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# **WEATHER SERVICES AT WAR**

**by K D Anderson**

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**104 OXFORD ROAD – READING – RG1 7LL – UNITED KINGDOM**  
**Telephone: +44 (0)118 956 8500 Fax: +44 (0)118 956 8571**  
**E-mail: [chief.exec@rmets.org](mailto:chief.exec@rmets.org)**  
**Web: <http://www.rmets.org>**

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# INTRODUCTION

by Maurice Crewe

## MOBILE METEOROLOGISTS WITH THE ARMY

During the 1920s and 1930s, there were discussions between the Meteorological Office, the Air Ministry, the Army and the Royal Navy about the arrangements for weather services that would be necessary in any future war. Various plans were discussed, and much background detail, based on official files, can be found in *The Second World War 1939-1945. Meteorology* (AP No.1134), Air Ministry, Air Historical Branch (London: Ministry of Defence, 1954).

When war broke out, only former members of the Meteorological Reserve were available for mobilisation – seven officers and 22 other ranks to fill an establishment of 30 officers and 124 other ranks.

Transportation, equipment and communications were also matters that needed to be sorted out.

Nonetheless, two sections of RAF meteorologists were soon attached to Numbers 1 and 2 Survey Regiments, supporting the Army in France and Belgium, and these became directly involved in front line conflict. Their story has been largely neglected.

The following paper by Ken Anderson came to me in the National Meteorological Library in 1993. It contains the only known record of met men involved directly in the real war, in Mr Anderson's case the war in central and western Belgium and the Nord-Pas-De-Calais in May 1940.

The style is rather cryptic, being based largely on notes from a war diary of the artillery unit to which they were attached. It was also rather long for a *Weather* article at that time, so it was relegated to a "look at again sometime" envelope and duly "lost". I found it again in 2004 and after scanning it, my wife and I did a little sub-editing to make it easier to read. I also added some of the pictures sent by the author.

Some of ex-LAC Anderson's story actually appears in a book called *Dunkirk* by Robert Jackson (first published in 1976 by Arthur Barker and recently republished in 2002, in paperback, by Cassell Military). This book is full of the memories of survivors and interviews with survivors.

Enquiries suggest that Mr Anderson is no longer with us.

Readers may also be interested in an article that was published by Gren Neilson in *Weather in 1992* (Vol.47, No.11, pp.430-435). Entitled "Meteorologist's Profile", it records his recollections of his service as an RAF meteorological observer in the Second World War.

Also, Massimo Mangilli-Climpson has written a book called *Larkhill's wartime locators* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2007, 698 pages, ISBN 13: 9781844155149). This book tells the story of the 4,000 men who made up the Survey Regiments in the Second World War; and it includes bibliographical references (pages 690-698). The men were trained at the School of Survey, Larkhill.

There is, in fact, a Defence Surveyors' Association, a charity which maintains links between officers and civilians concerned with defence geographic information, including the weather. This body produces a journal called *Ranger*, published twice a year.

# WEATHER SERVICES AT WAR

by K D Anderson

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## FRIDAY 10 MAY 1940

In the early hours of this fateful Friday, the War came to Western Europe with the murderous 'rape' of Belgium and Holland – and for the young men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) an abrupt end to what had been a cosy sojourn in France.

The grey pre-dawn hours were shattered by the roar of low-flying aircraft, the rattle of machine-guns and the thump of bombs as the Luftwaffe 'heralds' carried the flaming sword of 'blitzkrieg' into France. For the young Britons, the reason and purpose of their life in Nord-Pas-de-Calais was made immediately and frighteningly obvious. Considerable air activity continued throughout the day, and the nearby towns of La Bassée and Lens were heavily attacked by Stuka dive bombers. Great was the turmoil, loud the shouts of the NCOs, and louder the uncomplimentary comments of these 'gentlemen'. Vehicles were packed, unpacked, re-packed; there was reluctant abandonment of 'comforts' and 'treasures' carefully hoarded over weeks and months. Surrounded by the grim evidence of our fathers' savage battles, the hamlet of Haisnes bore a marked semblance of a disturbed and agitated ants nest, and this scurrying persisted until the Sunday morning departure of our temporary British residents for eastern Belgium, there to face the highly trained German Forces.

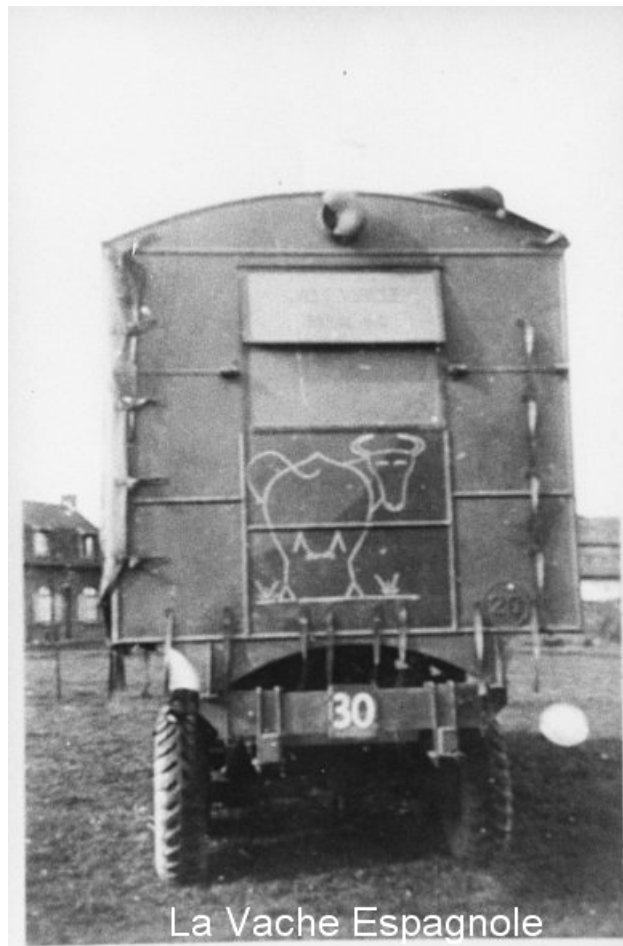
On Saturday the 11<sup>th</sup>, two members of the Weather Unit were sent to Air HQ near Arras to collect arms and ammunition for its members. Lavish was the RAF, for we seemed to have more war implements per man than any one of our Army hosts. This same day Anderson closed the Canteen, which he had organized and managed for all personnel, and disposed of all stock except cigarettes, tobacco and chocolate bars.

This tiny community, which had been our 'home' for several months, turned out in force this bright Sunday morning to bid us farewell. Many of the girls in white dresses had attended their 'premier communion', and they called upon the Lord to keep us safe. In response, we swore the Germans would not pass, that neither they, nor France, would know again the horrors of 1914-18. In ignorance we believed it, and, far worse, so did these friendly inhabitants of Haisnes. Similar scenes were enacted in towns and villages wherever units of the BEF had been stationed. Thus, at 11:30 hrs the 'trek' to war began.

Targett, Buttfield and Anderson, the initial members of this Weather Unit, landed at Cherbourg on 13 October 1939, and after an exhausting railway journey of 27 hours found themselves in the village of Maroeuil near Arras, where was located HQ Component Field Force, RAF. Following three days of many questions and few answers, they were dispatched into the 'blue' with instructions to find and join, on attachment, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Survey Regiment, Royal Artillery (RA). Before departure, possession was taken of a Fordson office tender (later to be christened 'La Vache Espagnole' – see Figures 1 and 2, both on page 3), and LAC Norris, an MT (Mechanical Transport) driver, increased the Unit's strength to four. After driving hours through a wet and dripping French countryside, where the only crop appeared to be sugar beet, contact with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Survey Regiment was eventually established in the village of Don. It was a filthy wet night and definitely not the best circumstances to find your billet was a ruined stable. Not unusually, our arrival was quite unexpected, nor was the purpose of our attachment appreciated. Furthermore, the Army had little or no understanding of RAF rankings, a situation of which we took full advantage – despite our being the 'lowest form of life' in the RAF, we cheerfully accepted membership of the Sergeants' Mess.

