

George Frederick Eley

George Eley, M.B.E., J.P., F.I.C.E., F.I.Struct.E., died on 23rd October 1994.

George was a remarkable man, not least because he demonstrated that a sound knowledge of Latin and Greek is an excellent preparation for a career in civil engineering. It came about in this way. He was a pupil at Bemrose School in the 1930s and he was very bright. He was also very obliging. The story goes that he used to do not only his own prep on the bus to Melbourne but that of all his cronies too. The Rotarian Headmaster recognised his intellectual quality and channelled him onto the classical side, that being the contemporary wisdom. But he left school at sixteen and went into a dead end job, which didn't please the Headmaster one bit. The Headmaster's friend was Rotarian Eddie Buckland, Managing Director of F.C. Construction Limited, and the two had words together over a Rotary lunch. So George became the office boy at F.C. and was immediately recognised as quick, industrious and full of high spirits, a 'bit of a card' (as I have heard him described). He never looked back. After a proper lapse of properly used time he became Managing Director himself, winning golden opinions all along the way and gaining a reputation for scrupulous fairness in all his dealings.

War service cut into his career. He was commissioned into the Royal Engineers and served with Montgomery's 8th Army from El Alamein to Tunis and then in the Italian campaign. He had his fair share of hair-raising incidents and tight corners, but his playful boast was that he had built more latrines for the troops, (and other less speakable amenities), across North Africa and up the length of Italy than any other man. He enjoyed his service career and would reminisce about it at Tuesday evening meetings of the Allestree British Legion. But I think he would have insisted that the best thing to come out of his war service was his marriage to his beloved Maud, a nurse. He met her in Cairo and married her in Rome.

Maud died in a tragic accident some ten years ago. George was cut to the quick. He never recovered from it and as the years passed he became more and more reclusive. Latterly as illness took its increasing toll he sank into a mood of despair. This was the sadder because his conversation had been witty and entertaining and always robust.

As long as he was able nothing was allowed to stand in the way of duty. He was a zealous and highly regarded magistrate, and his work as Chairman of the Midlands Region of Civil Engineering Contractors was recognised by his being awarded the M.B.E.

Members of the Club mourn his passing and extend their sympathy to his son, Rotarian Tony, and his family.

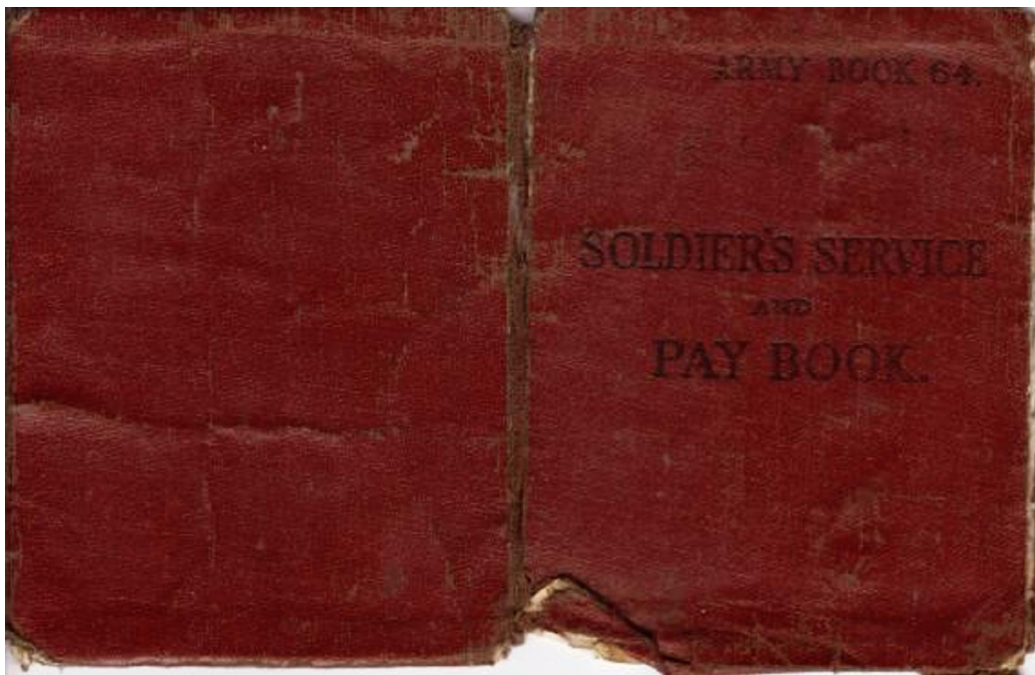
Raymond Chapman.

