Appendix 53

Wolfhamcote Church

Stray Jottings

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THURSDAY, AUGUST 31,

Wolfhampcote (Halstead 1999)Wolfhampcote is situated in what has been called "The Green Heart of England" in the undulating country of Warwickshire but very close to the border of Northamptonshire.The area is about a square mile with four natural boundaries. The four sides of the square are:-

The Oxford and Grand Union Canal. The River Leam, which also marks the County border. The Big Line, formerly GCR and LNER and, finally, The Little Line, formerly the LLNWR and LMS. Both these lines are now disused.We called the latter railway the Little Line because even in the earlier twenties, it was a one track line which ran from Weedon to Leamington-Spa with about four trains a day. The Big Line was more important with passenger trains and long goods trains passing all day on the double tracks between Marylebone and Manchester.

The Village: –

In the early twenties the village consisted of our house, Aunt Sue's house and a pair of stone built cottages. There was also St. Peter's Church (services once a month in the summer), and Puddle Farm, an empty building, once a public house on a closed-off section of an old canal.

Today, Wolfhampcote consists of Aunt Sue's house, our house and one stone built cottage – the two cottages having been converted into one respectable dwelling house. The Church, after a sad period of neglect, is again in good repair and well cared for. There is a service there two or three times a year. Puddle Farm

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Thus getting out at the next station, Braunston and Willoughby, a good mile away, he could walk home (along the track, by special permission) empty handed.Wolfhampcote, know in the Doomsday Book as Ulfremcote, must once have been a large village. There are several legends about it's decline ranging from a plague to the effects of the Enclosures Act.Nearest Villages: –
These are Sawbridge, Flecknoe and Braunston. As a child, I always had the feeling that Flecknoe was a friendly place, whilst Braunston was slightly hostile. This may have been because of a Scarlet Fever epidemic which started in our house and spread to Braunston, with serious results.The Way In: –
The old lane from Sawbridge has declined into a sort of bridle track and should be used only by farm vehicles. It comes into Wolfhampcote by the Ivy Bridge over the canal – once used by commercial long boats, horse drawn or motorised – now by the same boats converted into pleasure cruisers.From Braunston, you leave the A45 at Braunston Bridge, swinging sharp left down a steep incline which leads into the fields. This route enters Wolfhampcote by a bridge over the Leam and there is the Church, just beyond, with our old home just visible on higher ground to the right.The most meandering and pleasant approach is via Flecknoe which is a small, cosy, bosky village. One turns off the A45 at Daventry, for Staverton and Southam. After going downhill beyond Staverton Clump one sees a small lane on the right marked Flecknoe. Beyond Flecknoe there are no signposts; when in doubt, bear right! The road eventually goes to a farm and you think this is a private road but it is alright; the farm, built fairly recently, has it's buildings on both sides of the track. Just beyond you come to a hedge. My young Mother lost her engagement ring near this hedge during a summer picnic. We searched for hours. She wept bitterly but the ring was never found.The land falls

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Wolfhamcote Church

four and we lived with Aunt Sue, Uncle Jim and their daughter Kitty. Then in late 1919 when Dad finally came home from the War, he rented The Hall. This was a large old farmhouse and we lived there until I was nearly fourteen.I cannot remember anything about the move to the Hall but I will never forget the last day. Mum and the children had gone; and a loaded removal van stood waiting in te drive, and Dad and I walked all round the house, looking into each empty room, silently. It was a defeat; Dad had lost all his money and was bankrupt.It was not the end of Wolfhampcote for me as Aunt Sue was to live there for many more years. I well remember the first day, the arrival at her house. We had been met at Rugby by Great Uncle Robert – Aunt Sue's Father, a bearded former sea-captain who did not appear to like little boys.

We alighted from the train at Braunston and Willoughby Station (which is actually at Willoughby) and were met by Mr Cope, who drove the only local motor car. By road, it is a journey of several miles to Wolfhampcote, though only a mile or so if one walks along the railway line. So we eventually came across the Chapel Field, across the Leam, past the Church and the cottages and the Hall and up a slight incline to come in sight of Aunt Sue's house, The Old Vicarage. Having seen us coming (one could always see people coming in that remote place) Aunt Sue and Cousin Kitty were ready to welcome us.As Mr Cope's car turned the corner at the top of the drive, I saw them, at the front door at the top of a great flight of steps, in front of this large house. It was not a great flight of steps really, but it seemed so to a toddler. Each lady held a small dog in her arms and both were smiling.This was the first day of the happiest years of my childhood.Walking home to Wolfhampcote (Halstead 1997)The War MemorialOne evening during the nineteen twenties, having been to the village on some famiily errand, I came

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Wolfhamcote Church

only one more light before the fields, the lamp on the canal bridge. In those days there was nothing unusual in a boy of nine walking home in the dark. As I reached the gate, which opened into a small paddock, I heard the double clip! clop! of hooves coming along the village street behind me, so I paused and looked...Violet ClarkeViolet Clarke was the first of our maids at Wolfhampcote. She told me that two of her brothers had been killed in the Great War. Immediately after attending the funeral of one brother, her third brother Billy had been sent to France, and was also killed. How could they send a third son to the Front when a family had already lost two? Violet told me these things without bitterness, with matter-of-fact acceptance.

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By the way, in those days, every country lane had three ruts, not two; the third rut was made by the hooves of the horses.A few years later, when I was at the Grammar School on Daventry, I once passed by a group of slummy houses and outside one, was Violet, beating out a rug or mat.No longer the smart, uniformed Violet of Wolfhampcote, this was a tired, slatternly woman with untidy hair. However, she gave me a cheery wave and a smile as I passed by. Ah! the carelessness of children! I often walked past that cottage during the years of

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Wolfhamcote Church

Lookit!"Now nearly seven, he is a competent computer operator, telephones his friends for a chat and uses the TV and video with unthinking ease.Now in 1997, it is already many decades since men constructed space rockets and propellants which could lift a ship away from the earth at over seven miles per second, thus achieving escape velocity to travel beyond the pull of earth's gravity into far space. It is many years since men first reached the moon and walked on it's alien surface. Now we have Virtual Reality and in the near tomorrow we will have genetic engineering and NANO machinery – that is, delicate instruments so tiny that they can only be seen by magnification.Lookit! indeed!Lady Riddell...
However, on that autumn evening, 75 years ago, life was simple and without technical complexity, although there were already occasional motor cars to be seen, travelling at a sedate twenty miles per hour (the official speed limit). There were many light horse drawn vehicles such as Dog Carts and Pony Traps, but a Carriage and Pair was becoming unusual. Therefore, I paused at the gate of the paddock and it passed slowly by.The closed carriage was driven by a man in livery, he was well wrapped up against the night chill. On the door was a coat-of-arms and from the window above, the enamelled face of a very ancient lady looked out and our eyes met. She had been born long before the age of aeroplanes and telephones and wireless and even before the regular use of railway trains. She was already an anachronism and she was looking into the face of a small boy who would live beyond the time of the conquest of space.
I found later that this was Lady Riddell of Bragborough Hall, the last of her line. Lady Riddell had been born during the reign of King William the Fourth and died soon after our slight encounter. Bragborough Hall today is the country residence of some great industrial tycoon.The Way Home – so well rememberedNothing

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space said to be well over 40 acres. A stunted, wind-twisted thorn tree stood at the highest point of this field and helped one to be sure of being on the right track. Another guide, even in dense fog and darkness, away to the left was the high embankment of the Blisworth Junction – Leamington branch railway, know to us as "the little line."

There was a legend that once, long ago, a murder was committed in Braunston Church. Because of this sacrilege, the interior of the church was draped in black and not used for seven years. During this time, a temporary chapel was erected in the great field and the villagers worshipped there until All Saints could be re-consecrated.

After the twisted thorn, the way led downwards to the River Leam, where there was a bridge with a locked gate. This was also the County boundary; Braunston is in Northamptonshire, but Wolfhampcote is in Warwickshire. Our family held one of the keys to the locked gate and also one of the keys to St. Peter's, Wolfhampcote.After the Leam there was a rough stony road. The darkness would still be complete, but sometimes Violet would go up the back stairs from her kitchen and place a lighted candle on the sill of a window which faced towards Braunston. From the Leam I could just see the glimmer of that light.Soon on my left I would see the dark bulk of Wolfhampcote Church, once important but now serving only four houses. It was not a place of ghosts or dread to me however, as I played there a good deal, sometimes climbing into the belfry and out onto the roof of the tower, sometimes crawling through a "secret" door under the altar and into the burial vault of long dead Hoods and Tibbetts.In the field on my right was a curious irregularity in the ground that we called "the hollows". I often thought that this might be the site of some ancient fort, surrounded by a moat.

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Wolfhamcote Church

the paddock gate, one autumn evening.Return to Wolfhampcote (April 1995)In June 1944 during my last Army leave, I went back to Wolfhampcote, after several years of war, to visit Aunt Sue. I caught the 10:05 train from Euston to Rugby – and it was a sunny day. From the station I rang Braunston 206 and heard Aunt's lively voice on the phone. Eventually caught a Midland Red bus, which ran into Dunchurch, past Willoughby, until I saw Braunston's graceful spire amid the trees on the hill. (Such a lot of trees everywhere!)I stepped off the bus and was almost at once in the vivid green quietness of the Chapel Field. The forty acre field seemed more small than I had remembered and the distance to the Leam and Wolfhampcote shorter; Staverton Clump still dominated the skyline, but it seemed slightly denuded of trees: perhaps there had been some felling because of the war.On I went, past the old Church, past the house where we lived as children, when Mum and Dad were still young, where my brothers were born. At the half-ruined Old Canal bridge, I took the Sawbridge fork, towards the Ivy Bridge. Aunt Sue must have seen me coming at this point for when I reached her house, she was waiting in a tangled wilderness which had once been an immaculate tennis court.

In profile she seemed an old lady, but when she looked at me full-faced, blue-eyed, I could see the old, quick humorous fire still burning; this was a delight! She had not changed. "I shunna roar" (I shall not cry) said Aunt, misty-eyed, as she kissed me, defiantly.

There had been sad changes elsewhere. Amazing disorder of the once organised garden, gone back to wilderness, impassable in some parts. In one place, a circle of pink and mauve flowers had struggled above the rank grass into the sunshine, but otherwise it was not possible to tell where the great flower beds had once

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asked Mrs Rowlands idly if there was any gossip in the village? Her eyes twinkled. "Well, you remember your Father's farmer friend, Mr Chambers? He has a barmaid from Northampton living in the house. What we don't know is – does she live under the same roof or under the same ceiling?"On my return to Wolfhampcote, I told Aunt this amusing bit of scandal. She looked most grave and said "Fancy talking like that to a boy like you." Here I was, a married man, over thirty years of age, just back from a war and yet I was still apparently a boy, with a child's innocence!Aunt had a well stocked kitchen. At each of my surprised remarks, she twinkled "BM" (black market). Of the vast stock of chickens, only three remained – Mrs Roup, Mrs Dark Brown and Mrs Light Brown. When opening the door of their ancient coop in the mornings, I always crowed like a cockerel, to give the old dears a thrill. I wondered which would be the last to die? – and how lonely she would be with all her companions gone. Finding plenty of eggs appearing at meals, I said "Surely Mrs Roup and Co don't provide all these?" "No. BM" replied Aunt Sue placidly.