Routine weather observations were quickly introduced and passed via the quaint French telephone system to Air HQ at Maroeuil. At the same time, the meteorological requirements of our immediate hosts were laid on; they appeared uncertain as to the use of the information, but never failed to show gratitude. Conditions permitting, upper wind, temperature and humidity reports were sent, via Army Signals, to HQ 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps for the use of gun regiments.

Over the next seven to eight weeks the Unit's strength increased to seven: first with the arrival of P/O John Blamey as CO and later Sgt McEwen and Cpl Rudram. In the circumstances of 'semi-peace', the different personalities dwelt together reasonably happily, but 'cracks' appeared under the later stress of combat.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

Approximately two weeks before the New Year, the Survey Regiment and we moved to a French Artillery Range near Saint-Pol. The Weather Unit was billeted in the very pleasant village of Monchy-Breton, where a remarkably good Christmas was spent. The winter of 1939/40 was very severe, and night temperatures as low as  $-30^{\circ}\text{F}$  were recorded, but with very little snow. A pilot balloon tracked by theodolite ascended vertically in the powerful anticyclonic conditions until bursting at approximately 40,000 feet. The Army's passion for 'schemes' was not shared by the RAF meteorologists in these near-Arctic conditions; night exercises were especially horrendous. During the weeks at Saint-Pol Monchy-Breton, reports of German attacks in the Ardennes area greatly agitated the Army. They proved false.

Towards the end of January 1940, a move to Haisnes took place, our final journey in the 'phoney-war'. This grey, characterless hamlet near La Bassee was to afford us a pleasant, peaceful and happy three months or so of residence. It had been built (re-built), on the site of a German redoubt of 1914/18, and probably the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The good folk of Haisnes viewed us with some suspicion; our predecessors had behaved something less than well. It was most pleasing, therefore, to record the warmth of their farewell that fateful Sunday morning in May.

The flat lands of NE France, scarred by man with slag heaps, pithead gear and smoking chimneys, were warmed by bright sunshine and graced with the new green of spring and wild flowers as we drove to war. Advance elements of the Survey Regiment had entered Belgium on Saturday to organize 'wagon lines', billets and a front line 'base' on the River Dyle. The convoy route, as directed by 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, took us through towns and villages with familiar names: Carvin, Librecourt, Seclin, Vendreville, Roubaix, Tourcoing. The route continued to the Belgian frontier and soon then to Oudenarde, Alost (Aalst), Vilvoorde, thence Machelen, our 'wagon lines' and billets. A journey of sunshine, cheering crowds and flowers with no enemy air activity – were we really driving into war? The only evidence that an army had passed this way was the number of crashed and abandoned service vehicles littering the roadsides. Only in the latter stages of this 180 km journey did driving become difficult. Between Alost and Vilvoorde, several canal and river bridges had been 'blown'.

Sadly, we had been warned not to accept gifts of food and drink from Belgians and to be on the alert for surprise attacks by "Fifth Columnists". It has been officially denied that such attacks took place, but we who were there know that a bunch of flowers can hide a hand-grenade, also that packets of cigarettes and tobacco can explode, and a machine gun fired by a farmer from a barn roof does a man no good at all. And what of the farmer's wife who betrayed our position by the manner in which she displayed her laundry?

The 'wagon lines' and billeting area at Machelen were located in a large completely-walled orchard and farm of approximately seven acres. Here, to the accompaniment of farm noises, was spent the last night of peace and calm.

It had been decided that the Weather Unit would divide into two, thus allowing for casualties and duty relief. The forward group would be responsible for the provision of information to the Artillery and the rear group to continue recording standard weather observations.

## **MONDAY 13 MAY 1940**

At 04:00 hrs, P/O Blamey, Cpl Rudram, Anderson and Driver Norris (see Figure 3, on page 5) departed for the tiny hamlet of Berchem Bosch, some three miles west of Louvain, and front-line base HQ. It had been realised in October/November that driving the office tender for any length of time, particularly under battle conditions, would be exhausting for one man. It was agreed, therefore, to prepare a list of meteorological personnel who were experienced and competent drivers as reliefs for LAC Norris – Anderson and Targett becoming 1st and 2nd 'jockeys'. To his very great credit, it always proved extremely difficult to persuade Norris, even when near to collapse, to yield the steering wheel to another. This morning, the driving of 'La Vache' was shared by Norris and Anderson. Berchem Bosch nestled in the lea of a steeply wooded hill, the crest of which offered a clear view of Louvain and the verdant country between. Vehicles were parked in sheltered locations and carefully camouflaged, fox holes dug and bren guns sited. For our theodolite, a site was surveyed and a security pit dug, and a temporary Stephenson Screen was positioned.

During the day, large numbers of German aircraft were observed flying west at altitude, or hedge hopping. Berchem Bosch was not neglected; Anderson and Norris were seen cowering beneath a rack of six hydrogen cylinders when the hamlet was bombed and machine-gunned. Reports of enemy parachutists dressed as nuns or policemen infiltrating the area caused some alarm, and bren-gun and rifle pits were manned. Fire was exchanged with strangers seen skulking in nearby woodland; to wander about this country had become highly dangerous. The release of a pilot balloon for upper wind measurements produced a hail of bullets from Infantry and other Units in the area. We persisted, and we eventually managed to supply the Gunners with the information required by them.

During the late afternoon / early evening, German shells began to make nuisances of themselves. Our artillery responded, and this uproar was our first taste of the guns of war. Our particular hosts, the Sound Ranging Battery, made a number of very good locations, the task of the Sound Rangers being that of measuring the differing time intervals of the receipt of the sound of enemy gunfire by special microphones set out along a surveyed baseline and then by triangulation pinpoint the source.



**Figure 3**

A pleasant summer chalet, near the crest of the hill, was discovered by John Blamey and this we proceeded to convert into an office complete with landline telephone. All was well until the Battery Major happened upon us and promptly ordered the chalet to be used as the Officers' Mess. Night patrols were ordered and we RAF 'bods' made responsible for the chalet-cum-Officers'-Mess-cum Met-Office. There was irregular gunfire by the enemy and our own artillery, and the night sky was lit by flashes, as well as the fires of burning Louvain. Shouts and voices, shouted commands from unseen men; bursts of machine-gun and rifle fire left a man in no doubt that war had arrived. At the witching hour of midnight, Corps Artillery requested upper wind and temperatures – URGENTLY. The pilot balloon, complete with suspended candle lantern, created pandemonium; fusillade after fusillade of small arms fire cracked and rattled, patrols were intensified with much shouting and swearing. Corps did get the 'meteor' report as requested, and at 01:00 hrs a barrage of our guns, of all calibres, opened and roared unceasingly for two hours, signalling we later learned the opening of the battle for Louvain.

Reports suggested the Germans had been held and forced to give ground – an encouraging note after a night of thunderous noise and fear. Any man who claimed not be terrified was either a fool or a liar. Mercifully, the cooks maintained a steady supply of tea, (a brownish hot liquid) throughout that awful night.

## TUESDAY 14 MAY 1940

Four bleary-eyed, dirty, unshaven, exhausted meteorologists welcomed this new day to the blessed music of the 'Dawn Chorus' – never had it sounded sweeter. It rose and swelled, drowning man's overture of death.

