by German tanks overrunning their slit trenches so much so that they could no longer remain as infantry in the 6th Armoured Division, their divisional sign being the clenched male fist, a white fist on a black background. It was decided that the 1st Guards Brigade would replace the Irish Regiments in the division and many of us feel that it was a lucky day for us though sadly it was at the expense of the Irish Regiments. We were to remain in the division as lorried infantry, being transported in T.C.V.'s (troop carrying vehicles) which were driven by RASC drivers who we all admired very much, especially later in Italy, driving by night on unknown mountain roads. Djebel Mansour was another difficult action. We were told to occupy the hill as it was not occupied by the Germans but were rudely awakened one night by a stream of white tracer bullets from the German Spandau machine guns. We were not expecting this and chaos existed until we sorted ourselves out and eventually a counter attack was organized by the battalion which involved a bayonet charge by No. 2 Company, again resulting in many casualties, killed and wounded. Again the situation was too large for small-scale attack and it resulted in a withdrawal. Also involved in the action, in fact more so than ourselves, were the 1st Airborne Troops who were being used as infantry owing to shortage of infantry. These men were surely our very best soldiers throughout the Second World War, especially much later at Arnhem. On another occasion the Welsh Guards had attacked and captured a position known as the Fondouk Pass and we were to follow up and consolidate the position and we came across a nice German dug-out which contained, amongst other things, a wee pup, a gramophone, a large can of wine, etc. I cannot remember what happened to the wee pup, it was never possible to carry things we called loot, our own equipment, ammunition and weapons were quite sufficient. Returning to the action on Djebel Mansour, we struggled back with our wounded to a point at the end of the gully where there were approx. 200 yards of open ground to get across before you were reasonably safe from the shelling which was coming our way every few seconds, and during the brief lull while the German artillery were re-loading their guns a few of us at a time dashed across the open ground. At the end of this gully there was approx. a five foot parapet to surmount and we did not realize at the time that the mound of earth that we stood on to surmount the parapet was covering three Guardsmen who had received a direct hit from German shells and killed instantly. We were under canvas at Guelma and one night I awoke to see the sergeant standing with a rifle in his hand and I suppose that I was somewhat startled and asked what was happening, but by doing so I had scared away the Arab intruder who was trying to slowly withdraw whatever he could reach of our kit from under the flaps of our bell tent. During that night a guardsman had been detailed to sleep in the marquee with some company stores and he suddenly appeared in the morning wearing only his towel around his lower parts