Engine drivers on the upgrade of the railway still waved as they passed by, on towards London.Two visits to nearby farms were rewarded by a precious ¼ lb of butter and a dozen eggs to take back to Essex. One day we walked to see Aunt Sue's daughter, Kitty, at Grandborough, some four miles away. Coming back, Aunt, aged 75, was stumping along at such a pace that she tired me, aged 31!It was coming along that quiet lane through the fields between Sawbridge and Wolfhampcote that I thought of the war. A few weeks earlier, tired and disillusioned, I had gone to the West End to call at my old office in Piccadilly Circus and came up from the underground into Trafalgar Square. It was full of swaggering Yankee soldiers, tarts, spivs and scroungers and various crafty wide

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Wolfhamcote Church

Aunt, in her old leather jacket, tweed skirt and shabby brown hat up the lane from Sawbridge; the quiet remembered fields, the hedges, the five bar gates... I thought "By Christ, I would not like those bastards to come rumbling along here! The war was and is worth it, after all

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Name *

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Wolfhamcote Church

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SOUL OF A POET

JOURNALS AND ESSAYS FROM THE LIFE OF A QUINTESSENTIAL ENGLISHMAN 1913-2006

THURSDAY, AUGUST 31, 2006

Stray Jottings

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The Oxford and Grand Union Canal. The River Leam, which also marks the County border. The Big Line, formerly GCR and LNER and, finally, The Little Line, formerly the LLNWR and LMS. Both these lines are now disused.

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Aunt Sue's house is, strictly speaking, outside the square of Wolfhampcote as it is the other side of the Big Line, but so close that the house seemed to tremble in the night when trains on the down grade from London thundered past. It was so close that when Uncle Jim came home from London at the weekend, he could throw his

CONTRIBUTORS
PAUL WILSON
NINA WILSON
SAM WILSON

luggage out and into the garden as the train passed. Thus getting out at the next station, Braunston and Willoughby, a good mile away, he could walk home (along the track, by special permission) empty handed.

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The land falls away slightly. This was the great field known as Ladycroft. In the distance is a Church spire – Braunston. About a half a mile away is a large red-brick house on a slight eminence. This is Aunt Sue's old house. From this direction it is the first house in Wolfhampcote.

Arrival and Departure:-

I first came to the hamlet of Wolfhampcote with my Mother when I was about four and we lived with Aunt Sue, Uncle Jim and their daughter

December 2006
January 2007
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This was the first day of the happiest years of my childhood.

Walking home to Wolfhampcote (Halstead 1997)

The War Memorial

One evening during the nineteen twenties, having been to the village on some famiily errand, I came to the end of Braunston's main street. It was a crisp autumn dusk and the lamp-lighter was just lighting an oil lamp – the last light of Braunston. I had passed the Church of All Saints and had I turned aside to glance at the Village War memorial to the Fallen of the Great War, I would once again have seen, among the many names: Lucas Clarke Thomas Clarke William Clarke.

Ahead of me was a walk of a long mile, most of it across open fields; there was only one more light before the fields, the lamp on the canal bridge. In those days there was nothing unusual in a boy of nine walking home in the dark. As I reached the gate, which opened into a small paddock, I heard the double clip! clop! of hooves coming along the village street behind me, so I paused and looked...

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Violet Clarke

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A few years later, when I was at the Grammar School on Daventry, I once passed by a group of slummy houses and outside one, was Violet, beating out a rug or mat.
No longer the smart, uniformed Violet of Wolfhampcote, this was a tired, slatternly woman with untidy hair. However, she gave me a cheery wave and a smile as I passed by. Ah! the carelessness of children! I often walked past that cottage during the years of Daventry but never thought to call, where I would have been welcomed.
That was seventy years ago; too late now!

Lookit!

When my grandson was only a toddler, he became aware of the marvel of science and technology. Lifted onto a table or shelf, he realised the different perspective from this great height and gazed at the wonders with a cry of "Lookit!" Even more fascinating, you touched a switch and a light came on in the ceiling; an other touch, and the light went off, "Lookit! Lookit!"

Now nearly seven, he is a competent computer operator, telephones his friends for a chat and uses the TV and video with unthinking ease.

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Lady Riddell

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I found later that this was Lady Riddell of Bragborough Hall, the last of her line. Lady Riddell had been born during the reign of King William the Fourth and died soon after our slight encounter. Bragborough Hall today is the country residence of some great industrial tycoon.

The Way Home – so well remembered

Nothing else eventful happened that night. The coach passed on into the darkness and I went through the gate, along the paddock path and out across the Daventry – Dunchurch road (now the A45) and over the canal bridge, where there was another lamp.

Below the bridge was a blacksmith's forge, much used by the bargees – and the Castle Inn. Beyond a five bar gate was the complete blackness of the fields. Down across a small brook, one came into Chapel Field, a vast open space said to be well over 40 acres. A stunted, wind-twisted thorn tree stood at the highest point of this field and helped one to be sure of being on the right track. Another guide, even in dense fog and darkness, away to the left was the high embankment of the Blisworth Junction – Leamington branch railway, know to us as "the little line."

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After the Leam there was a rough stony road. The darkness would still be complete, but sometimes Violet would go up the back stairs from her kitchen and place a lighted candle on the sill of a window which faced towards Braunston. From the Leam I could just see the glimmer of that light.

Soon on my left I would see the dark bulk of Wolfhampcote Church, once important but now serving only four houses. It was not a place of ghosts or dread to me however, as I played there a good deal, sometimes climbing into the belfry and out onto the roof of the tower, sometimes crawling through a "secret" door under the altar and into the burial vault of long dead Hoods and Tibbetts.

In the field on my right was a curious irregularity in the ground that we called "the hollows". I often thought that this might be the site of some ancient fort, surrounded by a moat. After this, the road became hedged; there were some sheep pens on the right and then on the left, the cottage of Jimmie Burke, the Irish shepherd. Then through another five bar gate, into the small field opposite our house and the visible lights of home.

It was a quite ordinary walk home, but I have often pondered on the gap of years that spanned the lives of that ancient lady and a small boy, 75 years ago. The treads of our lives crossed, for an instant, by that last oil lamp and the paddock gate, one autumn evening.

Return to Wolfhampcote (April 1995)

In June 1944 during my last Army leave, I went back to Wolfhampcote, after several years of war, to visit Aunt Sue. I caught the 10:05 train from Euston to Rugby – and it was a sunny day. From the station I rang Braunston 206 and heard Aunt's lively voice on the phone. Eventually caught a Midland Red bus, which ran into Dunchurch, past Willoughby, until I saw Braunston's graceful spire amid the trees on the hill. (Such a lot of trees everywhere!)

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were born. At the half-ruined Old Canal bridge, I took the Sawbridge fork, towards the Ivy Bridge. Aunt Sue must have seen me coming at this point for when I reached her house, she was waiting in a tangled wilderness which had once been an immaculate tennis court.

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The quiet days there and the war so very far away!

In the garage I saw my once beloved Slinky B., the Ford Ten car which I had brought here in late 1939, still on bricks as I had left it, after I had switched off the engine for the last time. Somehow I knew that I would never drive that car again; someone else would take it off the bricks and get the engine going again.

One day I walked over to Flecknoe and visited Mother's old friend, Mrs Rowlands. Over a cup of tea, I asked Mrs Rowlands idly if there was any gossip in the village? Her eyes twinkled. "Well, you remember your Father's farmer friend, Mr Chambers? He has a barmaid from Northampton living in the house. What we don't know is – does she live under the same roof or under the same ceiling?"

On my return to Wolfhampcote, I told Aunt this amusing bit of scandal. She looked most grave and said "Fancy talking like that to a boy like you." Here I was, a married man, over thirty years of age, just back from a war and yet I was still apparently a boy, with a child's innocence!

Aunt had a well stocked kitchen. At each of my surprised remarks, she twinkled "BM" (black market). Of the vast stock of chickens, only three remained – Mrs Roup, Mrs Dark Brown and Mrs Light Brown. When opening the door of their ancient coop in the mornings, I always crowed like a cockerel, to give the old dears a thrill. I wondered which would be the last to die? - and how lonely she would be with all her companions gone. Finding plenty of eggs appearing at meals, I said "Surely Mrs Roup and Co don't provide all these?" "No. BM" replied Aunt Sue placidly.

Engine drivers on the upgrade of the railway still waved as they passed by, on towards London.

Two visits to nearby farms were rewarded by a precious ¼ lb of butter and a dozen eggs to take back to Essex. One day we walked to see Aunt

Sue's daughter, Kitty, at Grandborough, some four miles away. Coming back, Aunt, aged 75, was stumping along at such a pace that she tired me, aged 31!

It was coming along that quiet lane through the fields between Sawbridge and Wolfhampcote that I thought of the war. A few weeks earlier, tired and disillusioned, I had gone to the West End to call at my old office in Piccadilly Circus and came up from the underground into Trafalgar Square. It was full of swaggering Yankee soldiers, tarts, spivs and scroungers and various crafty wide boys.
A big, blowsy woman was singing and ogling the Yanks, hoping for money. The words she bellowed sounded ridiculous - "Mairsey doates and dozie doates and little lamsiedivie." (Only recently I discovered that the words were "Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy". Hardly more interesting.)

I saw all this and thought – have I wasted years of my life for this? Would it matter if the Panzers came here?

However, now, on this June evening, following Aunt, in her old leather jacket, tweed skirt and shabby brown hat up the lane from Sawbridge; the quiet remembered fields, the hedges, the five bar gates... I thought "By Christ, I would not like those bastards to come rumbling along here! The war was and is worth it, after all."

A Child's Remembrance of the Great War. (Halstead 2004)

I was only a toddler at that time, so my memories are disjointed, fragmentary.

Dad was a person often spoken of but never seen. For some reason, I imagined him as a man in a tweed jacket, standing, feet astride in the bows of a grey warship. The first time I remember really seeing him was on a rainy railway station, at night. He was nor wearing a tweed jacket but a long blue raincoat and a peaked cap with a sort of golden badge on the front.

Soon after this I decided to volunteer for the Navy. I left the house unobserved and walked along to Grimsby Docks. I took my favourite toy, a red wooden railway engine with me, pulling it by a string. There was much bustle and activity at the Docks and I stood there, rather shyly, with my railway engine and began to wonder if I had made a mistake.