Captain George Frederick Eley RE



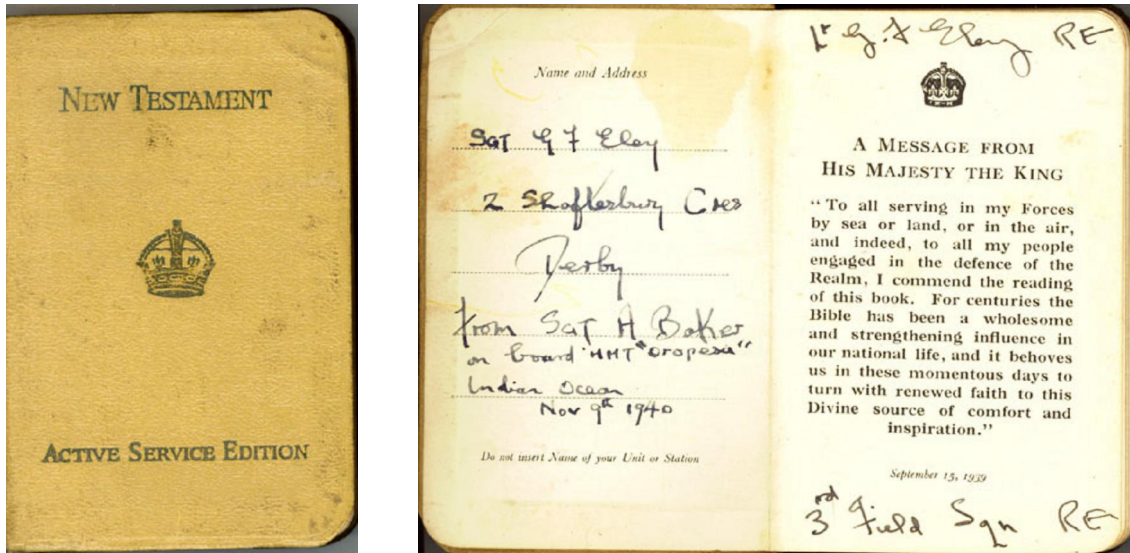
These are just a few reminiscences of my father's time in the Armed Forces.

His Soldier's Service and Pay Book show that he was enlisted on the 3rd of June 1939 into the supplementary reserve.



From letters in my possession I now know that he joined 233 Battery 68 Medium Regiment Royal Artillery and served with them after he left the United Kingdom until October 1941

Part of the journey must have been aboard HMT Oropesa because on 9 November 1940 he received a copy of the New Testament (Active Service Edition) from one of his colleagues.



However the letters that I have from one of his former comrades in arms reveal that after they arrived in Egypt they were diverted into the Horn of Africa for the Eritrean campaign.

By this time my father had been promoted to the rank of Lance Sergeant and was working in the command post of one of the batteries of the guns.

The first recollection of my father was that he had been sent out on patrol with two vehicles behind enemy lines to gather intelligence for the artillery.

Sadly by poor judgment or poor driving they broke a half shaft on one of the vehicles and only managed to return to base with considerable difficulty – the nearest spare half shaft being in Khartoum, 500 miles away!

His debriefing by the Colonel was brief and to the point.

The Colonel complimented him very briefly on his success in bringing his party back - but described his effort at intelligence gathering as a woeful



Despite his poor performance as an intelligence officer he was tasked once again with determining the positions of the Italians facing the guns. Together with a small party this time accompanied by mules he was positioned on a high hilltop with a view over a large area of Eritrean scrubland where he was supposed to discover and map the trenches of the Italians facing the British Army.

Despite assiduous observation for several days there was no sight of the enemy. On the third morning however my father was shaken by one of his men who dragged him from their cover to say "We can see all the Italian army."