and asking us who was playing the prank on him but realised that he also had a visit from an intruder who had removed every stitch of his clothing, plus boots. Also while we were at Guelma the battalion were involved with a spot of bother with the military policy there who I understand had reported some of our men for not observing the curfew by having to have their sleeves rolled down, something to do with the risk of mosquito bites I think. There was a battalion identity parade arranged but I can't recall what the outcome was. There were many more incidents before the end of the campaign in North Africa, probably not worthy of a mention though still not pleasant for the individual concerned. Another incident that comes to mind when we were in Tunisia was when one of our Officers, who I am reasonably sure was the Company Commander of No. 3 Company at that time, John Nelson (I am not sure whether he was a Captain or a Major then – he later became our Commanding Officer) – he decided to dress himself in Arab clothing and went on to acquire a donkey. He proceeded to make his way into the German lines for obvious reasons. It must have been a relief to see him returning to the Battalion area after what was surely a very brave task to undertake, especially when everyone realized that had he been captured and under interrogation his blue eyes would not have been in his favour. Kasserine pass was one such action where the American troops sustained many casualties when Rommel decided to make his usual thrust to drive us all back to Algiers. Once again these were powerful thrusts of armour and difficult to contain, as was proven during the retreat to Dunkirk. I remember seeing the American troops retreating in every vehicle possible through our area, and one man remarked that "he was right behind us", meaning of course Field Marshall Rommel. We were immediately detailed to go forward to try and stem the German advance and we were to advance behind a creeping barrage meaning that an area in front of us was shelled by our artillery and we would then advance when the artillery would shell further in front and so on. We were all prepared to follow the first barrage of shells and the guns behind us opened up and we were shocked when all the shells landed behind us instead of in front. We all very quickly realized that things could have been worse, the shells could actually have landed right on top of us, the error was quickly corrected and we proceeded to advance only thankfully once again luck was with us and Rommel's attack had been aborted which I understand was due to some disagreement amongst the German Generals. Eventually the First and Eighth Armies linked up and the campaign ended with over 200,000 German and Italian prisoners being captured. I remember one old white-haired German soldier of the Africa Corp tramping up and down speaking in quite good English words that I must not repeat "prisoner in the 1st so and so war, prisoner in the 2nd so and so war, no so and so good". There was a huge victory parade when many high-ranking generals were present which I think included General Eisenhower, Generals Alexander and Montgomery and I've often thought that having this parade with so many important people assembled was taking a big risk at this stage of the war, when it only needed one swoop by a daring German airman to make a swoop and knock out all three important people. I suppose that this had been looked into and unknown to us probably plenty of air cover protected the parade. When the campaign ended we were detailed to guard the prisoners in a camp in the open a few yards from the banks of the Mediterranean doing 48 hr guards on and 48 hrs off, during which time we enjoyed a swim in the Med. The prisoners were also granted this luxury, the Germans usually forming up and marching in order to the tune of Lili Marlene. During this period our mortar platoon were firing bombs out to sea and sadly a bomb was placed into the barrel upside down which exploded on impact with the barrel, the explosion causing the unfortunate death of two or maybe three Guardsmen. I believe that on another occasion a party went on a desert safari and again unfortunately strayed off the track and went onto a minefield - again there were fatal casualties. We eventually moved back to Algeria to a town named Constantine and were billeted under canvas in some woods. I cannot remember how long we

remained there but it was a nice break which I'm sure that everyone appreciated. Our next move was to Phillipville where we boarded another troopship and were on our way to Italy, this was quite a rough voyage. I remember that we started off with a barrage balloon attached to the rear of our troopship but awoke the next morning to find that the balloon was no longer there. Just after the campaign in North Africa finished we were in a bivouac area amongst the olive groves when suddenly we were engulfed by a swarm of locusts which is something you don't normally experience in your life, the noise was amazing as they swarmed over the ground and suddenly, as though they had heard a signal, the whole swarm took off.

Part Two

I recall passing Sicily and seeing the volcano smoking and eventually we reached Naples, the front line being some miles past there, thanks to the many actions that had taken place before we reached Italy. Our own 6th Battalion was involved in heavy fighting at Salerno, losing many men.

I remember one evening at "stand to" it was nearly dusk and two Guardsmen and myself were standing near each other when there was a sudden whoosh as a shell must have missed our heads by feet only landing about 20 yds away, the sulphur smoke rising from the shell hole. This was a German shell.

It was a very difficult journey to get the wounded men to the nearest medical station, down narrow mountain tracks with individual stone shelters built up every two or three hundred yards, manned by Indian personnel as stretcher bearers who passed the wounded on to the next shelter.

We became aware that the main stumbling block to any further advance in Italy was the Benedictine Monastery above Cassino, apparently an obstacle which had prevented many more troops in the distant past advancing on Rome. We were destined to become involved in this action though thankfully again not in an attacking role.

Several attempts had been made to capture the town and the Monastery without success by several nationalities including New Zealanders, Indians, Gurkhas, British, etc. Eventually the town was partly held by the Germans and partly by ourselves. By the time we were to take up positions in Cassino the town had been pretty well devastated with not one building standing complete, the monastery had also been destroyed but the Germans hung on.