Sometime during the night, the farmer, his wife and family had fled westward, leaving home and contents – chickens in the yard, pigs in sties, sheep and cattle in the paddocks; and khaki-clad 'milkmaids' sought to relieve the cows of their nourishing liquid. Question – which gave the poor creatures most discomfort: over-full udders or the method of removal? By contrast, an elderly couple stayed on in their estaminet, completely ignoring the war around them, and concentrated their efforts on selling beer to all and sundry at ever higher prices. What price did they charge the Hun? Throughout the day, sporadic artillery action, plus bombing and machine-gun sorties by the Luftwaffe, was not good for the nerves.

As more and more of our artillery arrived, the demand by Corps HQ for weather advice increased accordingly, and to meet this we released balloon after balloon, many of which were shot down by infantry units in our area. However, we managed to get sufficient away to give the gunners all that they wanted.

Mid-morning we suffered our first intense air bombardment; a flight of Dorniers launched a fierce attack on Berchem Bosch and a neighbouring village. Earth, trees, houses, animals and vehicles were hurled in all directions. For a few minutes after this deadly onslaught there was an unearthly silence. Not a living thing moved or made a sound, and then the last few civilians were seen to be escaping westward, only to be machine-gunned by German fighters. This murderous evil tactic was to be used many times against the hordes of refugees, with the sole intent of creating chaos on all roads leading west, by filling them with terrified, brutally-slaughtered humans, and with wrecked and abandoned vehicles, with the obvious intent of impeding the movement of our forces. The world, our world, was filled with the crash, crack, roar, and terror of war – and now there was another horror warning of a gas attack! Gas masks were hurriedly fitted. Was this the ultimate Terror tactic? It was a false alarm. There had been a 'Fifth Columnist' uprising in Louvain, and in the fighting and gun action a very large gas main had been fractured, and easterly winds did the rest.

More bombing, this time the howling, screaming 'Stuka'!

Signals came from Corps Artillery requesting winds etc for guns of all calibres, including 3.7 anti-aircraft. More balloons were shot down – and an irate Guards Major demanded to know what kind of children's game we thought we were playing!! Perhaps, not unreasonably, his lurid language was understandable – especially in a perfect Oxford accent. We did learn from him, however, that the enemy had been compelled to withdraw from Louvain.

Because of the fear of further 'Fifth Columnist' activity, the Belgian Authorities, in French and Flemish, ordered all civilians to withdraw to a line 12 km west of the River Dyle by 1800 hours; and anyone found east of that line thereafter would be shot on sight. A little after 6:00pm, the whole of Corps Artillery opened fire, and though it had been noisy before, this was the ultimate in shattering ear blasting. The earth shuddered, and the air was filled with the hiss and whistle of missiles; we seemed to be surrounded by guns. The Germans took a poor view of these nasty shells bursting around their ears and promptly responded. What a murderous childish game is war.

No matter how well camouflaged, 'La Vache Espagnole' was far too conspicuous to be left in this front line position, and it was decided to move 'her' to Machelin when the relief party arrived.

Around 20:00 hrs, Targett, Buttfield, and Sgt McEwen appeared – smartly dressed with well-polished buttons, and cleanly shaven, and with an air of quiet confidence (their trial was yet to come). They were speedily briefed, and amid the roar of guns Cpl Rudram, Anderson and Norris bade them a peaceful night and departed westward with alacrity. John Blamey remained at Berchem Bosch.

Into the westering sun we drove through miles of terrified refugees, Army vehicles, marching men and dispatch riders. The fear of 'fifth columnists' had seized the military mind, and Military Policemen were stopping, searching and questioning all west-bound traffic, service or civilian, at cross roads and intersections. The compulsory evacuation of civilians added to the flood of refugees, and the ruthless machine-gunning by low-flying German fighters was already causing appalling chaos on the roads. At dusk, we came to Machelin – alive, unhurt, exhausted, slowly shedding some of the terror that had enshrouded us for most of the past 40 hours, or was it 40 years? To eat, to sleep – there were times when a straw palliasso on a concrete floor felt almost sensual. We ate our meal at tables set up beneath apple trees and watched the unending gun flashes and listened to the distant rumble. It was



an awesome terrifying sight, the whole eastern horizon, both to north and south, a curtain of fearsome light. On Thursday night, we had to return to all that!!

Our colleagues at the 'front' were subjected to hours of bombing and shelling, plus rifle and machine gun fire by our own infantry. Pilot ballooning had to be abandoned because of the 'trigger happy' attitude of our infantry, and the unpleasant interest in our activities being displayed by the enemy. From this time on, all weather observations and recording had to be carried out at Machelin and forwarded by signals or dispatch rider to Berchtem Bosch and/or Corps HQ.

Soon after midnight, the Coldstream Guards barricaded Berchtem Bosch and turned it into a fortress. Enemy tanks were reported to have crossed the Meuse, broken through and driven westward. They had indeed broken through, as we later learned. A violent battle to the SE seemed to offer some proof. As we learned from our colleagues, a bitter artillery duel was fought throughout the night.

### **WEDNESDAY 15 MAY 1940**

A day of hot sunshine. A day for us to rest, eat and drink beer in the local estaminet between routine wind and temperature reports for 2<sup>nd</sup> Survey Regiment and urgent requests from Corps.

This morning it was again observed that wet clothing was being laid out, in changing patterns, on the grass of the orchard which served as our wagon lines. The farmer's wife was arrested and invited to explain and lead the Military Police to her husband. She claimed he was milking the cows!! Pursuit of the 'gentleman' was abandoned after several miles as his destination was obviously far to the east. The woman was handed over to the Belgian authorities, protesting she did not know where the munitions were kept. The house was found to be full of Nazi leaflets and propaganda literature. Late morning the sky was filled with the roar of aircraft, and the rattle of machine guns – and a blazing German bomber was seen to dive straight into the ground. We danced and shouted with fierce glee, calling on the Almighty for lots more of the same. At mid-day, the report of the German crossing of the Meuse was confirmed. The French Army in that sector (2<sup>nd</sup> Corps right flank) had collapsed. It was rumoured that Amiens had fallen! This French failure engendered doubt, anxiety, and fear. Rumours flew from mouth to mouth, and multiplied in the telling. More and more Belgians were packing their best and most treasured possessions and starting on that fearful westward journey.

During the afternoon and evening, large formations of Luftwaffe planes flew over, in support, as we later learned, of their ground forces pursuing the French. What did all this mean for us? Doubt and dismay were, for the first time, entering our minds. Fortunately, the demands of Corps Artillery kept us busy, and future speculation kept to a minimum. Abruptly, at 23:00 hrs, we had orders to pack and prepare for instant movement, and at midnight we moved off into the night, six vehicles without lights except for low-power bulbs over back axles.

### **THURSDAY 16 MAY 1940**

Dawn found us in the village of Woluwe St Lawrence on the main Louvain to Brussels road, about three miles east of Brussels. Our vehicles were parked under trees in the grounds of a large house – the residence of a wealthy Brusselian, perhaps? Surely, we said, this was retirement? No-one could answer this question, or any of the very anxious questions. At 08:00 hrs we picked up the BBC news, and a news-reader's calm voice informed us that La Bassee, Lens, Arras and Bethune had been occupied by enemy forces, while Amien and Abbeville had been by-passed by Nazi panzers! This stunning news filled us with greater dread and left us in a totally bewildered state. What was happening? What of our colleagues at Berchtem Bosch? What of the good folk of Haisnes, and all the others back in France among whom we had dwelt? What was going to happen to us? The increasing volume of Army trucks and equipment filling the road from Louvain did nothing to stifle the rising doubt and fear in our minds. We continued making weather observations, and we dispatched wind and temperature reports to Corps. In the confusion, did they get through? Were they used, anyway?