Just then, an elderly man with a peaked seaman's cap and a white beard came and spoke to me. I had nothing to say, so he took me by the hand and led me and my engine to a Police Station. Soon afterwards I was collected from there by a frantic Mum. She was too relieved to be cross.

Once there was a Zepplin raid and a man with a posh and authoritative

voice came down the street shouting "Put that light out!" I was put under the table and several Aunts and my Mum sat around. There were a couple of thumps somewhere but I felt quite safe, indeed cosy, under the table, surrounded by long skirts, like a protective wall. When it was over I was taken out into the street. It seemed odd; although it was the middle of the night, the whole sky was bright like an orange sunset. Two planes flew slowly over, lighted from tip to tail.

Mum used to play the piano. Once, she was playing and singing a song called, "There's a long, long trail a winding." There was a picture on the cover of the sheet of music; it showed a soldier walking along a long winding path in the moonlight, towards a house where a lady looked out from a window.

Suddenly, Mum stopped singing and stopped playing and began to cry, still sitting there in front of the piano. In my childish way I wondered if it was my fault. had I done something to upset her?

A more happy occasion was when Dad came home on leave. We were living then, at a remote house in the Midlands, right alongside the Great Central Railway from London to Manchester. At night we could hear the trains chuffing by, so close they shook the house. Then, one night, a goods train came, travelling north. However, as it came near, it slowed and slowed and nearly stopped, then gathered speed and went on.

A few minutes later, Dad was knocking on the door! He had been given a lift from London, on the footplate!

The war ended, but Dad did not come home for another year. Being an Officer on a minesweeper, he had to help clear the seas. I was told that he received double pay for this duty: £14 a week.

When he eventually came home, he brought fascinating loot. Besides a wind-up gramophone and records, there was a shell-case, half a Mills bomb, a bronze mine-sweeping plaque, a heavy revolver and rounds (this would have been a .45), a large White Ensign and a huge Union Jack.

In the following years, when I was old enough to walk to school, several miles away, I often encountered men who had come back from the trenches. To me, these men were heroes, giants, but it is sad to recall that many of them were unemployed tramps, in shabby clothes, with tattered ribbons on their jackets.

Once one asked me the way to the "Union" in the next town. "Is that an hotel?" I asked. They laughed bitterly and said, "Maybe it is. Hope you never find out, son." The Union (of course) was the workhouse.

At this time each village and town was erecting a War Memorial. As we sat by the roadside one said, "They remember the ones that stayed out

there, son, but they don't remember the ones that came back." These men often spoke of France, usually of comic incidents. Never about the horrors. Perhaps human beings are blessed with a condition known as the merciful Freudian Amnesia.

A Message for Mrs Mason. (Halstead 2004)

It was a time, during the late nineteen twenties, when our family fortunes were in decline. We lived in Gwendolen Road, Leicester. The nearby side road was Nansen Road and here in a new semi-detached house (£550) lived Mr and Mrs Mason and her three children, Dorothy, Wilfred and Joyce Knowles. Their father, Mr Knowles had been killed in the Great War. Mr Mason had been wounded in the same War and walked with a painful limp. He was a travelling stationery salesman. He was a quiet person.
Mrs Mason was buxom, blowsy and lively, with dyed red hair. Our Mother often was attracted to such persons and one day let her new friend dye her hair with some sort of henna. The result so horrified her husband and three sons that she never did it again.

Once in a heavy summer heat-wave, she called at our home, in pious horror, saying, "Do you know, Mr Mason says that some of the young women, because of the heat, are not wearing corsets!" We all loved this prim remark from Mrs Mason, of all people.

For a while, we lost touch with the Masons. We had to move down market, to Ellis Avenue on the other side of Leicester. We rented No.9. This was a gas-lit, furnished house, flush lav outside in the tiny back yard and a bath and copper in the scullery. The modest rent was collected each Saturday, by Mr Turvey, a grey and quiet man, involved with choral music. (He worked, like me, at the British United, a huge firm nearby. He worked in a dreary room with many other grey men. I do not know what they did, but it seemed hopeless work. I do remember that when I was dismissed from the BU, Mr Turvey was brave enough and kind enough to come down to my office to express his sympathy.)

Ellis Avenue was the last place of respectability before the slums. To prove this, it was called "Avenue" not "Street" and each dwelling had a garden, about one yard deep, to thus separate the front door from the pavement. One day, Mum received a letter from Mrs Mason. She had left her husband – I do not know what reason was given – and now lived, with her children, on the outskirts of Leicester. That weekend I was given Mum's reply and told to find Mrs Mason at her new home. So I cycled off and eventually found it. There was a large grassy field with about a dozen new red-brick bungalows in it. No road or footpaths; it was as though the bungalows had grown out of the grass.

I wheeled my bike down towards one of the lower bungalows. It's door was closed and all the blinds were drawn. I was most interested to see Mr Mason outside. He was banging on the door with his walking stick,

shouting. He looked very cross indeed.
He glanced at me and then shouted at the silent house, "Now Stephen is here. Are you going to let him in?" He thumped the door again and called, "Send out your fancy man! I want to speak with your fancy man!" Leaving me at the front door, he went around the house and presently I heard him banging on the back door.

Left alone, I lifted the letter flap of the front door and peered inside. I saw a short hallway, empty, but as I looked, a side door opened and two persons stepped into the hall. One was a rough looking man, barefoot and clad only in trousers. Beside him was Mrs Mason, twice his age, also barefoot and wearing a slip – no corsets! An awful sight. I hastily closed the flap of the letter slot. After a lot more shouting and banging and requests for the fancy man, Mr Mason gave up and limped away.

After a further interval of silence, I was called to the door. It was Dorothy, speaking through the letter flap. "Stephen! Has Daddy gone?" I said this was so and was let in. We all sat by the fire drinking tea rather subdued. After at least ten minutes, the boyfriend sprang to his feet crying, "I'm going after him! If I catch him, I'll give him a damn good thrashing!" We were all silent for a while after his dramatic departure and then one of the children said quietly, "I hope he doesn't catch him, 'cos Daddy's got a bad leg. It wouldn't be fair."

Having delivered Mum's message I left. Mrs Mason told me proudly that her gentleman friend was a professional soccer player, with Leicester City. Needless to say, he did not overtake Mr Mason; it was just a show. When I got home, Mum and Dad asked me how I found Mum's old friend. I described the above scenes in detail, with relish. When I had finished, Dad announced, No one in this house will ever see that woman again." Mum agreed demurely, "Of course not, dear." But she did!

Mrs Mason came under the protection of an old wealthy man and was installed, with her children in a large house in Narborough Road. I often called there with messages but was never allowed to see or be seen by the old man, who, it was rumoured was a distant relation of Mum's family.

Soon after this our fortunes began to improve. Dad got a job in Lincoln and presently sent for Mum and the boys. I stayed, going into digs with a kind friend of Mum's and became part of her family in a house at the posh end of the Avenue. A house with electric light and an indoor bathroom and lav. Our gas-lit house in Ellis Avenue was vacated and the last rent paid to Mr Turvey, wearing his cycle clips. For the last day, Mum and the boys moved to – yes! Narborough Road and Mrs Mason's hospitality.

I remember, after I left work on their last night, I walked across the city to say good-bye. It was a calm night of bright moonshine. As I went to cross the bridge over the River Soar I heard a gramophone record being

played on a river boat below. It was "The Desert Song," "Blue Heaven," and "One Alone." Whenever I hear that music, I think of that moonlit walk on the last day of our family life in Leicester.

I never saw Mrs Mason again. A year or so later, I met Mr Mason, for the first time since the scene outside the bungalow. I was on reception at the BU and he was making a sales visit. As he waited for his interview he said quietly, "Stephen, do you know where my wife is?" I replied that I did not. Why give this likeable person more grief?

Fields of Green (Halstead 1996)

This is the story of two country walks – they were called rambles in those days – which I led in the summer of 1932. The purpose of this story is to illustrate that I was, at that time, an over-confident and thoughtless person, lacking in good judgement and leadership; in short, as my daughter Nina, would say, "A Thick Sod." The only good quality revealed is a sort of dull, plodding integrity. If I had been the captain of a passenger liner, it would have certainly sunk through poor maintenance. However, as she went down, I would have apologised to the passengers for the lack of life-boats and assured them that if the wireless had been working, I would have allowed them to send farewell messages to their relatives.

A letter came to the Leicester Scout Association from Nottingham. It suggested that a party of Notts. Cub-Scouters should meet with a party from our Association for a ramble in the wild and lovely Charnwood Forest country near Leicester. This was an excellent idea which was at once agreed; unfortunately, I was selected to lead the Leicester contingent.

I walked the proposed route carefully and found a tea-house - near Ulverscroft Priory – in the right place, booked tea for a party of 30 to 40 people. I rechecked the route I had chosen; fifteen miles from railway station back to railway station. The Nottingham leader, a man twice my age, wrote expressing pleasure with my plans but mildly suggested that fifteen miles was rather long for his people, some of whom were not regular walkers. Perhaps eight miles might be better? However, in my folly, I overbore him and the ramble remained at the longer distance.

My party of about twenty arrived at the rendezvous by bus, just before the Nottingham train arrived. First class weather, a lovely walk, good conversation and an enjoyable tea in a pleasant place. All went well, except that about half of our Notts. friends missed their return train and would have to wait a couple of hours for the next one, at a station that did not have a refreshment room. Somewhat embarrassed, we Leicester people strolled on to the small town of Mountsorrel and our bus home, muttering, "Well, they could have walked faster" or "They lingered too long over tea" and surprisingly, no one blamed my poor route planning.

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During the next weeks, in my dull integrity, I went to the bus company and managed to prove that our small party had been slightly over-charged and was eventually granted a slight cash rebate. At the next Association meeting I gravely handed out the rebate, which amounted to one shilling for each member of the ramble. (Five pence!) This most piffling matter was greeted with a round of applause and quite overcast my stumbling, mumbling explanation of those poor, tired Nottinghamshire Cub-Scouters whom we had left standing at the station.

A month later there was a return ramble, somewhere in Nottinghamshire, and I was detailed to lead the Leicester party of 14 – 7 girls and 7 men. Why did they trust me a second time? Perhaps it was the distribution of the shillings. Again it was a lovely day and we were taken through unfamiliar but attractive country deep into Nottinghamshire. At the end of the ramble they brought us safely back to an isolated railway station in the middle of nowhere, that is to say, acres and acres of fields surrounded by miles and miles of bugger-all.

There was about an hour before our train back to Leicester so, of course, Thick Sod has to ask, "Can't we walk on to the next station down the line? We don't want to wait here that long." "Well, yes" said the elderly (over forty) Notts. leader "There is a station down the line but it is about four miles away, by a path through the fields." "Is it easy to follow?" "Yes, it's a clear path parallel to the line all the way, but – it's four miles and it will be dark by the time you get there." "All the more reason not to delay then," I rashly cried, "Let's go!"