To reach Cassino up what we called the mad mile, route six, was a dangerous journey and only possible after dark. On reaching the town it was a scramble crawling through holes to reach your positions, the stench from decaying bodies buried under the rubble plus the continuous smell of the smoke shells that our artillery were putting down to try and obscure our supply route was somewhat overpowering and life in those trogladite conditions was not pleasant. It was only a matter of yards between our own positions and the Germans - we could often hear them talking. These German troops were the best that Germany had. The 1st Airborne troops, elite soldiers. We learned later that one of the troops was none other than the one-time heavyweight champion of the world - Max Schmeling

. Outside our positions there was quite a large bomb crater which was filled with water at the time, from which we had obtained water and later in the year in the month of May when the crater dried up it was discovered that a German soldier was lying at the bottom!! Again there were many incidents which would be of very little interest to anyone but was all part of our life in

Cassino. Apart from Cassino itself there had been many hard fought battles particularly by the American 36 Infantry Division losing thousands of men trying to cross a river and to try and capture the town and the Monastery always in full view of the Germans in their commanding view from the high ground.

Many instances come to mind while we were in Cassino, not really of any importance all these years later. I recall that one day I was on sentry at our post when suddenly a man passed quite near heading for the German lines. It all happened in seconds – our view from our position was limited especially for anyone approaching from the rear. The man had only gone a few yards past our position when he was met with German rifle fire and he literally flew back past our positions much quicker than he had approached the other way. We never did hear any more of the incident. No-one moved in daylight in Cassino which makes the incident even more of a puzzle.

One night our battalion Padre came into our position and while he was with us a firefly entered and fluttered about, flashing a light rather like someone trying to light a cigarette lighter. The Padre enquired what it was and when we explained that these fireflies were a common sight at night I was rather surprised when he said “kill the bastard”.

During the period that we were holding the line in Cassino men were able to go on leave which was to the 8th Army rest camp at Bari. I was fortunate to be on one of these breaks and I recall that there were nightly fights with men getting the worse with drink and comparing how they thought that they had seen more action than others, etc. My leave eventually ended but on our way back to the battalion area our vehicle broke down and we had to stay at a transit camp for repairs which happened to be an old Italian wine refinery. While we were there we were shown a film which consisted of three reels shown by the army film unit. However the man operating the camera showed the first reel OK then proceeded to show the third reel before the second one. We already knew what the end of the film was!

We realized that the battalion were due to take up their duties in Cassino and we wondered if we were possibly lucky enough to have avoided going in but this wasn't to be as the person who should have been on leave on our return had to go in in our place so we were quickly taken into the line so that the other man could go on leave.

I shall always feel that the Germans were happy with us occupying half of the town while they held the other half. It was obvious that there was no way we could advance from our positions and the Germans surely realized that while we were there there would not be any more bombing of the town. I recall signs on the road on the way to Cassino “There is still time to turn back”, “You are now under observation”, etc.

Still more punishment for the reader by going back to another incident that I recall in Cassino. Our platoon had to occupy two separate positions, one during the day and one at night, with the forward position being occupied at night. The incident that I mention could be associated with depot days at Caterham when we occasionally did a night scheme and one particular night we were concentrating on dealing with how to deal with Very lights which were used in front line areas to try and deter any enemy movement - I recall an officer stood in the middle of a field demonstrating to stand perfectly still and not to look up and you would hopefully remain undetected. Such training may possibly have helped me in Cassino when one night, as my section were moving from one position to the other, the Germans must have detected movement and sent up a Very light. I was the last man in the section with the bren gun and

wasn't able to reach our position, resulting in being caught in the full glare of the Very light which seemed to last for ages. I stood perfectly still almost in a crouching position, heart pounding, expecting a burst of gunfire but thankfully the Very light died, much to my relief.

I remember long after the war that I revisited Cassino and asked someone where the German cemetery was and they replied, as usual, they still hold the high ground, the cemetery obviously was on higher ground than our own or the Poles.

Pretty well everyone by now will be aware that the Monastery did eventually fall to the Poles but its final capture was at the expense of many thousands of lives of several nationalities.