Mid-afternoon we had a grandstand view of an aerial battle between six Hurricanes and a number of Dornier bombers – four of these were shot down and crashed within a mile or so of us. One hit the ground with, we judged, its full bomb load, for the resulting violent explosion made an enormous mushroom cloud and an awe-inspiring smoke ring which remained visible for quite a long time. How we cheered and shook our fists at the sky. Our spirits soared at the sight of someone on our 'side' hitting back. The bombers had been attacking Allied vehicles on the Louvain road.

Late afternoon came the devastating order "BRITISH FORCES TO RETIRE WEST OF BRUSSELS, CONDUCTING A FIGHTING WITHDRAWAL". What did tomorrow hold for us? Could things get worse?

In the cool evening of what had been a day of clear blue skies and hot sunshine, our colleagues began to arrive from Berchem Bosch, bleary-eyed, haggard, and physically and nervously exhausted. Not for them any rest, for with their arrival our journey westward began.

The volume of military traffic had by now increased enormously, and Brussels had become one vast traffic jam. Why did the Hun not bomb or machine-gun us? The city streets were lined with anxious-faced residents – no longer the cheering and applause of our arrival. They asked if we were retreating. How do you answer that question? With evasion, or the brutal truth? Amid the confusion, we managed to lose one small truck and its passengers, including Cpl Rudram. We hoped and believed they would find their way back.

Terror, confusion and chaos spread among refugees by German fighter-bombers, fighters and Stukas on roads leading west made a nightmare of our journey. This was the Nazi war machine's ruthless road-clogging policy brutally and savagely applied.

We crept through Brussels, our convoy slowly continuing west until halted at Bedegem St Martin by guns and equipment of Corps Medium Artillery – or a large part of it. Brussels was now being heavily bombed, and huge fires lit the eastern sky. We seemed to be surrounded by fire, for in every direction there were burning hamlets, villages, barns, vehicles; and the night was made hideous by the roar of gunfire and bursting shells - war's satanic firework display. A scratch meal of 'bully beef', hard biscuits and tea. An attempt to find sleep and rest was swiftly curtailed by orders to continue withdrawal.

## **FRIDAY 17 MAY 1940**

Moved off at 02:00 hrs and, after a journey of increasing fatigue and despondency, arrived at Woubrechtigem. Orders were received to provide winds and temperatures for Medium Artillery and Survey Regiment – the line of the Dendre to be held. The theodolite was hastily set up, and a balloon with candle lantern released – with the usual pandemonium this produced. Very tired and hungry, we managed to buy bread, butter and eggs from a local estaminet. In the midst of the violence and horror, the entrepreneurial attitude of the owner was astonishing. Our gratitude was boundless.

Late morning, the missing truck and passengers, to everyone's delight and astonishment, rejoined us. In the traffic chaos of Brussels they had managed to get themselves separated, take a wrong turning and then drive gaily towards the Hun until stopped by 'Redcaps' and put on a road to the west. Why Cpl Rudram was travelling in this truck remained a mystery, but George's immense relief was no mystery.

It was a brilliant summer day and a quieter day for us, yet a day of growing tension as we waited for something to happen. There were increasing floods of refugees, distant gunfire and casual bursts of rifle and machine-gun fire. Armadas of German planes were flying west, with hedge-hopping fighters spreading havoc. Sitting around listening to wild rumours – but were they "wild"? – made men jumpy and irritable. We could not raise the BBC on any wavelength!! How grateful we were for a signal from Corps requesting winds and temperatures for all calibres and types of guns. Never have balloons and theodolite been more cheerfully assembled and released, every member of the unit eager to take part.

This peerless summer day was lacerated by War's demonic claws of terror, fear and death; by flame, fire, and smoke; the roar and rattle of Kipling's "reeking tube and iron shard"!

Midnight brought orders to continue moving back, at first light.

## **SATURDAY 18 MAY 1940**

04:00 hrs and back towards France we drove, with 'La Vache', as always, the last vehicle in our convoy – how appropriate the rear end of a cow we had sketched on the back panel of our truck.

The streams of refugees had become a flood. They formed a pitiful writhing serpent of human misery, terror, fear and utter despair, with old men, grannies, cripples, teenagers, children, tiny tots, and weeping women with babies. These crawling columns oozed defeat and hopelessness – life surrendered, new life born. Here and there was a bloody shambles, a pile of rags. There were cars, trucks, carts, prams, wheelbarrows, bicycles and handcarts piled high with bedding, chairs, tables, pots and pans, cage-birds, and often topped with an aged grandmother. Here was a torrent of lost, bewildered, exhausted, terrified humans seeking to escape a greater horror, the Nazis.

Our orders were to drive on regardless. Not only may we not stop to give aid, but accidents had to be ignored – as, when Anderson was driving, a terrified woman, fleeing from machine-gunning German fighters, fell under our truck.

No longer were we saviours. Now the refugees spat at us, and cursed us as we drove past. As the day wore on, the Luftwaffe onslaught increased in ferocity and ruthlessness, and the terror weapon, the Stuka, seemed to fill the sky. Burning, abandoned vehicles littered the roads, and bodies the grass verges and fields. We, being both spectators and participants, were forced to witness this human misery and partake of the suffering. What should have been a land of smiles and happiness beneath a hot May sun was a land of fire, smoke, explosions, agony despair and death.

In the late afternoon, we re-entered France at Wervicq, halting at Linselles.

## **SUNDAY 19 MAY 1940**

It was a night of lesser gunfire and sporadic chatter of small arms, but the sky was lit with many fires. As the eastern horizon began to lighten, we were alerted by the sound of aircraft engines starting up somewhere in our vicinity – possibly Merville or Vendreville – presently to be thrilled by the sight of a number of our fighters climbing into the morning light. How good it was going to be to see them 'down' just one or two of the hordes of Nazi bombers.

At frontier towns and villages such as Linselles, we saw pathetic notes pinned to Town Hall notice boards and any possible display area – messages for those who may have been dead already. These messages told of survival and planned destination, of hope and despair, of death and new life. And still this grey multitude poured west, driven on by the increasingly ruthless Hun bombing and machine-gunning. It was hard for us who had no tribal or historical memory or knowledge of invasion to understand fully the refugees' manifest fear and horror of German invasion and occupation. The bombing, shelling, machine-gunning, and possible death and maiming were frightening for us, but these people were fleeing from all of these, and also from a greater fear, the fear of people from another country.

There was a 'Fifth Columnist' scare, with cries of "parachutist" which proved to be true. Two local gendarmes captured a female complete with canopy and harness, and in a frenzy beat her to death with helmets and rifle butts, cheered on by refugees.

Most houses were now deserted, the owners and occupiers having fled, leaving everything in working order, beds unmade, food cupboards mostly full. Targett, Buttfield and Anderson came upon a modern bungalow type of home, doors open, hot water on tap – it was unbelievably wonderful to wallow in a hot bath and wash away the muck and filth of the past seven days – it was far more than physical cleansing.

We recorded weather observations but knew not whether anyone would ever see them; and we made pilot-balloon ascents.

## **MONDAY 20 MAY 1940**

In the early hours of this morning, we moved to Croix and were billeted in a part-built power station, with power tools and cranes fully operational, but not when we departed. The roof of the power station offered fine panoramic views of the country, grossly marred by clouds of smoke and dust sprouting incessantly.

Stores were overhauled and everything surplus destroyed; empty hydrogen cylinders were smashed. Wind, temperature and humidity reports were sent to Corps Artillery, and similar details to our Sound Ranging colleagues.

In a nearby meadow, fifteen to twenty cows were desperately in need of milking, their agonised mooring pitiful. Fortunately, a few of our Army colleagues had a working knowledge of milking and the poor creatures were relieved of their burden. The nourishing liquid was given to the refugees.