So after a hasty farewell to our friends, the 14 of us set off, quickly dropping down onto a pleasant well-trodden path southwards as the sun was setting. Very soon the group became seven couples, well dispersed as the pace quickened. My companion was Miss Foster, an auburn-haired healthy lady, a good walker. I had walked with her many times, joined her at meetings and swum with her, but I did not regard her as a possible girl-friend, or even know her Christian name. Miss Foster was getting on in years, probably at least thirty. We strode on onto the twilight, only one couple ahead of us and the tail of the procession right out of sight.

As we walked I began to form a poem in my head, called "Twilight Ways." It began -

"Fields of green which change
To golden corn in the night wind moving"

but I never got any further than that. What a masterpiece it might have been!

Now it grew really dark. Miss Foster looked at her watch and we walked even faster. Out of the corn fields at last and there was the lonely

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station, a small halt, up on an embankment. We ascended to the platform just behind the first couple. We'd made it! But what of the others? There was a pool of light below the station, and beyond that, the darkness. Had I made another balls-up?

Away to the north along the railway track we saw a pin-point of light, which rapidly increased in size. "The train!" Two figures appeared out of the darkness below. "Run!" we all yelled and they did, coming safely up onto the platform a few seconds before the little train puffed to a halt. Another couple came out of the darkness and started to run. Then they stopped, spoke together, waved at us casually and strolled forward without concern. The train pulled out. Six out of fourteen, I thought dismally. I had lost over half my flock.

I cannot remember what we talked about on the long journey back to Leicester LMS main station, but I think unkind criticism was avoided. There had been one porter/station-master to see our train off, the entire staff of that small Halt. He had confirmed that there would be one more train to Leicester that night – much later.

Having reached Leicester, I tramped alone around the City calling at each of the four homes to explain to parents what had happened to their daughters and the probable time of their arrival home. The girls unfortunately lived in four different parts of the City and there were few private telephones in those days. So this was the dull integrity bit. Leicester is a large City but I was back in my digs in Belgrave well before midnight, and by that time, I hoped that the last train from Nottinghamshire would have arrived.

This all happened over sixty years ago and looking back now, I wonder if any of the missing couples were perhaps willing to miss that train? It was a warm summer night...

However, at the time, no such thoughts entered my head. I was a nice little boy then.
There were no more inter-County rambles and I certainly was not consulted about the possibility of arranging one.

I saw a photograph of Miss Foster the other day (perhaps it reminded me of this incident). It was taken at a mixed camp – A Wood Badge Training Centre – and she is about to plunge into an icy pool with three men, one of them myself. To give Miss Foster credit, she was the only woman in that camp who entered the pool. It was really cold. There we stand, frozen in time and in fact, all wearing decorous bathing costumes; it was before the days of trunks and bikinis.

Those Remembered Words. (Halstead 2003)

It all happened so long ago, that distant time of war – a lifetime ago.
Yet some words and remarks are still remembered:

First, September 3rd 1933. 339 Battery was assembled in the Chelmsford Market Place for a lecture by the MO. Instead, the Battery Commander, Major Ingledew appeared and at midday made what must be one of the shortest speeches ever delivered to the troops. In short, clipped sentences he said, "We've been at war with Germany since 110'clock this morning. So we've got to fight the buggers. That's all."

In that same autumn of 1939, during a drill order, a truck load of Yeomen halted beside the War Memorial of a small Essex village. As they waited for orders, the men glanced at the Memorial tablet. There was a sad list of a dozen names above an inscription: 1914-1918 THEY DIED IN WAR THAT YOU MIGHT LIVE IN PEACE

A gunner commented, "You died for bugger-all mates." Because he was a soldier, in uniform, the remark was not offensive.

Also that autumn, a new PSI was appointed, Sergeant Tommy Essler. After his first visit, he returned to their hotel and his wife asked what he thought of the Yeomanry? He replied, "Good material."

The first two Yeomen to be wounded, near Bardia, were Bombardier Jim Hutley and Gunner Ron Hadlow, hit by fragments of the same shell. Hadlow cried dramatically "They got me! They got me!" Hutley, a master of the understatement, added, "I think I'm hit, too, sir."

One hot summer's day during the Siege of Tobruch, Battery Captain Robin Boulton thoughtfully observed, "This war will go on for years and years. We shall all end up throwing bloody stones at each other!"

Sergeant Major Frank Carlo loved and cared for "his boys" but sometimes used the wrong words. Once on arriving at a former enemy position, he warned, "Now, listen together. Beware of the booby troops."

Last words of the dying: Gunner Donald Bibby, near Tobruch - "They got me this time." Gunner Paul Bayliss, near Sidi Barani, to the MO - "Just a touch of the old rheumatics, sir."

Battery Captain Robin Boulton, sitting beside his wrecked truck at the edge of the minefield, to the rescue party, "Hullo Sergeant, We've just been blown up."

Let us conclude with the comment of the elegant Gunner Bax. At the height of the final bombardment of the German gun-line. Quite detached, in an atmosphere of noise and controlled frenzy, he observed quietly, "We do see life, don't we?"

Well I suppose we did. At El Alamein. And other places.

Sober and Properly Dressed (Halstead 1997)

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By March 1940, 339 Battery had settled in at their first overseas camp, near Gedera, Palestine. There had been a few escorted trips to Jerusalem, but on the 13th it was decided that the possibility of independent leave passes to the nearest town, Rehovoth, could now be considered.

As a trial, the authorities chose two dull and respectable Signals Bombardiers for the first outing on a pass from After Duty until 23:59 hours, S and PD. They were to be sent forth, like the doves from Noah's Ark, to test the waters. It was felt that these men were the least likely to get drunk, accost women or start fights in the streets. They were more likely to have a sober meal in a respectable cafe, visit respectable shops and attend a respectable cinema before making their sober return to camp. This theory was mainly correct - therefore the Bombardiers chosen for the adventure were Ling and Dawson.

Having received our passes in the Battery Office, BSM Essler gravely handed over a rifle and ten rounds. This was presumably for our protection during the journey to Town. The parting admonition from BSM Essler, delivered with a straight face, was "If one of you refuses to come back the other one is authorised to shoot him with this rifle." We were finally seen off in a more avuncular manner by our gentle Signal Officer, Lieutenant EC Adams.

We caught the bus feeling rather important with our rifle, and presently arrived safely in Rehovoth, a town of white buildings, which then centred round a single wide street, bordered by tree-lined pavements. We handed in the rifle and rounds at the local post of the Palestine Police and strolled along the street, gazing in shop windows. We felt free! - in a strange foreign town, with no other Englishmen except those at the Police Post.

The first thing we noticed, as we saw the prices displayed in the shops, was that the Arab and Jewish traders around our camp were absolute robbers... (Probably this was because we were the first soldiers to visit the town. No doubt prices would be rapidly adjusted upwards when the influx of suckers really started.)

In a German cafe we enjoyed coffees – the first since leaving England – and then made purchases in several shops. We bought pipe-cleaners, Palestinian cigarettes, shoe polish, chocolate, darning wool, buttons and an olive-wood cigarette case.
Ling, after hours of deliberation, bought a really good camera. The people in this shop laughed and made us tea; they had soft, kindly voices, quite different to the trades people we had known around the Camp and in Jerusalem. English of a sort was spoken everywhere except the wool shop, so here some time was spent in explaining that we needed two small skeins of a particular shade of darning wool. The whole shop was cheerfully turned out for this small purchase which came to 6 mills.

Worn out by all this excitement, we then had tea at a pleasant Hebrew cafe named "Freulich". From the title, we expected that German would be spoken in "Freulich" but this was not so. However, the waitress had about a dozen words of English and we were able to order some excellent eggs and chips.

When we emerged from this cafe it was well past nightfall and we were pleasantly surprised to find the whole street lit up – no black-out! Lights were gleaming everywhere, among the trees and before the white houses with their shutters and window blinds. With some difficulty, we found the huge cinema and took back stalls.

The cinema was packed with an enthusiastic audience; we were the only soldiers. The film had already started. It was in English with Hebrew sub-titles. It was called "The Mystery of Treasure Island" and was so melodramatic and corny that it was almost comical and we continually laughed aloud in the wrong places.

After an hour or so we realised that it must be one of those Saturday morning serials, with the episodes strung together, with climax after climax, into one very long film. Much of the action concerned a girl on a ladder, on a smoking volcano, with a wicked villain and a brave hero. Once, the hero was flung down a 100 foot cliff amid lumps of red-hot lava, but he landed safely in the foliage of some trees, just before they burst into flame. The hero then rushed back up the cliff and arrived just in time to prevent the villain from kicking the girl's ladder over backwards. The ladder with the girl on top of it, went back to the vertical, but then gently returned to rest safely on the edge of the cliff.

It could, perhaps, be described as unsophisticated entertainment. After four hours, the conflict was still unresolved but we had to leave the cinema and return to the Police Station, only to be told that the Tel-Aviv bus had come through early and there was no other until midnight. We very wisely telephoned the Camp to report our problem and found BSM Essler quite understanding. He said we had been right to phone. He would go down to the Guard and explain our late arrival. This gave us a good feeling. This was not some Base Depot, this was our Yeomanry. We collected our rifle and ten rounds and came back on the almost empty bus. The Guard was expecting us and on the Sergeant major's advice, our mates in the tent had got our beds ready.

It was good to have experienced a few hours of freedom but it was also good to be back with our family.

An Off-Duty Afternoon (Halstead 1998)

Jebel-at-Tur in Samaria is not a great mountain but rising to 881 metres just south west of Nablus it dominated the view from the signallers' billets. There seemed to be some ruins at the summit and after gazing upwards for several weeks, five of us decided to make the climb one afternoon when off duty. The war news from home was

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frequently alarming and the future of our country uncertain at this time and an air of depression existed in the Battery.

On Wednesday 26th June, 1940, according to regulations, we took with us a rifle and six rounds. We split into two parties for the ascent – Ling, Hadlow and I went up the rocks, Chenery (known as The Trapper) and Pond scrambled and walked up a long sloping gully about a quarter of a mile to the left. After a short, hard climb using the hands, we sighted the summit – the remains of an old tower rising from the general scene of tumbled desolation. At the same time we saw Pond and Chenery toiling upwards some distance off. "Come on" said Ling, "Let's get there first," and we staggered across the rough broken ground at a shambling trot and reached the tower about 20 yards ahead of the others. They were coming up through the ruins of an old temple, one carrying the rifle, both looking business like. Four of us climbed onto the roof of the tower – probably the tomb of some long gone holy man – by some steep steps. Chenery, however, disdained the steps and somehow climbed like a fly up the thick 25 foot wall.

We took photographs, we rested there in the sun, we forgot the war. We gazed at the views; we felt young and strong and far from the ambience of the Great Conflict.

We eventually, with reluctance, decided to return to the realities of Army life.
Soon after leaving the summit, the Trapper and I, who had separated from the others, met an elderly Arab sitting among the rocks. No doubt pleased to practice his English he called us over and we squatted down beside him.