It was strange on the first morning to emerge from our position into the open and it was hard to believe that we were not under observation any longer. On the first night after the fall of Cassino the advance was to continue and I remember being in transport stretching nose to tail for some considerable distance, it was dark and suddenly there was the drone of German bombers overhead and flares were dropped exposing the whole area like daylight. We dived into a nearby ditch and prayed for the flares to go out because we were all a sitting target. Bombs dropped a few hundred yards behind us inflicting casualties, but once again we were lucky and the convoy continued.

Our next task was being placed on the top of Sherman tanks to continue the advance which, although it helped us from the marching on foot, was nevertheless a bit precarious being perched on the rear of the tank above the hot engines, plus the heat of the sun in the month of May and over rough terrain.

We continued until we were aware that shells were exploding around us which we had not heard owing to the noise of the Sherman engines. We were quickly dismounted from our tanks and as far as I can remember we took up positions and what happened after that at that point I cannot remember. The pattern of action remained the same during our advance encountering hill after hill with many casualties and we often remarked how stupid war can be, neither ourselves nor the Germans had the slightest interest in these hills yet people were getting killed and wounded. How sensible you feel it would have been if the Germans and ourselves said "to hell with this. Let our politicians come and do the fighting".

All these years later when I see German footballers playing on our own teams and also against us and at one time we were striving to kill each other I think what a crazy world we live in. No-one is going to live forever so why can't we see common sense and all get together sharing our skills to make it a better world for the very short time we all have to live in it, so much greed, so much mistrust in each other. It was all rather depressing that we knew that there would never be an end to the campaign, we would never be able to tackle the Alps.

We were only fighting and dying solely to try and tie down as many German divisions as possible for the benefit of the Russians and the second front which would inevitably have to happen. This I understand the campaign did succeed in doing, it's debatable whether the Normandy landings would have been successful if all the German divisions had not been tied down in Italy.

Another rare experience in Italy was for us to see at close hand the eruption of Mount Vesuvius near Naples, an awesome sight most people only ever see on the T.V. or pictures in the newspaper.

At the end of this short and probably uninteresting story I shall no doubt remember things that I had omitted to add, some funny and some unpleasant. Although we were lorried infantry in an

armoured division the terrain in the Appennine mountains meant that it was all foot slogging and we rarely saw our tanks until the spring of 1945 where there was some open country. One of the most difficult actions in Italy apart from Cassino was when the battalions and in fact the whole of 1st Guards Brigade were involved in an action on Monte Battaglia where the Americans had done extremely well by holding onto the feature, repulsing several desperate German attacks involving the use of flame throwers and again in atrocious weather conditions. Eventually we were called upon to relieve the American troops. It was approximately four miles of mountain tracks to reach the position and we shall forever be grateful for those hard working mules carrying supplies for us; sometimes the track was knee deep in mud often involving leaving one's boot in the sticky mud and coming under shell fire as we neared the front. I remember being told that we were to be relieving the Americans and to be sure to try and take as many socks as possible as frost bite had been a problem for the Americans.

Our advance party had gone on ahead and when we reached them at night we asked about our positions and what it was like and the answer that we received made us feel that we did not want to proceed any further. We could see the mortar bombs exploding on the side of the hill where we were to be going and we thought of the madness placing ourselves in such a dangerous position. Of course it was war and such thoughts should not have entered our heads, other troops were desperately awaiting our arrival so that they could get out and have a well-earned break.

I remember being in a narrow part of the track as we approached the castle hill when I noticed a dark shadow appearing in the semi-darkness, only to discover that it was about 6 to 8 mules, on the backs of which were dead American troops and I remember thinking to myself that this was a serious kind of frost bite!!

One soldier had slid beneath the mule's tummy and was dragging through the mud and as the part that they passed us being very narrow, the American bodies brushed past our equipment.

We were then faced with a near vertical route up to our positions which we could only reach by pulling ourselves up inch by inch by a rope that the Americans had attached higher up. I remember that I had to place my Bren gun ahead of me, leaning it against my chest until I had managed to pull myself up further. At last we managed to reach the positions, each person allocated their respective slit trench and I remember so very clearly the two American soldiers in a very shallow trench. They had grown substantial beards, not being able to get a wash or shave, not only because of being continually shelled and mortared but also because of the mountain being continually shrouded in rain and mist. I shall always remember their words as they quickly disappeared into the darkness "lets get to hell out of here" - normally the troops who are being relieved try and give you some idea of the situation as they had found it and possibly the location of the enemy position.