Food was now becoming a real problem and we were reduced to quarter rations. Every house was deserted, and in many cases doors were wide open. Most unusually, an order to loot for food was issued with the qualification that any items surplus to immediate wants must be handed to the refugees. We entered some of the abandoned houses with misgiving, but appeased our consciences with the thought that the contents would surely be collected by the enemy. We confined our looting to canned food, wines, and liqueurs. Anderson and Targett came upon tins of tuna, and long tins of asparagus. We shared the tuna, but to our delight all other members of the Unit hated asparagus.

There was a strange, eerie, noisy silence about an area of empty houses – no people – no everyday sounds – no children.

In the afternoon came the news that a defence line on the Escaut (Schelde) river was being established, and full gunnery reports would be required of us at very short notice.

An uncannily quiet night, much of which we spent speculating about the days ahead, and what was happening now. We had a great sense of pity for the refugees, but what was there for us?

## **TUESDAY 21 MAY 1940**

There was very heavy gunfire to the east, and in a semicircle round to the west. One had a nasty feeling it was creeping closer with every passing hour. The Germans had launched an attack across the River Dyle.

Very extensive air raids – we were amazed by the amount of ammunition our AA (ack-ack or anti-aircraft) gunners were expending in trying to bring down enemy aircraft. The air seemed full of shrapnel, splinters falling like rain, whistle and hiss. There was real wisdom in remaining under cover.

This outburst of activity by the German forces had an ominous feel about it, and the half circle of fire hinted at a nasty situation for the BEF.

All day we were kept occupied by the demands of our Artillery 'customers', and our supply of hydrogen was running low without any prospect of replacement.

## **WEDNESDAY 22 MAY 1940**

Retirement to Houplines near Armentier, after a quiet night. Distant gun flashes, like summer lightning, flickered along every horizon. The main front was reported to be falling back to the frontier.

Shattering news from the BBC confirmed that Boulogne had fallen, and that there was heavy fighting around St Omer and on the approaches to Calais. This could only mean we were cut off from everything except the sea. Were we really surrounded?

These were times when the mind protected itself by ignoring the truth.

Only our French Allies could do it – they mounted a heavy guard on Houplines Brewery!! This was eminently sensible amidst all this madness. Splendid men these guards, they gave us four large barrels of the local brew.

We were warned to have our arms with us at all times, ready and loaded, and to take every precaution against surprise attack by light armoured forces. This war was becoming increasingly unhealthy.

Somewhere in Belgium a mental hospital had evacuated its patients, and some of these poor creatures had been arrested on suspicion of being 'Fifth Columnists. Some were shot by French military! Our Allies took no chances.

The CCRA (Commander, Corps Royal Artillery) 2nd Corps visited us this morning, complimented us on our efforts to date and ordered us, now, to provide weather reports to all gun units of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps via his HQ. He undertook to pass our signals to the French and, if possible, to Britain. We were, it seems, the only meteorological unit operating in northeast France.

Blamey, Anderson and Norris ventured into Lille hoping to find a food store. They found a dead and empty town, already partly occupied by the Hun – many shops and houses severely damaged, or merely heaps of rubble – wrecked and burnt-out vehicles everywhere. The German presence persuaded us to retreat with alacrity – we were weather observers but there was little doubt but that the enemy would regard us as members of the British Armed Forces.

From mid-morning, much of our time was given over to pilot-balloon ascents – a decidedly tricky business. This was trigger-happy country now, and to venture far from one's unit or attempt anything unusual was to ask for a blast of rifle fire. The French guards seemed far more fearful of 'parachutists' and 'Fifth Columnists' than we were and blazed away at our balloons in a most alarming fashion. In the evening, and into the night, we continued with balloon ascents – each with the suspended paper lantern and candle. As on all previous occasions, these caused great consternation, and very anxious enquiries by British, French and Belgian officers, some of whom reported seeing parachutists descending with torches!

The heavier sounds of war were creeping ever closer, and everywhere the smell of war was becoming more pungent – an acrid smell of smoke and burning, of cordite, death and decay. Refugees appeared now in groups; aimlessly wandering they knew not where, exhausted, terrified, lost. Towns

and villages were raped, indecently assaulted; there were streets of rubble from blasted buildings, and rail tracks curled like sticks of rhubarb.

### **THURSDAY 23 MAY 1940**

Situation very serious. It seemed fairly obvious that the Hun was slowly, inexorably, closing in on this northern pocket. Little food remained, although we still had one or two tins of tuna, and asparagus.

A new defence line up to Menin was being organized to cover the frontier.

As the German Forces pressed ever closer, could the technical services of we meteorologists and our Survey Regiment colleagues continue to be of value? Would we not be of greater use as infantry?

The "eye of the storm" with all its horror and terror was very near. Fear and despondency induced by ignorance of the situation were difficult to resist. What did the future hold for us? Did we have a future? Home and safety seemed desperately far away!

A great amount of aerial activity all day – many enemy planes but none of ours.

### **FRIDAY 24 MAY 1940**

We moved up to the frontier town of Warneton and witnessed a Dornier make a crash landing after being hit. Our gunners were taking no chances. Three machine guns traversed the plane after it landed, and before anyone ventured near it. The Germans had brought this form of action upon themselves by their ruthless and brutal machine-gunning of fleeing civilians.

We were billeted in farm buildings on the outskirts of the town, which was very heavily bombed three or four times during the day, shattering many buildings. Of the very few remaining civilians, several were killed and wounded. RAMC (Royal Army Medical Corps) orderlies did what they could to ease the suffering.

A large French convoy, consisting, to our amazement, of mainly horse-drawn vehicles, was passing through all evening and most of the night. German planes were trying to locate them using flares. Bombing and machine-gunning was almost continuous. The convoy managed to survive with remarkably few casualties to both men and horses. Here was more of the savagery of war. Strangely, one was more affected by the sight of dead refugees and horses than by uniformed men.

Sleep was near impossible, and from now on a rare commodity. Delayed action bombs all around, or so it seemed, created a new fear.

### **SATURDAY 25 MAY 1940**

There was an urgent call from Corps Artillery for upper winds.

Whilst pilot ballooning, there were showers of shrapnel from AA shells. French guards on a nearby bridge 'peppered' us with small-arms fire – the Luftwaffe seemed anxious to join in the 'fun'. However, signals were still sent to the 'Gunnery'.

Bridge guards informed us that they were on fifteen-minute 'standby' to 'blow' the bridge. The BBC News had much to say about German advances, which was little comfort for us. All around us, the tempo of bombing increased by the hour – especially to the northwest, another bitter action, perhaps.

There was a new shower, this time of leaflets telling us we were surrounded, and urging us to lay down our arms and surrender. We would be amicably received and well treated. Those pieces of paper were disposed of in an appropriate manner!

We had no realisation of the gravity of our situation. If we made for the coast, surely the Royal Navy would take over and do whatever was necessary. In retrospect, there was an appreciation that we were a defeated Army, but order and discipline ruled us.

We re-packed vehicles and prepared for movement at a moment's notice. These were days and nights of snatched sleep – just a few minutes.

Amidst all the infernal uproar, horror and fear, a tiny number of civilians were to be seen walking about in a dazed vacant state. Dozens of dogs of all shapes, sizes, colours and breeds were roaming the streets and roads, starving and terrified.

## SUNDAY 26 MAY 1940

At 02:00 hrs came the order to move back to Fleubaix and Laventie (the latter 12 km from Haisnes!). To dwell upon the fate of friends we had left 14 days ago, full of promises, was sickening. How would they have judged us?

It was a peerless summer morning, with clear blue skies, a gentle breeze shattered and desecrated by the roar and screech of airplanes, bursting bombs, endless gunfire, chatter of machine-guns, and rifle fire – what a devilish creature is man.