"See that place" said the old man, pointing to a distant group of houses, "Awrance stay in that village. When I had not many years, I see him." After a moment we realised he was speaking of Lawrence of Arabia and questioned him further.
"One day I see him and he smile at me," said the Arab. "He was a great man like a king." This reminded him of something else and he added, "After the big War your Georgie King send for Awrance and say to him "Excuse me please, I want give you a medal" but Awrance say, "No. You make me liar to Arab people and I not want medal."

We had never heard of this alleged interview between King George V and Lawrence but we could not take offence as the old man spoke with dignity and nostalgia.
"So you see," he concluded, "Awrence loved the Arab people and we who remember, love him."

After graceful farewells we continued the descent down the steep slopes above Jacobs Well. Trapper, who had the rifle, slipped and fell down a small cliff. I looked down anxiously from my handhold above, fearing that he might be badly injured. However, like the good soldier he was, Trapper's first thought was for the rifle; he worked the bolt, squinted

along the barrel as he lay in the rocks and called up, "The breach and bolt are OK." The wooden "furniture", however, around the breach was smashed and looked a sorry mess.

After this we slowly made our way down and the Trapper went to the MI Room for treatment on his many cuts and bruises. We had two half mugs of well-stewed tea from the cookhouse and heard the latest serious news from Europe.

The Trapper and I went to the OC next day – not as defaulters – it was just an investigation into the facts about the damaged rifle. We were told that there would probably be a full Court of Inquiry at some later time and we might have to pay for the damage. However, soon after this, the Battery moved into the Western Desert and the incident was forgotten.

It all happened a long time ago and it is sad to reflect that only two of those five young men are still living.

The Fog of War (Halstead 1993)

The retreat from Mersa Brega towards Tobruch, began on Wednesday 2nd April 1941. There had been a stand at Agedabia but then it became a rout of packed vehicles feeing eastwards. After many adventures, 339 Battery of the Essex Yeomanry went into position in wooded country in Derna Province but still to the west of De Martino.
This was Saturday 5th April.

During the day, a report came in that enemy columns crossing the desert from Sceleidima were attacking Mechili. In the late afternoon, at 45 minutes notice, 339 Battery moved out of position and off towards Mechili. We managed to get ourselves a good meal first, of biscuits and bully stew, followed by a second course of porridge oats mixed with creamy evaporated milk. We were well supplied at this time, because as the Army fell back, we cleared out as many food and supply dumps as possible.

The roads had been crowded, with engineers mining all bridges and defiles. Now, the men going forward with us were laughing and in high spirits, sometimes singing as we drove on south eastwards into the night and the desert. I was in the HQ Signals Truck, designated M1. The occupants of this open truck were George the Sergeant, Geordie the driver and four line signallers – Vic, Basil, Jack and myself.

At midnight as Saturday became Sunday, I relieved Geordie and took over driving M1. We were now in the darkness of untracked desert. Although we did not know it then, in the ebb and flow of desert warfare, we were probably behind the line of advance of the enemy.

After some time, the truck stopped but I soon got it going again by switching to the reserve petrol tank. However, during those few

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minutes, whilst I searched for and found the switch tap, the last vehicles of the Battery passed us and disappeared ahead. I drove on alone into the darkness, expecting to quickly regain contact with the convoy. Around me, my companions slumbered peacefully, the Sergeant beside me, the other stretched out among the kit in the back of the truck.

Presently we reached the rear of a stationary column of vehicles, so I halted also and switched off the engine. Then one became aware of the absolute silence of desert night, broken only by gentle snores from the rear of the truck, probably Basil, a particularly sound sleeper in all circumstances.

Nothing happened and after about ten minutes, feeling uneasy, I left the truck and walked forward along the column to see what was causing the delay. Each vehicle was packed with sleeping men and half alert drivers, waiting. At last I reached the the head of the long column and found to my alarm that the lead vehicle was not one of ours! It was a staff car and inside was an Aussie soldier asleep at the wheel. I shook him awake and said "What's on? Why have you stopped?" The Aussie stared at me. peered ahead, muttered something about "the light", started up his engine and roared off. Immediately, all the trucks in the convoy started up and followed him.

At this point I realised that it would have been intelligent to have awakened our driver, Geordie or the Sergeant, before leaving M1 to make distant investigations. I now ran back, in some anxiety, towards our truck at the extreme end of this long column. I was not even sure that they were all 339 Battery trucks; some certainly were not as they contained infantry men.

By the time I had reached and mounted M1 every other vehicle had long gone and the desert was empty. We trundled along aimlessly into the darkness. All my companions still slept, like trustful children, knowing that good old Steve was in complete control of events. However, good old Steve himself, lonely at the wheel, was having grave doubts about this.

After an hour or so my hopes were raised by seeing a dim glow to our right; I steered towards it. When I reached the source of the glow, I found that it came from the dashboard light of a large British truck, pointing in the direction from which we had come, that is to say, north westwards. The truck had a sinister air about it, recently abandoned and windscreen smashed by bullets, driver's door hanging open and ignition switched on.
Fearing that some of my trustful comrades might awake and suddenly lose all their trust and confidence, I did not investigate further but drove on, roughly south eastwards, by the stars, as I had no compass. By this time I was terrified – not of the Afrika Korps but of my Sergeant! I was dreading the moment when he would wake up and ask the awful question, "Where are we, Steve?"

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On and on we went, without encountering another vehicle or person. Hours went by and still M1 rumbled on alone, until gradually the darkness thinned and the brief desert morning twilight came. Then, quite suddenly, it was full daylight and I halted M1 cautiously in the lee of a large sandy mound. I switched off, dismounted and climbed the mound.
The desert was empty in all directions except for a solitary British light truck some hundred yards away. An officer was standing in the truck, binoculars at his eyes, looking straight at me. No doubt he had been alerted by our trail dust. The slow, deliberate voice of our Battery Captain came clearly over the still air, "Follow me."

Suddenly it became a beautiful desert morning. I raised my arm in joyful acknowledgement, doubled back to M1 and started up the engine. As we began to move, the Sergeant awoke, looked around and enquired, "Where are we, Steve?" With the quiet confidence of a competent Yeoman, I replied, "We are following the Battery Captain, Sergeant." Fortunately, George accepted this answer and asked no further questions.

Our rescue was not accidental; the Battery Captain, in his K truck had been making a sweep around the area in the hope of finding stragglers. In fact, we were not far off course and at about 7a.m. we came into the main assembly of the Battery.

The O.P. (Observation Post)

As there were few natural points for artillery observation around the perimeter of Tobruch, use was made of tall masts, like telegraph poles, which had been put up originally by the Italians. They were ascended by a vertical ladder and from the "crow's nest" at the top a considerable distance could be observed. Some of the posts were unmanned and one hoped that the distant enemy could not tell which mast housed an observer. The post was usually manned by an officer, a specialist assistant or "Ack", a signaller and a driver. The team changed each night.

Certain points in the featureless landscape, known as the panorama, were registered by gunfire, so as to facilitate rapid response from the guns if activity was observed. Such points as "Wrecked Tank," "Scrub Clump," and "Bright Spot" were typical. The latter was the half buried remains of a petrol can.

Observation was most difficult during the late forenoon when the heat of the sun caused a shimmering haze or mirage effect, and best in the late afternoon. At night, flash spotting of enemy guns was carried out. Genial members of the Bush Artillery would often come to the post asking, "Can we fire our gun, Captain?' One of their guns, a large Iti gun affectionately named Musso was frequently used to bang off.

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The orders were not anything like the precise fire-orders transmitted to the British Battery and one heard such orders as "A bit to the left," or "cock her up a bit."
Musso may not have done much damage but her crew certainly enjoyed the gunnery.

From Mechili to Tobruch (Halstead 1999)

On the morning of Sunday 6th April 1941, after a night march, the men of 339 Battery halted six miles from Mechili, where remaining elements of the HQ of the 2nd Armoured Division were believed to be situated. There was time for tea and a snack. Everything seemed "peaceful" until we found a quantity of .303 Lee Enfield rifles strewn about. We were accustomed to finding abandoned Iti rifles but it was unusual and alarming to discover British rifles discarded in the sand. On M1, the Battery Signals truck, we collected a score or so but there were too many so in the end we just removed the bolts. There was also a rumour that Mechili was already in enemy hands and that wireless contact with the Regiment had ceased.

Eventually, the whole Battery got under way and drove north westwards. Although nothing was happening, there was now an air of tension and unease. We moved with a long line of soft vehicles in the centre; our 25 pounders travelled on each flank, making three parallel lines. In each towing vehicle (FWD tractor) the Gun Number One could be seen, scanning constantly outwards, forwards and rearwards. We in the open trucks, without being told, were also watching in all directions, including the sky.

With us now in the formation was the 25 pounder gun from "A" Troop, which had been feared taken by the enemy. This gun had last been seen at Agedabia, far to the west and three days ago. However, during a cautious patrol this morning, our Battery Commander had come across the gun, limber and FWD tractor at a place named, appropriately enough, Essex Ridge. That which had been lost had been mysteriously found, though not the crew. The gun was in working order except for the breech ring and dial sight and so we brought it home.

We passed evidence of hasty flight, abandoned trucks, tin hats and rifles. Once we halted beside a dead British Officer, sprawled across the track; a fair-haired, blue eyed boy, chest badly blood stained, a revolver in his hand. Our Wagon Lines Officer dismounted from a nearby truck and took the dead man's identity disc then gently removed the revolver in his hand. Some of us began to dig a grave but did not have time to complete the job as the convoy moved on suddenly. I placed a little three-ply cross on his body before I jumped aboard the moving truck. "RIP A British Ordnance Officer. April 1941"

We looked back as the last truck swerved to avoid the body. He seemed very lonely, lying there, deserted. He, also, was someone's son. We became silent. The track seemed even more evil and ominous. The heat

increased. Then we turned northwards towards the distant Derna – Tobruch road.

Now, away to the west as we travelled northwards, we could see many dust trails. Vehicles, tanks or dust devils? Now, on our left, much nearer, we saw a body of about a hundred men in darkish uniforms. They were marching in close formation and appeared to be unarmed. One man detached himself from the group and ran towards the track. Our last vehicle, that of the Battery Commander, paused, halted, then accelerated on towards our main convoy. Who were those men? Germans? Italians? or Aussie prisoners of war whom we could have liberated?

The Battery Commander in X car, a most gallant and patriotic officer, who was to sacrifice his own life during the next year, frequently wondered if, in the stress of the moment he had made the right decision when he drove on, without further investigation.

Away on our left,westwards, we could now see dust, burning vehicles, tanks and heavy smoke. The column came to a bend in the track and turned away from Derna, eastwards, towards Tobruch. Speed increased and for the first time we lost our usual excellent desert formation; instead we hurried on in a fleeing mass of vehicles, huddled close together amid great clouds of dust.