It was understandable however in the circumstances when they had been under almost continual stress from attack, shelling and mortar, plus the rain. Our first task was to try and deepen our trenches with most of us being six feet tall, but we found that this was not possible with the ground conditions.

Only a few feet or so away there were two American bodies lying perfectly still and for a moment we thought that they were asleep and had been overlooked by their comrades. Of course they were both dead so we did not fancy having these bodies so near to our trenches so I dragged one man over a bit of high ground in front of us and the other I gave a shove with my foot, not

knowing in the dark that there was a steep long drop below. The body disappeared and it was only the next morning that we noticed that the soldier was lying on his back several feet below and he was clutching a tin of what must have been food that he was eating when he was killed and rigor mortis must have caused him to remain clutching the tin.

There was nothing anyone could do but just sit there hoping that the mortars would not drop directly on your trench which could have happened any second, night or day. Two guardsmen who shared a trench had a direct mortar hit, their bodies being taken out in empty mortar boxes, what must have been a very unpleasant and stressful job for the stretcher bearers.

Casualties were occurring frequently but not as many as the Americans who had many more troops on the ground than were available to ourselves. I remember our platoon officer asking our sergeant to select six good men for a patrol and the sergeant answered by saying "six, we have not got six good men on the hill" meaning, I hope, that everyone was pretty well shaken up with the incessant shelling and mortars.

We were eventually relieved for a short spell but returned after getting cleaned up and rested.

One morning all hell seemed to be let loose and we were to learn that the Germans were making a last desperate attempt to recapture the feature by doing two flanking attacks with the idea of cutting our supply route when we would be isolated and would either have been prisoners or made an attempt to fight our way out or maybe someone would come to our rescue.

It seems that the German attack had gone wrong. Some Germans had got lost, some reached our HQ but landed on our minefields and hand to hand fighting took place and eventually about 80 German prisoners were taken and we were able to breath again, and the Germans did not attack the position again.

Another small incident in Italy was after we had captured the town of Perugia. We were dug in on the outskirts of the town when my platoon was detailed to try and dislodge some Germans who were occupying a house and causing problems with their snipers. We duly set off at dusk in the evening led by one officer, a lieutenant, and NCO's and my particular section was detailed to act as fire cover while the rest of the platoon approached the house from another area. Suddenly my section encountered a burst of spandau fire which struck my section leader across his chest killing him instantly. I remember seeing him firing his tommy gun into the ground as he was falling. I immediately fired my bren gun in the area where we could only assume that the spandau had fired from and in the meantime the rest of the platoon were met with enemy grenades which badly wounded the officer who later died from his wounds.

I was very fortunate once again being only a few feet away from my section commander but did not get hit myself. The Germans very quickly left the position. I do remember on our way to the house that was occupied by the Germans some Italian women begged us not to go there because they knew that the Germans were in there but of course that was the reason why we were there.

I often think of the many trenches that we dug during the campaign in Africa and Italy which would surely have made us all expert grave diggers when the war ended and many times it was soul-destroying when we had just managed to dig what we thought was a really nice trench that would give us protection from shells and mortars only to be immediately told that we were moving because we were in the wrong place and we had to start digging all over again.

In those far off days in such appalling conditions so far up in the mountains, I did not ever dream that one day I would return there with my wife and also the same applies to the Cassino area, such terrible destruction, so many thousand lives lost and yet many years after the war I was able to return there with my wife on what was described as a battlefield tour, even then, all those years later at Cassino, you still felt an uneasiness that you were being watched from the monastery.

I do not recall any more actions of any significance after Battaglia for myself.