On the journey to Fleubaix, we became entangled with a French ammunition convoy and armoured cars driving north! The general feeling was that there was something very odd about this; should it not be the other way round? The situation was becoming more and more bewildering, and very hard on the nerves. To think of home was not a good idea. Why were we moving south, away from the coast, as the French armoured went north? It could not be that we were part of a defeated Army, or could it? A shallow confidence, born of ignorance, was beginning to give way to despondency. Despair had yet to come.

About 07:00 hrs, a Gunner Officer, one with guns, discovered who and what we were, and demanded we provide a series of 'meteor telegrams' for field and anti-aircraft weapons of all calibres. Setting up a theodolite, and filling balloons with hydrogen, in the midst of a battle is not recommended. From this officer, we learned that the violent action around us was the northern half of an attempt to sever the Nazi corridor by driving south through the area of Arras. Subsequently, we learned that a French attack from the south had failed to materialize, or if it did was ineffective. The really grim news from the Gunner Officer was that the Channel Coast from the western suburbs of Calais to Le Touquet (approx) was already occupied by elements of the Wehrmacht, and that Calais itself and the coast around Gravelines were under heavy attack. The Germans had broken through to the north of Menin, and were driving for the coast. This was desperate news, for it meant that as the 'crow flies' we were 35 km (21½ miles) from the coast at the nearest point, whereas the Hun was already somewhere between 6 and 10 miles therefrom. What were our chances of seeing England again?

Guns all around us were firing continuously, all calibres. The sky was filled with the Luftwaffe, and black pock marks of bursting AA shells. Falling shrapnel, and bullets from low-flying fighters, hissed and whistled – a deadly downpour.

Abruptly at noon, our guns ceased firing, and almost immediately sixty Stukas, with covering fighters, attacked gun batteries about 500-600 yards away – 30/40 minutes of undiluted HELL. The earth shuddered as if in pain. The atmosphere crackled like a lightning flash. What were we doing here? What had we done to deserve this nightmare? As if in defiance, scarcely had the bombers departed, than our guns recommenced firing.

In the general direction of Arras, a fierce action was being fought, and it was towards this that our guns were directing their fire.

In this almost treeless open country, there was little or nowhere to hide, but the ditches were wide and deep. Who cared if they were filled with barbed wire, tin cans, broken glass and brambles?

To our intense horror, three Nazi fighters suddenly found our balloons attractive, and swept back and forth with machine-gun fire. Mercifully, no one was hit, nor did our vehicle suffer any damage.

It seemed our office tender, 'La Vache Espagnole', had attracted the attention of the enemy, and we were ordered to obliterate the name over the front and our sketch of the rear end of a cow on the back panel.

A German bomber was hit, burst into flames, and crashed with a vast explosion and fireball. We leapt about like madmen, shaking our fists in the air and shrieking with glee.

At 17:00 hrs, we received orders to smash all instruments, burn all documents, dispose of all excess personal possessions, make for the coast and report to the NAVY! Now we knew the worst, or the best. There was a strange comfort in having a positive instruction – even of this nature.

We had had no food for about 24 hours – all our tins, except for three-quarters of Libby's asparagus, had been emptied. Somehow, we meteorologists had managed to hoard a little tea and powdered milk – what nectar is that great British beverage!

Thus began a journey of hope, of doubt, and at times of despair, often running the gauntlet laid upon us by enemy fighters. North to Armentiers, Houplines, Frelinghien and Comines, where we were held up by a squadron of cavalry galloping east towards the Belgian Frontier – an astonishing sight. French or Belgian we knew not. A very gallant body of men.

The canal bridge guards had disappeared, and who can blame them. Thank God they left the bridge intact.

After crossing the Comines Canal and driving along the exposed Messines Ridge Road towards Ypres, we were running a real gauntlet of fire bombing, shell fire, and the fire of hedge-hopping fighters. What marvellous ditches they have in France and Belgium – the ones filled with mud, water and weed offered the best cover.

The wreckage of war became more and more obvious now: village streets strewn with the rubble of broken houses, burnt-out cars and lorries, carts and prams, dead horses and cattle, pathetic blood-stained bundles of clothing lying in ditches or on grass verges or in roadside fields. Army cars, trucks, wagons and motorcycles were now being added to the destruction and debris.

Anderson and Targett shared the driving. Norris had been near-sleeping at the wheel. As we approached Ypres, it looked an awful mess. It had been battered by bombing and shellfire and was still being hammered – great fires and clouds of black smoke. One of our howitzer batteries was firing from a field beside the road, and we were held up at that very point. We came in for a lot of abuse by the gunners, and one walked slowly across the road, scornfully eyed us up and down without a word, turned and ambled back to his comrades and in a loud voice exclaimed: "Well, mates, we can die happy". "At last we've seen the 'bloody' Air Force"!!!

Our route took us west of Ypres, through Vlamertinghe, and on to Poperinghe. Twenty-odd years ago, our fathers and uncles passed this way to give battle to the same enemy, but they stayed.

Passing through Poperinghe, with Anderson at the wheel, Targett suddenly shouted: "Stop the 'bloody' truck". "Get out"!! A small bomb or shell exploded some twenty yards ahead. Neither we nor our tender was hurt or damaged, but cottages either side of the street became heaps of rubble. Our colleagues within the body of the vehicle were most abusive, having been flung about by the abruptness of the halt, in particular Cpl Rudram, who was shaving at the time and now had a face covered with blood and soap suds. With George, shaving was something of a solemn ritual; he seemed to spend most of his waking hours with a shaving brush and razor!

Harry Targett was never able to explain his shriek to "Stop". For him, in particular, it was a most unusual outburst.

Our comrades were impressed by the hole in the road and the damaged houses and finally agreed that the sudden stop was not unreasonable.

On again, still dumping equipment, into a canal we hurled our last six hydrogen cylinders. Surely the Hun wouldn't find them there.

By now, dusk was falling, and the marauding Luftwaffe was showing less interest in our activities, although the German artillery continued to be a most unpleasant nuisance. At 23:00 hrs, we came to Hoogstade, where all the small vehicles, and all remaining instruments and equipment, were to be destroyed. Engines were emptied of water and oil and run until seizure. Tyres were slashed, windscreens smashed, and petrol tanks holed. Our theodolite, screen, thermometers, barograph, barometer and thermograph were given the pickaxe treatment. This was an orgy of wrecking which provided a curious pleasure – sadistic perhaps. But what of these few items compared with the enormous destruction around us? Everything inflammable had been burnt before leaving Laventie, or at 'hold-ups' along the way. Anderson and Targett gorged themselves on the last of the asparagus.

We had two hard tack biscuits per person. The official War Diary stated that we were down to quarter rations two days ago. Either the Diarist could not count or he lost some fingers, because it was almost 48 hours since we had enjoyed anything even faintly resembling a meal.

## **MONDAY 27 MAY 1940**

At 00:30 hrs, we climbed aboard the surviving large trucks, including 'La Vache', and drove into the night. We were weary in the extreme, unshaven (except George), dirty, hungry, each wrapped in his private cocoon of fear, doubt, and thoughts of home. The night was made hideous, and fearful, with gun flashes, explosions, flares, fires of burning buildings and trucks. This was a journey of many stops to clear roads and fill shell-holes. At noon, we came to Bulscamp. Since dawn, the Luftwaffe had been virtually queuing up to attack, and many buildings were wrecked and burning. There were increasing quantities of Army wreckage and abandoned vehicles, but now wrecked small guns began to appear.

To our great delight, three Hurricanes took on approximately thirty ME109s. Two German and one British aircraft were shot down. The two surviving Hurricanes made a run for it at almost ground level, with the 109s in full cry.