Suddenly three fighter planes appeared behind us. "PLANES!" "PLANES!" and trucks swerved left and right in an instant of terror. The planes dropped to low strafing position, then suddenly broke away, waggling their wings. Hurricanes! The encounter was over in a moments. Thank God they recognised us in all that dust. As we swung back onto the track, a gun bombardier leaned over the side of his vehicle, teeth shining whitely in his dust streaked face - "An interesting few seconds Boy! Broke the monotony didn't it?" and he smiled, a genuine, easy smile.

A few moment earlier, the flesh of our bodies had been cringing at the expected impact of metal. However, in the British Army there is always someone with a laugh or a wry comment which releases the tension. This time it was the normally grave and sardonic Trapper and soon we were all joking about the incident.

Blazing vehicles were all along the track, many of them ours. A Bren Gun Carrier blew up just after we passed by; there was certainly a feeling of defeat. Martuba Oasis was deserted except for some Arabs looting Aussie kits.

At last we came off the desert track onto the hard surface of the coast road. A signpost read: Derna 24 Tobruch 146. We turned towards Tobruch; for the first thirty miles the road was silent and empty except for the detritus of war; one had the feeling that everyone had gone and we had been left behind. Would enemy forces from Mechili have

already reached the Timimi cross roads far ahead? If so, we were hopelessly cut-off.

The convoy pressed on with desperate haste. Any truck which broke down was immediately abandoned after further disablement, whilst the men were taken aboard one of the other, already packed vehicles. Shortages of fuel was another anxiety until we found the remains of a dump of petrol cans, placed along the road a few hours earlier by the RASC. This provision must have saved many of the retreating remnants of the Western Desert Force. We were now in a single line, but well dispersed, M1 being near the end of the column. A few armoured cars came up from behind, and passed us at speed – the last of the rear-guard, we presumed cheerfully.

At this time, as we proceeded eastwards, there was an almost comic incident. We came upon a RASC depot beside the road and it had not been abandoned! Four soldiers unaware of disaster, lounged around a fire enjoying fried eggs and hot tea. Loot for the taking! Without anyone suggesting it, our truck swerved in, past the relaxed soldiers and four of us jumped out and began loading boxes – anything portable. The soldiers stared in dismay; it was all over in a minute as the voice of the Battery Captain shepherded us back to the road, "Keep going! They are already over the escarpment." M1 swung back onto the road as those startled soldiers stood in shock, mugs of tea in their hands, suddenly bereft of leisure, comfort and security.

A few minutes later, looking back beyond the very watchful Battery Captain in K truck, we were amused to see a lorry lurch out of that depot and take to the road at speed, leaving all that lovely food, stacks and stacks of boxes, lost for ever. The lorry soon passed us and disappeared ahead; once again, K truck at the rear seemed to be, and probably was, the last vehicle of the British Army on that road.

At last we reached Timimi and safety. The cross roads were being held by a desperate little triangle of men and guns. The Aussies lay by their rifles and machine guns (aimed in all directions). A small heap of rocks and sand provided scanty cover for each man. Some lay smoking, some were asleep. A few grinned in dusty tiredness. One, by the roadside, raised a thumb in welcome, saying "Nice to see ya Pom."

Our "A" Troop dropped trails here in support. The rest of us went on and made bivouac some twenty kilometres from Tobruch. We were now part of a vast assembly waiting to enter the perimeter; meanwhile we brewed up hot, sweet tea and porridge made from looted oats and creamy Ideal evaporated milk. We opened our boxes, grabbed from the RASC depot. Mine was a disappointment – tins of curry powder. However, some of the others had done better, especially Jack Pitt who had got a box full of apricots, very useful for swapping later, when we had settled down to siege conditions and shortages.

Now that the tension had relaxed, everyone seemed snappy and bad

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tempered. It had been a day of menace and danger, yet we had not seen or heard a shot fired. Then, just before dusk, a German bomber appeared, flying low, perhaps already damaged. Without orders, because we were all fed up and tired and cross, every man in each bivouac seized a rifle and fired. Over a thousand men opened fire and suddenly that bomber dropped vertically and became a ball of flame. A great shout of joy went up and we all felt better and no one gave a thought to the men inside the plane.

We heard that evening that over seventy of our Regimental HQ had been captured but only some half dozen men of 339 Battery were missing. The total list of prisoners included some most illustrious officers of Western Desert Force. Yet, in all this chaos, 339 Battery, either by luck or good leadership, had slipped out of the trap. We moved a little further and halted for the night near the perimeter of Tobruk.

The long retreat was over.

Knightsbridge - Sent in June 1995 to D.Holmes

During the battle of Knightsbridge, I was the NCO Signals for "C" Troop of 519 Battery, Essex Yeomanry. Whilst armies moved here and there and attacked and counter attacked and searched for weak points in the opposing forces and Generals pondered tactics – whilst all this went on, life on the ground for the ordinary soldiers was more simply, yet sometimes confusing.

Sunday 7th June started as a fairly quiet day on our sector. After a breakfast of cold biscuit porridge and hot tea, I was ordered to drive up to the OP to bring back the Troop Commander. My driver was Whacker, know as The Duke in Liverpool, he told us, "because I'm the mainstay of the town." We went forward in one of the troop signals trucks, M2 – M3 having been hit by a bomb the day before.

Leaving the gun position we drove forward up the slightly rising ground passing the infantry and some armoured cars. Coming to the head of the slope I dismounted and walked up to where the Troop Commander lay, binoculars at eyes, studying the forward terrain. He was a dark-eyed man (known to us privately as Tyrone Power) and rather strict but always fair. He seemed rather thoughtful on this occasion. A shell flew over and fell nearby but he took no particular interest.

"You had better reel in, Sergeant," he said gloomily, "We're moving. It's just come through." "Got no signallers with me, Sir." "Well," he said, "I'll give you a hand."

(It took three men to lay or reel in telephone line; One to drive the truck, one in the truck on the drum and one to walk behind, clearing the line of any snags.)

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We then set off, moving slowly rear-wards; Whacker, The Captain and myself. It was a pleasant morning and there was no more shelling. After a while the wireless operator, Sid, came to help as well. Suddenly the GC truck appeared with new instructions. "You're to return at once sir," said the driver. "It's just been ordered. "Cease fire, limber up" "Right!" said the Captain, leaping aboard. "Carry on, Sarn't. If by any chance we have withdrawn, I'll leave a guide to the gun position."

(section missing from jottings)

When we topped the first rise, the landscape ahead was empty of vehicles. "Look, Steve! 339 has gone!" said Sid. Yes – and the infantry and armoured cars. "Mate" said Whacker, "I didn't ought to be 'ere. I ought to be back in Cairo reading about this in the papers."

It was very slow work with only three of us and there were three miles of line to be reeled in and the line kept catching in the scrub. Eventually we got to the Troop Position. Deserted.

There was nothing to show that it had ever been the Troop Position except for the end of the signal line in our fingers and the wreck of our other truck, M3, nearby. A couple of hours ago, this place seemed like home; now it was just a dust spot in the desert with a burned-out truck and papers blowing about.

"What now?' asked Sid.
"Go and see if there is anything left at our old camping position."

There was nothing there. "The lousy bahstuds," cried Whacker, "They've left us and and taken our kit! What shall we do Steve?" "We'll drive roughly eastwards," I said, "Whack, point the truck about a spread hands width towards the left of the sun. And keep in the tyre marks of other vehicles; there may be mines in some places." I felt so happy, so liberated. There was no immediate danger and there we were, alone between two armies, on a lovely morning. Free!

Alas! After a few miles we overtook some infantry, then tanks and eventually saw te gun tractors of our sister Battery,339. A sergeant directed us to 519. The guns were in action and men were frantically digging slit trenches. We found Tyrone Power reading some wireless reports. Slightly resentful that he had forgotten to leave a guide at the old position I marched up and bashed up a parade ground salute.

"M2 party reporting back, sir!" I expected a look of shock and "Thank God you found us! I'd forgotten about you!" but instead he said imperturbable, "Ah, Sergeant, there you are. I've got a job for you." As he spoke, the guns ceased firing, the men stopped digging slit trenches, the guns limbered up and moved off. Thoroughly perplexed, we found that the whole vast column of infantry, artillery and tanks was moving back westwards.

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Eventually we returned to our original position. "We could have stayed here all the time and waited for 'em," said Sid. "Yeah and had a brew up" grumbled Whacker.
The Troop Commander told us what the job was - to re-lay the line to the OP! We laid the line under sporadic shell fire and then on the way back decided that we deserved a peaceful break. So we got into a shell hole near the minefield and brewed up - not tea but cafe au lait! A young signaller named John had received a small tin from home. It was luxurious. John was the most important man in the section at that time.

We lay there in the sun, out of the eternal wind, tapped into the OP – Gun position line, listening to the traffic in case we were needed. For 20 lovely minutes we were not needed. We did not know why the whole sector of the Army had retreated several miles and then returned to the original lines, Who cared; whilst we lay in that shell hole sipping cafe au lait.

Alternative ending to "Knightsbridge"

Who cared, whilst we lay in that shell hole sipping cafe au lait? There were thirteen of us in the signal section of Charley Troop; we were all little unimportant pawns on the military chess-board. Within one week three would be killed and two very severely wounded: Cooper, Newby, Morgan, Gibbon – and Whacker Newton.
However for the time being, we enjoyed 20 idle minutes, without a thought for the coming days.

"California, Here I Come."(Halstead 2005)

It was a spring morning in 1941. For once, the Desert was lovely. The awful desert wind was just a breeze. Somewhere far ahead, elements of Western Desert Force were engaging the retreating Italian Army, under General Bergazoli, south of Benghazi.
We in the 339 Signals truck, M1, did not know this. We only knew that it was a peaceful day and we were running south west, alone, free from the discipline of convoy. Although alone in the Desert, we were not lost; M1 was following in the tracks of many vehicles.

In our relaxed joy we sang, over and over again, "California, here I come, tight back where I started from." The only distraction from our happiness was when, occasionally, the truck became stuck in a patch of soft sand. This did not happen often, but when it did, we dismounted and using the sand-trays and shovels, got the truck onto firmer sand.

During one of these halts, we observed a dust cloud, far ahead. This became a staff car, coming towards us at speed. The car presently stopped beside us. A rear window was lowered and there was a General, yes, a real, immaculate General.

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He was euphoric, full of good news. The NCO Signals knew what to do. He paced forward, crashed to attention and executed a parade ground salute. As his heels came together, the dust rose to his knees. "Ah, Sergeant," said the beaming General, "I thought you would like to know. Our chaps have taken Beda Fomm and Bergazoli's in the bag." "Thank you Sir," said Sergeant Pond, still rigid at attention, "The men will be delighted."

The General smiled and waved and the staff car moved off. We watched with some concern: if it got stuck, we would have to dig it out. However all went well and presently the staff car was just a moving cloud of dust far to the north east.
Then Sergeant Pond turned back and said "And who the bloody hell is Berganzoli?"