It was decided to amalgamate our 3rd battalion with our 5th battalion who had many casualties at Anzio and reinforcements were not available. It was decided that those of us who had been with the battalion through North Africa and Italy would be allowed home, our places being taken from men of the 5th battalion, the battalion being disbanded.

General Alexander came aboard our troopship at Naples to see us off. I am not sure whether he had already been made a Field Marshall. We were all very pleased that he had been our Commander.

Our journey back from Naples was in a Dutch ship called Sibba Jack, which was uneventful apart from one incident. We called at Malta then on to Algiers then Gibraltar. I can't recall whether we were detailed or whether we volunteered but one or two men including myself ended up doing a fatigue which must have been on the bottom deck of the troopship. We did realize that we could be in a precarious position if the boat was attacked. Each morning food was returned which must have come from the Officers' quarters, which consisted of trays of bacon and eggs which we were allowed to indulge in. Part of our work seemed to be in a refrigerated area so we got warm clothing. There were large tins of fruit juice in there which, again, we were given permission to help ourselves to. We were ordered to take our lifejackets with us everywhere on board. These seemed to be made up of 4 blocks of what seemed to be cork which we wore at the front, and four more blocks on the back, tied with tapes at the front and rear. Suddenly there was quite a loud boom which seemed to make the whole ship shudder and I suppose that we all thought we were under some sort of attack, especially as the Dutch crew who were working with us hurriedly dashed up the stairs to get to the top deck. Another Guardsman and myself were not able to find our lifejackets, everyone had hurriedly grabbed a belt which did not happen to be their own. In the meantime everything went quiet so we remained where we were. There was not much point in going up on the deck anyway without a life jacket. Gradually we noticed the crew and Guardsmen sheepishly returning down the stairs. I think that someone eventually explained that it was probably depth charges being dropped by the Navy which seemed to cause the noise.

I understand that the rest of the battalion were brought home on an RAF Liberator bomber. The men were situated in the bomb rack where there was a slight sign of daylight showing the length of the bomb rack which allowed the bomb doors to open to discharge the bombs. This sounds a far more precarious position than our troopship. I think that the Pilot had a sense of humour when he said that he hoped he would be able to get the plane off the ground and that he would hug the coast as much as possible in the event of having to ditch. Having second thoughts regarding being in the bomb rack I think I would have preferred to have been secured to the wall of the bomber in the event of someone accidentally operating the control that opened the bomb rack.

Our return journey home was uneventful and we returned to Chelsea Barracks to await what was going to happen to us all.

We were given leave and I had got in touch with my dear Jean who by this time was in Germany with ATS attached to the RAMC and later was to be involved in the clearance of Belsen Horror camp.

Jean got permission for leave and arrived home and we married on the 16th April 1945.

There were some rumours that we may be posted out East at the time. Jean returned to Germany and I returned to Chelsea Barracks when we had the choice of four things: 1. remain in London and do public duties, Buckingham Palace Guards etc.; 2. go to Windsor and do Castle guards, 3. go to the Guards depot to be trained as squad instructors or 4. go to Stobbs Camp, Hawick on Fatigues.

Jean had by this time arrived home from Germany to her home in Perth so I chose to go to Hawick and at least be near Jean in Scotland. We were not as promised put on fatigue duties but were chased on the barrack square as though we were raw recruits plus going on training schemes with the young soldiers who were based at Hawick. However sadly for me it was to be the end of my soldiering days when I was admitted to hospital with pleurisy and double pneumonia which resulted in being in several hospitals lasting more than six months, which meant that Jean had the difficult job of getting to the different hospitals, always involving awkward and quite long journeys and also an expense that we could ill afford. I was eventually discharged from hospital but remained for a while in the Army on what was called a long term scheme.

This all came to an end and I was discharged from the Army, ceasing to fulfil army physical requirements, this I thought was somewhat strange after going through the whole war and I would have thought could have been of some service even if it meant being downgraded from A1. I duly was issued with my blue pinstripe suit, a raincoat, trilby hat which I never did wear, shirt, underclothes, socks and shoes.