It was here that the large vehicles were destroyed, including 'La Vache', with fire, hand grenades and engine seizure. From this time forward, we MARCHED to stay alive, and perhaps escape.

The cooks produced a messy coloured liquid they were pleased to call TEA!! It was gratefully received, there being no other refreshment or food. Now the greater ordeal began. Commencing at 14:00 hrs, in parties of 25, each led by an officer, the twenty or so miles forced march on Dunkirk was under way, along differing routes and with time intervals. Members of units were split over several marching parties, with, for example, Cpl Rudram, Norris and Anderson together. Away to the northwest was a vast plume of black smoke, and this we were told marked our rendezvous with the Navy – at DUNKIRK.

Our party, led by an officer of the French Mission, set off at 14:30 hrs with instructions to reach Teteghem, some three or four kilometres southeast of Dunkirk, by 19:30 hrs. Our leader twice led us astray, but on both occasions units of, first, the RAOC (Royal Army Ordnance Corps) and, second, of the RASC (Royal Army Service Corps) put us back on the right road away from the Hun. After listening to our account of the march thus far, a Captain of the latter unit was gravely suspicious of our French leader's intentions and recommended we take steps to eliminate him.

Along the last few miles, we saw nothing but wreckage, trucks large and small, cars, searchlights, generators, stores and equipment burnt or burning. We tried to find a vehicle in working order but were condemned to march that seemingly endless twenty miles. At least we knew that the cloud of black smoke marked our destination. From ditches, we uselessly blazed away at low-flying aircraft – it relieved some of the tension. At Teteghem, our diversions having put us an hour behind schedule, we were allowed thirty minutes rest, and food – two 12 oz tins of 'bully' between 24 men and two hard tack biscuits per man.

Near to exhaustion, torn between despair and hope, we renewed our march to the outskirts of Dunkirk, the sand dunes and the beach. Against a darkening sky, the roaring flames of a burning town silhouetted churches and other tall buildings and other marching shambling groups of men. And a battery of AA gun barrels was split open and curled back like sticks of celery. The whole fearful inferno was reflected in the sullen waters of canals and waterways. Over all this was the towering pall of black smoke from burning oil tanks, made crimson by Dunkirk's flames, acting as a smoke screen. No doubt it saved many lives by day.

The Luftwaffe and the Hun artillery maintained a constant bombing and shelling of the harbour and town; and sudden outbursts of flame as missiles exploded all added to this cauldron of fire. Borne on the south-westerly winds the heat of the fires added to the misery of this night.

We reached the sand dunes and marram grass, within the sound of the sea, its black surface reflecting flares and gun-flashes. Behind us, the whole horizon was splashed with the flash of guns, star shells, shell bursts, and burning villages – a summer night made hideous.

Hundreds of exhausted men groped and struggled through the sand dunes to the firm sand of the beaches to await contact with the Navy. Many fell instantly asleep, whilst others suffered the waking agony of fear, of despair, and desolation. A few brave souls maintained the 'spark' of hope in themselves, and in others.

Captain Browning of the Sound Ranging Battery, his batman, and three or four Army NCOs were sent forward with the hope of finding the Navy and arranging night embarkation. We never saw them again. It was subsequently learned they had boarded a destroyer which had been sunk with the loss of all hands.

## **TUESDAY 28 MAY 1940**

At 03:00 hrs, we were ordered to dispose of all personal possessions, except water bottles. We marched into the sea for possible 'lift' by small craft, but our misery was further added to by NO 'LIFT'. Back to the shelter of the dunes.

At dawn came the order to march eastward to Bray Dunes and La Panne, now De Panne. We struggled a grim 10 km along the beach and into the dunes at Bray, some suffering alarmingly with boots squelching blood. We seemed to have been marching, hobbling, stumbling for days. We burrowed into the sand like rabbits, cold, wet, hungry, despondent, certain we had been forgotten.

A brief rest, then we marched into the sea almost up to our necks. Then we marched out again. This heathenish performance was repeated, and then abandoned. NO BOATS.

At first light came the Luftwaffe in ever greater numbers to hurl exploding horror at this town, harbour, dunes and beaches, and the many ships and craft of all shapes and sizes. German artillery, not to be



outdone, kept up a thunderous cannonade. Vessels were hit and sunk by this fearsome onslaught, but still they worked to get us men of the BEF away.

The beach and dunes were littered with abandoned clothing, rifles, equipment, vehicles and all the impedimenta of a defeated Army seeking to escape. The crushing noise of gun fire, of exploding bombs, rattle of machine-guns, and small arms fire stunned the mind. The shore and dunes were covered with thousands of men waiting with incredible patience and in a most orderly fashion for embarkation. At brief interludes in the enemy attacks, great efforts were made to comfort the wounded and bury the dead.

The very worst of the bombing and shelling was completely ignored by an elderly, white-haired Padre who displayed the most incredible courage to bring comfort and support wherever it was needed – a true 'Man of the Cloth'.

Mid-morning, Anderson and Norris, perhaps because they were the youngest members, decided to explore some of the abandoned trucks by the very large building at the back of the dunes, and came upon a NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) wagon containing considerable quantities of cigarettes – the 'blessed weed' – also a mobile field kitchen containing a small quantity of stew. A pint or two of water was added, stirred and heated and we had a meal fit for a king, not so much stew but a very thin watery soup.

About this time, we scrounged a bottle of rum from some French soldiers, who told us they were the remnants of a regiment which had lost 800 out of 1100 in the fighting on the Albert Canal.

From our 'foxholes', we fired madly at bombers and fighters alike. It was a fruitless pastime, but it did ease our frustration and fear.

We fervently prayed for rain and low cloud to curb the Luftwaffe's activities, and miraculously it rained. We had a long-running thunderstorm with mountainous cumulonimbus, and heavy rain for hours. While we suffered the physical misery of grovelling in wet, sandy holes, soaked to the skin, near to starving, at least for a while we were spared the terror from the skies.

The German guns were now shelling the town, harbour area, dunes, beaches and vessels at sea. In the dunes, there was safety of a sort, for as the shells arrived they penetrated the sand before exploding and showering the immediate area – unless it was a direct hit, when burial was found to be unnecessary.

In the late evening, the Luftwaffe returned, with even greater fury it seemed. How perfectly wonderful it was to see a Nazi shot down by a Spitfire or Hurricane. Come the night, and Dunkirk was surely burning more fiercely. There was evidence of street fighting to the east and south of De Panne, some five to ten miles away, and the horizon, which was closer tonight, was ringed with fire. This small bit of France and Belgium showed every sign of dissolving into a flaming cauldron.

More and more men were coming into the shelter of the dunes and beach, and several sorties were made into the sea, but there were no boats.

How much deeper into the 'slough of despond' could a man sink? The impact of failure affected men in a variety of ways: some raged and cursed, others broke down and wept, and there were those who retreated into a stony silence betraying no emotion, the majority stoically accepting the situation. The assumed strong proved weak, and the believed weak were revealed as men of character.

At sea, there were sparkling chains of tracer and dull explosions. Occasionally the earth shuddered, and the sea and the sky were lit with bursts of flame – torpedoes, depth charges!!? Inland and at sea, men were fighting and dying to make our escape possible. How many of them would get away?

### **WEDNESDAY 29 MAY 1940**

As the eastern sky showed the first light of dawn, back came the Nazi aircraft, bombing and machine-gunning the ships at sea, men in the water and on the beaches, the town and harbour and targets inland. From the harbour oil tanks still poured the vast cloud of black smoke into the sky. The guns on ships at sea, our own artillery, together with the enemy's guns added to a stupendous cacophony of sound that numbed the mind – the air quivered.