No one answered; we just resumed work on the sand-trays. Very soon, the truck was on the move and we began to sing again in the bright morning.

Auschwitz (Halstead 2006)

Sometimes a moment occurs when one is certain that the second Great War was necessary, was worth fighting, such a moment is mentioned in the last sentence of this memory.

We first saw the Aussies on a summer morning in Palestine, in 1940. The Yeomanry was travelling slowly in convoy, when we came to a small country railway station. The platform was packed with Aussie infantrymen, waiting for the train south, to Egypt and the war. There they lounged, healthy, tall, confident, completely at ease, each man surrounded by his kit and rifle. I remembered a newspaper placard in a Colchester street, in the anxious days of late August, 1939. It proclaimed: "AUSTRALIA WILL BE THERE. OFFICIAL" and it was comforting to the people in that street. Now, here they were, a fine, proud sight.

Many years later, with my wife, I was on a coach tour of northern Israel. We became friendly with a tall, healthy young Australian and his girl friend. Later, standing at the Lebanese frontier, I was moved to tell this young Aussie about those fine men seen, long ago at a country railway station, and how the scene could never be forgotten.

"Of course," I said, "You could not have been among them, you were not old enough; but perhaps your Father...?"

The young Aussie smiled gently. "No" he said, "My Father was not there. My Father was in Auschwitz."

Pilgrimage to Tobruch Sixty Years After. (Halstead 2001)

The party arrived in Cairo in the early hours of an April day in 2001.

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We were met at the airport by our Libyan guides and friends, led by Achmed Khalifa. He had with him two assistants and a Benghazi medical officer, provided free of charge.

Our party was led by Lady Avrill Randell, daughter of a Desert Rat, a girl of much warmth and feeling, as well as having considerable energy and organising ability. We also had a Regular Army bugler, loaned by the Royal Green Jackets. To complete the whole party, we were joined in Cairo by two ladies from the other side of the world – an Aussie daughter and a Maori sister of the Fallen.

A few hours later we set off along the Desert road beyond Mena. This is not as old soldiers may remember it. There are excellent tarmac dual carriageways, lined with massive advertising billboards and many small settlements. As one goes on, there are a growing number of little towns or resorts on the seaward side.

Mersa Matruh is a clean and pleasant city and the Arabs there are not like the remembered 'Wogs' of Cairo. They are a quiet and dignified people. One can walk in the crowded streets there and feel one is among friends.

Once you are beyond Sidi Barrani, the old memories return. Except that there is now a proper road, the desert is just as it was, when we first went there as young men: emptiness, with the Libyan Escarpment beginning to edge in from the south.

However, before this, we had spent the night at a resort near El Alamein and visited the great cemetery next morning. Eleven thousand nine hundred and forty five Allied soldiers are remembered here in this beautiful, quiet place. Gazing beyond the Cross of Sacrifice to the south, there is nothing except the great Bluey, stretching on and on. As it should be.

Among the Yeomanry graves here is that of Gunner Fleming, of Paisley. There is nothing special about Wee Fleming except that he was the last Yeoman to die in the Desert. He was killed during the final salvo of shells that fell on the Battery position.

The wretched village of Sollum lies just below the Libyan Escarpment. There is nothing here except a little sea fishing. The main reason for the existence of Sollum (the name means "Ladder") is the proximity of the frontier and therefore an Egyptian Army post. There is a small Allied cemetery here, seldom visited but it contains nearly two thousand of our dead. There is a graceful inscription engraved in English and Arabic on the wall near the Cross. "The land on which this cemetery stands is the perpetual gift of the people of Egypt in memory of the men of the Allied Forces who fell and are honoured here."

There are four Yeomen buried here and one of these is Gunner Bayliss of Brentwood. Paul was terribly wounded, early in 1942. Our Medical

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Officer got to him just before he died and trying to make light of his condition said, "What is your trouble this time, Bayliss?" The dying man replied, "Just a touch of the old rheumatics, sir."

The word "sir" was the last word he uttered, ever.

Leaving Sollum, the coach now took us up the long winding road and onto the Libyan Plateau, 800 feet above. Within two hours we had been passed through the two Custom Posts and were in Libya. We now became aware that this was a special occasion. The coach was halted by a large marquee. The Veterans descended and walked along a long line of local dignitaries, shaking hands with each and again and again hearing the words, "Welcome, Welcome." One noticed not only the shaking of hands but the warm and friendly eyes.

We were then invited into the marquee, where we all sat down and were served with soft, sweet drinks. There were speeches of welcome, including one by a Government Minister, to which Achmed Khalifa and Lady Avrill responded.

After a photography session,we went on our way. During this, the third afternoon, we reached Tobruch and checked in at a 4 star hotel near the Harbour. It was very different from our first visit, some years ago. Then, the hotel was full of secret policemen, posing as business men and tourists. This time there was a large party of Dutch tourist and no policemen – apparently.

Also joining us here were the British Ambassador, Mr Dalton and his wife, with a Highland Piper in full costume. There was also Michael Palin and a large BBC TV crew. They were working on a TV series, probably to be called "Project Sahara" which will be shown in the autumn of 2002, and had detoured from their tour of North African countries to be with us in Tobruch.

We also met Brigadier Suliman Mahmmoud, the man at present responsible for the security of Eastern Libya. He was obviously a hard man, like the Minister who met us at the frontier. These two men were courteous but very different from the ordinary, warm people.

During our stay in Tobruch, we visited Sidi Rezegh and the site of the Battle of Knightsbridge, or Gazala, out in the desert. We also made private pilgrimages to the German Mausoleum, a grim Gothic fortress where some 8000 names are listed, and to our cemeteries of Tobruch (3400) and Knightsbridge/Acroma (3500). One always feels that Acroma is more tragic, as these men fell in a battle that was lost. Our dead at Acroma and Tobruch are cared for by Hadji Mohammed, a most caring man; he calls our dead, in Arabic, "My boys."

One day we had a walk around the town, seeing friendly faces and no following police. The town is still in a rather neglected and untidy state. We visited the old Garrison Church, St. Antony's, now a museum, and

paid our respects at the Mosque.

The day of the main ceremonies was dark and cloudy, with a high wind and occasional spatters of rain, but all went well. The TV crews treated the occasion – and us – with respect. The wail of the bagpipes and the clear calls of the bugle made the remembrance most moving and there were tears mingled with the raindrops.

Our bugler must have been the first British soldier in Libya for many years. To avoid giving offence he only wore his uniform in the actual cemeteries and by the jetty for the final parading of the Rat's banner. He was described on the visa as "Musician".

The final ceremony was held on the jetty, at sunset, watched gravely by a large party of Dutch tourists. Again there was the emotional wail of the pipes and "The Last Post." Two great poppy wreathes were cast into the sea, one for the Army, one for the Navy. The tide was going out and they drifted steadily away over the darkling water.

The following message addressed to Lady Randall was read out:

"BUCKINGHAM PALACE, APRIL 2001. PLEASE CONVEY TO THE BRITISH RATS OF TOBRUCH ASSEMBLED TOGETHER FOR A MEMORIAL SERVICE ON TOBRUCH BEACH TO MARK THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SEIGE OF TOBRUCH, MY VERY BEST WISHES FOR A MOST MEMORABLE OCCASION. ELIZABERTH R."

Then the banner of the Rat's of Tobruch was paraded for the very last time. It will be laid up in a chapel in Staffordshire. A dozen or so old men, who had once been young and strong, marched past the British Ambassador.

Next, finally came the order from our senior officer, "Rat's of Tobruch, Desert Rats, to your duties, DISMISS" and it was over.

One of the Dutch tourists said later, "We did not understand all that was said or what you were doing, but we were all most moved by it."

The following day, as the coach drove eastwards, back towards the frontier, one remembered a song the old Regulars used to sing, after the first fighting in 1940. The last verse was:

"And when we are back in old England,
When this war is over and won,
Remember the lads left behind us
Under the Libyan sun."

Footnote 1988

Egham today has changed more than any other place of my youth.

The Paripan Paint Works in Windsor Road has gone, like the dear old firm of Paripan itself. Frank's Boat-House has gone; his sheds once straggled along the tow path where the huge and ugly concrete bridge of the M25 now crosses the Thames.

My tiny riverside chalet "Kapai" has vanished, with all the adjacent bungalows. The River and Bell Weir are still there, but I understand that no gently drifting punts have been seen, on that reach or in those inviting backwaters, for many years.

The Medes remain; Runnymede is a National Heritage site and cannot be destroyed. Where the Paripan works had stood, for over a century, in Windsor Road, between the Medes and the River, is today a black, hideous box of industry, an unusually ugly and sunless structure. It is, I believe, some kind of motor accessories warehouse.

There was no tall RAF Memorial obelisk, above Runnymede, on Coopers Hill, in those days. This was because World War Two had not happened and those thousands of young men were still alive and loving life.

"Where have all the flowers gone?"

The Love that Never Was

When, in my youth, I worked at Egham, I frequently changed my digs – just to vary the monotony! - and so I would not always follow the same route to the Works.
Sometimes I would approach by the towpath, sometimes by Windsor Road, sometimes across the Medes.

Often, as I walked or cycled up the morning road, I would meet a beautiful girl on a bicycle, going in the opposite direction, towards Staines or Egham. She always seemed to be in a hurry, as though to catch a train to Town. Frequently our eyes met but we never spoke or smiled. She was truly beautiful. I called her, in my mind, Blush-Rose. Later I discovered that her name was Daphne Chart and she lived with her parents in one of the attractive river-side houses. Once I did hear her voice – I offered her my seat in some public place and she said "Thank you so much" in a delightful, shy, low-inflected voice.

Why did I make no attempt to know the Blush-Rose, since she fascinated me so that I still remember that morning girl on the hurrying bike? Who knows? Perhaps I instinctively wanted this delicate vision of beauty to remain unspoilt by the reality of propinquity? Many long relationships of that period began with a casual encounter – Anne Bridges in a railway carriage, Diana Littleton in a bus, Audrey Fry cycling along that same Windsor Road.

Where is the Blush-Rose today? Is she some elegant old lady, faded in beauty but with the same lovely voice (for voices are not spoiled by age)

living by the riverside, with her grand children sometimes coming to visit at weekends in the summer?

Alas no! When I returned to Egham after the War, I remembered Daphne Chart and made casual enquiry – even then, so much had happened in a few years, that my youth seemed as a far-off, foreign country. It seemed that one day she had fallen off that bicycle, suddenly and was found in the roadside ditch, calling for her parents. Soon afterwards she had died of some mysterious illness.

The Blush-Rose did not even live to be 25, but I hope that in writing these lines of remembrance, I have brought her, a little, to life again for a few minutes.

I first heard Rupert Brookes' "Desertion" recited late on night on the radio ("wireless" in those days!) as I sat by the dying fire in my Egham digs. (Not my happiest lodging, being kept by two gentlewomen, strict on morals and manners, snobbish, parsimonious with food. Their house has also disappeared under the motorway.
)
However! I say farewell to the Blush-Rose with the final lines of Brookes' "Desertion": -

"There it shall crumble, frail and fair, under the sun,
O little heart, your brittle heart, till day be done,
And the shadows gather, falling light, and white with dew,
Whisper, and weep; and creep to you. Good sleep to you!"

A First Visit to the Somme

At this time, the autumn leaves are swirling down and I remember how, as a small boy, living in a remote Warwickshire village in the Great War, I would advance on a walnut tree in a field near my home. Forward I would go, running, crouching and dropping. When I was struck, I fell or limped bravely forward. This was the war in which my Father fought and to my shame I have never in my long life, visited the Western Front.

Now at last, I have made the journey, accompanied by my wife Jill, driven door-to-door by David Biggs the great grandson of a fallen soldier and guided at all times by John Bailey. It was a most moving and thrilling experience, David such a calm driver in the narrow roads of the Somme; John such a caring and knowledgeable man with an anecdote for each place visited during our brief and well-organised pilgrimage.

It would be impudent of me to describe the Somme, as all of you will have visited the battle fields many times. However, I must mention the Ancre, where my Father served with the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division in November 1916, and where Sub. Lieutenant Dyett failed and paid a terrible penalty. I walked up the hill in the sunshine, alone, and

imagined my Father advancing up the same slope in the darkness and confusion, noise and fear, with bullets, not leaves flying past. I was surprised to find undulating countryside; I had expected to see a flat featureless landscape.

John made sure that the first place we visited was the Thiepval Memorial. It is shielded by trees and we came upon it suddenly. I shall always remember that awesome, gloomy structure, seen for the first time in the late afternoon with the shadows gathering. No other monument can be so terrible. I could describe many other places to which John took us, but you know all these better than I.

How dare people say we are war-monger or militarists because we remember and respect such epic tragedy?

A few months ago, I had never heard of the unfortunate Sub Lieutenant Dyett. Through the WFA Essex Branch Newsletter I learned his story, and now John has showed me the place where it all happened and Jill has read me the book, which was in my rucksack at the Ancre.

Before coming home, John took us again to Thiepval. I stood and gazed once more, whilst the quiet David recited his own verses, inspired by this place:

"Seventy thousand names and more,
Are scattered on these walls before,
Seventy thousand names and more,
Show thc futility of war.
Seventy thousand men and more,
Died for what they thought they saw,
Seventy thousand men and more,
Saw a war like never before."

It is sad my fading eyesight does not allow me to re-read, now, all those war books and novels I once enjoyed though without fully comprehending the geography of Delville Wood, Mametz, High Wood, Devon Trench and Lochnagar.

POSTED BY PAUL WILSON AT 6:59 PM 4 COMMENTS

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30, 2006

Authors Update - 1997

"The past is a foreign country".

On re-reading the comment of ten years ago, it sounds somewhat grumpy and old-mannish!
I should have mentioned all the advances since those distant days - the technology, the science, the emancipations, the improvements in medical knowledge. What a joy and relief, the present informality of dress after those stuffy and conformist days. Men were almost in a drab

uniform; a bright tie could cause a sensation and could be thought rather daring, "not the thing!".

However, I must stick to my comments on lack of respect, that is backwards and forwards, up and down and self respect. (No one need know you did do it, or did not do it. Perhaps not, but I would know.) Especially respect for children, which includes their safety.

People of the nineties cannot be expected to imagine the ordered stability of those years before the second world war, which came like a tidal wave to change everything. Nor can they visualise the quiet roads, the smaller population - and a dark face was an exotic novelty!

This is ref: ½B/3ft (half blind three finger typist) so there may be errors, since I cannot see what I have typed.

POSTED BY NINA WILSON AT 2:46 PM 1 COMMENTS 

Summary of Diary Scribblings - 1993

During the last few days I have been looking at these old diaries, making notes and then throwing them out. These first diaries were written in pencil and with my failing eyesight they are difficult, now, to read.

In 1931 I lived with my family at 9 Ellis Avenue, Leicester. I worked at the British United (B.U.) as a very junior clerk, I was acting cubmaster at the 18th Leicester (St. Albans) Scout Group and was a night-school student. I was also a Toc H member (the youngest member) and my best friend was Jack Garratt - he too was a Scout and worked at the B.U.

My young brother, Dick, joined the Cub Pack when he became eight and in due course was given a service star. There is a scribble in the diary that on the night when he came home from the meeting with his precious star, a big boy hit him and ran off with the trophy. He was in tears until I gave him another Service Star, from my stock. As I write these words, now, - two days ago, off the north coast of Vancouver Island, the ashes of my brother, Dick, were commited to the sea.

What a span of years.

It was a busy life; apart from Toc H and scouting and night school, there was cycling, walking and swimming at the 'Cossy' - (Cossington Street Baths) and in the River Soar, which was not polluted then.

Dad was a refrigeration salesman and in the autumn of 1931 took a new job in Lincolnshire. Mains electricity had now reached that area and there was a growing market for electrical appliances.

During October, the family moved to a new home in Lincoln. The

situation, which had been in decline ever since Wolfhampcote, began to improve. The Lincoln house was much better and was unfurnished, so they bought their own furniture - on the never-never, of course.

As I had a job, such as it was, I stayed behind and moved into digs with Mrs Evelyn Wood, a friend of Mum's at no. 4 Ellis Avenue - a larger house than no. 9. This was my new family; Billy Wood, former Infantry Captain, hard as iron; and the children, Frank (Bim), Douglas (Bunty) Brian and Pat. We still have Christmas cards from Pat and regularly correspond with Brian. Most years, Jill and I call at his house in Wisbech, on the way to our seaside holiday at Chapel St. Leonards.

I was not just a lodger at no. 4. They made me a member of the family. As no. 9 was a furnished house, moving out was a simple matter. Mum, Dick, and Robin spent the night of Friday, October 23rd with a disreputable friend of Mum's - Mrs Knowles - in Fosse Road. I don't think Dad would be there as he disapproved of Mrs Knowles and had once pronounced, "No member of this family will ever contact that woman again!" Not that Mum would accept such a dictum.
On that Friday evening, I walked across Leicester to say good-bye carrying the last of the luggage and accompanied by our dog, Pip. He came to us as a puppy at Wolfhampcote and now an elderly dog, was off to his last home, in Lincoln. On the way to Fosse Road, I crossed a River bridge, there was a boat moored somewhere below and I heard plaintive music from a gramaphone. 'Blue Heaven' from 'The Desert Song'. The night was so still... Strange, how a piece of music links forever with a memory.

POSTED BY NINA WILSON AT 1:35 PM 0 COMMENTS 

Introduction to the Journals - 1992

"The past is a foreign country" - in that country everything is different.

Certainly , when I look back 60 years later, at that immature, idealistic & introspective youth who kept these diaries, I am regarding a foreigner.

He is also in a foreign scene, where nearly all the unmarried girls were virgins; it is a simpler, less complex world. Trams rattle through the gas-lit city streets; very few people have a car, therefore the rural roads are quiet and pleasant. Few houses have a telephone. There is no TV. Some large areas of the land have no mains electricity.

Milk is delivered from a churn in a horse-drawn cart, direct to the householders jug. Yes, it is a less hygienic world with few medical facilities or sophisticated treatments. The average life span is shorter. The poor mainly accept their condition with resignation. The children are less worldly and have little self-confidence; they remain children much longer. The teenager is a thought for the future.

The unemployment rate is high and benefits are meagre or none, yet there is more dignity and respect. Those gallant veterans of World War One are still young men. With their frayed medal ribbons, they are often seen tramping the roads, hopelessly.

The first notebooks begin from an address in Ellis Avenue, Leicester. This area was clinging to the last fringes of respectability before the slums. We had lived for many years at Wolfhampcote, in Warwickshire, first at dear Aunt Sue's house, "The Old Vicarage" and then at Wolfhampcote Hall. From there, when Dad lost all his money in corn futures and was declared bankrupt, we moved steadily downward, first to Gwendolen Road, Leicester, and finally to Ellis Avenue.

Number 9 was a 6-roomed, furnished house with outside flush lavatory, bath in the scullery. There was a small back yard reached by an entry and a couple of square yards of front garden with a gate. This separation of the street from the front doorstep was a symbol of the fragile respectability.

The house was gas-lit - there would be a plop! as one applied a match to the mantel. The furnishings included an old piano but no wireless set. The back room was the kitchen/living room, with a coal-fired range. In these districts, the front room was seldom used except for weddings, funerals, and courting couples. These front rooms usually had a damp, musty and unloved smell. They were heated, when in use, by an unattractive gas fire.

Each Saturday the landlady's nephew rode up on his bicycle to collect the rent; 25/-. I see him now, Mr Turvey; a grey man in a grey suit, propping up his bike by the kerb, taking off his cycle clips, always polite and diffident.

Ellis Avenue is a short cul-de-sac of terraced houses off the Loughborough Road, just beyond the Melton turn. Nowadays the District has a predominant Asian population. Then, of course, it was all white, and mostly Midlands born. In those days, the trams clanked and rattled past the open end of the Avenue. The other end was closed by the gloomy buildings of a Council School, Ellis Avenue Secondary. However, in the evenings it became a night school, and fees for a term were very modest. In my second year I passed the R.S.A. Advanced English, Second Class. A first class certificate would have been better, but the effort of studying and learning was worthwhile.

This then, is the scene in which the first diary jottings were made...

POSTED BY NINA WILSON AT 1:32 PM 0 COMMENTS

Comment - 1987

"The past is a foreign country".

Appendix 53

If anyone ever reads these early jottings or the later, more detailed journals, they will find it hard to believe that young people once used such phrases as "Cad" or "Bounder","Look here,old man" and "I say, old thing" to mention just a few. But they did!

Attitudes were also very different. One great loss is that of Respect - and I do not mean just respect for one's alleged betters or elders or leaders, though that was part of it. For instance, in those days all men wore caps or hats, and no decent man would pass the Cenotaph in Whitehall without removing his headgear. The neglect to do this would offend his own self respect, apart from offending other people.

The attitude towards sex was of course very different. Without going into detail, it could be summed up as less sexual action and more romance and poetry. The young people of those days were more hidebound and stuffy; less daring and free and extrovert than they are today. They very rarely travelled outside Great Britain. Not only were they introverted and insular but there were two other practical reasons; first, they were short of money, secondly they did not have such long holidays. The funny thing is, they did not particularly want to have holidays abroad and did not fret too much about the shortage of money. The purchase of 'things' was not so important; the advertising industry was still a genteel infant. People were easily content.

Yes, the past is indeed a foreign country.

POSTED BY NINA WILSON AT 1:01 PM 0 COMMENTS