Thus began another day of anguish, misery, fear, growing despair and hopelessness. Filthy dirty, near to starving, dressed in sodden rags, we huddled in pits of sand, waiting, waiting. The bay was littered with sunken shipping, only the masts and funnels showing above the water. The shore, too, was strewn with clothing and small arms, and at the water's edge bodies and the flotsam of war washed sluggishly in and out. Great columns of men lined the beaches, in a remarkably orderly state.

Looking at these thousands of men, what chance was there of our escaping? Surely only the hand of God, and the great gallantry of a few could make our relief possible. And what of the thousands still battling out with the enemy? It became harder and harder to close the mind and thoughts to the dreadful scenes around us, and yet there was a collective confidence that we would get away. Sometime during the morning a largish vessel was steaming slowly towards the Mole and harbour when it blew up with a mighty roar, a great fountain of water, debris, and bodies. All evidence of the ship and men had gone in five minutes – just two were saved. Later we were told that German light craft had been creeping in at night sowing mines in all the approaches to Dunkirk. The Luftwaffe, too, had joined this 'jolly' mine sowing. But still the Navy and its supporters were getting men away. And still we watched and waited.

The German artillery and the German Air Force were now throwing everything at the Allied perimeter, at the towns of Dunkirk and De Panne, and at ships and craft, in a ruthless endeavour to destroy the evacuation. At sea, destroyers and anything with a gun and our own artillery were firing back. A shattering crescendo of noise that left a man quivering with the intensity of sound. We dug ever deeper holes!

A rumour was circulated that General Alexander had assumed command of land operations and had called a conference of all senior officers available in an attempt to organize an orderly 'lift'. The story also had it that the simple expedient of drawing unit names and a number out of a hat solved the problem. The Survey Regiment's number, and therefore ours, was said to be 16.

Occasional visits by RAF fighters cheered us more than somewhat, and when, on one memorable visit, a German machine was shot down, thousands of men danced like madmen, regardless of the shrapnel and bullets flying around. Small boats and whalers came into the shoreline and took off small parties of men, but where unit command structure was still effective the order to await orderly evacuation was maintained.

As this mind-numbing day wore on, our hopes of being rescued rose and fell, as parties of men who had arrived on the beaches after us were marched away. Perhaps the story about General Alexander was true.

Water became a real problem. Bombing or shelling of the large building behind the dunes destroyed the mains, but thanks to John Blamey a few bottles had been hoarded. In the late afternoon and early evening, the shelling and bombing faltered and died, although machine-gunning fighters continued to harass and torment. With darkness came a sharp exchange of fire between ships and Nazi artillery. What would another day reveal?

## **THURSDAY 30 MAY 1940**

Sometime during the night we acquired a young RAF Wireless Operator. Somehow, somewhere, during the past frantic days, he had managed to become separated from his unit, but with the aid of 'lifts', miles of walking, hiding in barns, and scrounging food he finally made it to the beaches. He was a very frightened young man who freely shed tears of relief upon finding us and being assured he could join our party.

The thunderous roar of the guns was unceasing, and the German bombers seemed not to sleep, pouring bombs and incendiaries in a downpour of death and destruction upon anything that moved: upon the rescue vessels at sea and upon the town and harbour of stricken Dunkirk. The lesser town of La Panne, and every village, hamlet, farm and barn were treated to the same brutal assault. This was 'total' war.

At 04:30 hrs, our number, 16, came up, and upon an order emanating from General Alexander's HQ we began a stumbling, shambling, hobbling march back to Dunkirk. We RAF men were placed at the head of the column – perhaps because of the blue uniform. Somewhere along that 10-12 km of agony and fear we were each given a 2 oz bar of Cadbury's chocolate. It tasted odd, and in some men, on empty stomachs, it produced rebellion. Regardless of the many thousands of human 'ants' in the dunes and beaches, the Luftwaffe pounced upon our column – or so it seemed – and proceeded to give us the full treatment with machine-gun and cannon fire. The ripping, tearing, chatter of these was terrifying. Every time we dived for cover it became increasingly hard to get poor George Rudram on to his feet. They were in a terrible state, and between us we more or less carried him along that heathenish beach. He made it.

We reached the base of the East Mole at about 08:00 hrs and there were ordered to wait and rest. Close by was a tented hospital where dozens and dozens of men waited for treatment, and a large stack of coffins for those whose ordeal had ended.

As far as the eye could see, this area of the harbour was a cemetery of wrecked cars, lorries, guns, trailers and all the paraphernalia required by our fighting forces. And amongst this mass of broken equipment lay the bodies of men, parts of men, and live men clinging to hope. Here and there on the beaches were pitiful bundles of khaki the 'Great Reaper had claimed.

We watched yet another Stuka attack, this time on the west side of the harbour and West Mole. Fortunately, the Navy had abandoned the use of that area a day or so ago.

With Survey Regiment personnel, we were held while two columns of other Army units struggled along the Mole to be taken off by waiting vessels. No one was willing, or able, to say why we, in despair, were kept waiting.

We were enormously impressed by the behaviour of a naval officer of three or four rings, wearing normal service uniform, and cap, and armed with only a walking stick striding up and down the stone portion of the Mole, giving orders, cracking jokes in the most nonchalant manner – a truly courageous performance.

Presently, we moved onto the Mole, which was now coming under shellfire, fortunately with a lack of accuracy, and at 12 noon we commenced boarding a Clyde or Loch steamer by name King George V. As Anderson, the last man to board the steamer, set foot on the deck, a shell blasted a great hole in the Mole at the junction of the stone and timber portions. King George V was moored at the seaward end of the timber structure. A three-vessel convoy of our steamer and one other escorted by a heavily-laden destroyer sailed east, then north, and after some three hours west into the English Channel. Some four hours later, we made to enter Dover, only to be ordered to make for Margate.

The Channel and seaway were littered with masts and funnels sticking forlornly out of the water, and dozens of small craft were buzzing about like river beetles. Above, patrolling Hurricanes and Spitfires kept the Luftwaffe at bay. Several times, we witnessed the destruction of German machines – what a perfectly marvellous sight that was. High in the wondrous blue of the sky, the contrails wove patterns of aerial battles. Little did we know then that these were the ominous signs of greater sky combats yet to come.

No doubt because of our destroyer escort, our passage was relatively free of incident. From the Navy's point of view the biggest problems appeared to be avoiding minefields, loose mines and German light surface craft.

Finally, at about 8.00pm, we pulled alongside Margate pier. It was a lovely summer evening with all the happy sounds of an English seaside resort.

Here we surrendered our arms and ammunition; and, curiously, we were reprimanded for bringing our ammunition back.

At the pierhead, a group of wonderful Salvation Army men and girls were filling in postcards with names and addresses, and a small Post Office van was waiting to take them away. The Author's parents received a 'Missing' telegram and a postcard from Margate the following morning.

Those who were capable of walking marched to the station; the lame, injured and 'shocked' were carried by bus.

Climbing into upholstered British railway compartments was one of the first signs of 'HOME' and safety. Many fell instantly asleep and had little knowledge of the journey. At Faversham, the train halted and splendid ladies of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) thrust beakers of scalding hot tea into our hands, and sandwiches of immense proportions. Those sandwiches had a near sensuous quality – 'manna' from the ladies of the WVS. In a while, the train moved on. Where it went the slumbering men aboard cared not. The frightful cacophony of war had for the moment been hushed.

It was a misty dawn, with country sounds of England and green fields strewn with sheep and cows. No guns, no bombs, no bullets, no fire, no smoke, no fear, no horror, nought but the 'deafening' rural sounds of Cleeve Prior, a village on the Warwickshire-Worcestershire border. Sleep, food, shave, bath, more sleep, more food, and one was able to feel like a human being once again.