To the total amazement of both my father and his men the entire Italian army could be seen facing them standing upright in their trenches whilst the Commander-in-Chief of the Italian forces in Eritrea , the Duke of Aosta carried out a full-scale inspection

His first significant encounter with authority came during this time, as a sergeant Gunner responsible for gun laying a battery of 25 pound guns.

As part of the demonstrations for a very senior army officer, he was required to lay down a barrage on an imaginary target in the desert.

To the complete amazement of the senior officer every single round landed on the target. Such was the amazement of the artillery General and that my father was offered an immediate commission. To the further amazement of the general he declined, saying, "I'm really a civil engineer not a Gunner and I understand that I am about to be offered a commission in the engineers."

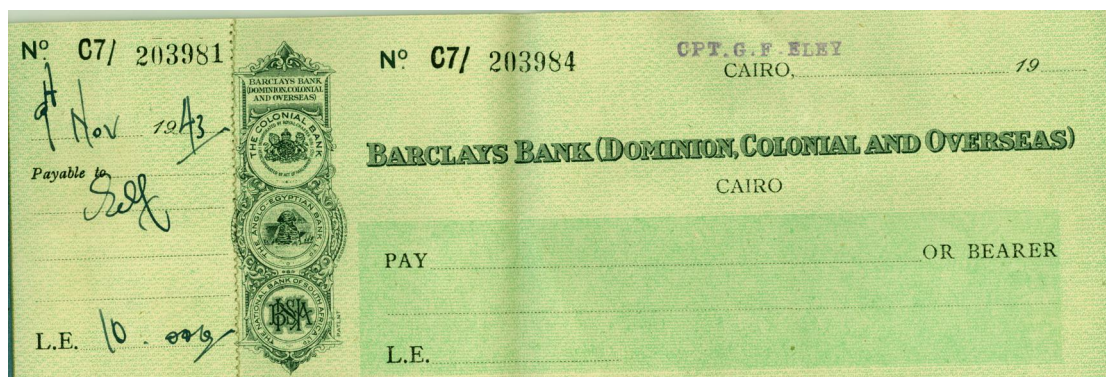
Not a good career move but one that you can understand. The final battle in Eritrea took place at Keren and is renowned for being the last time that mounted cavalry – in this case Italian, charged British guns – unsuccessfully.

On the fall of Eritrea my father was amongst the first British troops to enter Asmara. He had received notification that his application for a commission in the Royal Engineers had been approved and he had received advanced notice of his joining instruction. He was required to open a Bank Account!!!

As they entered Asmara which had been shelled by the British he noticed a local workman sifting through the rubble.

With a cry of excitement the workman dragged out a business sign which he cleaned and proudly repositioned over the damaged front door of his business – Barclays Bank (Dominion Colonial and Overseas) was back in action in Asmara

My father rewarded this fortitude by opening an account with Barclays which he kept for the rest of his life (mine too)



68 Med Reg RA left East Africa and joined the British Army in the Western Desert in time for the backward and forward rush across the north African desert during 1941. Sadly the majority of the Unit were captured after the fall of Tobruk and spent the remainder of the war as prisoners of war

In 1947 he received this letter from one of his colleagues in 233 Battery 68 Med Rgt RA

1, Belston Road, Childwell, Liverpool, 16. Saturday, 9/8/47.

Dear George

You must excuse my seeming lack of courtesy in not replying to your most welcome and refreshing letter before this.

I was very pleased when I received your short note of 11th. July to know that you were sound in wind and limb and back again in the great army of downtrodden civilians.

Your second letter of 16th. I read with avid interest, and re-read it several times. I would have written you sooner than this, but owing to the fact that I was away on holiday from July 24th until last Monday and since then I have been clearing up arrears of work left for me, I haven't had much time.

I think that I had better start and give you a brief, but comprehensive, picture of the 68th. Med. Reg. RA from Oct. 41 until — it's hard to say when.

Shortly after you left us at Sidi Bishr we packed our bags and moved up the desert to Sollum where we dug in and pulled faces at the Germans who were safely perched on top of the escarpment.

It was one of those positions where you stay put all day and only move about at night fortunately I had a difference of opinion with a new officer about some computation and told the then CPO (Brian Kelly) that the two of us couldn't work together without friction so Bertie packed me back to Wagon lines for a 'rest' until he had disposed of this other nuisance, so consequently AGR had a fairly pleasant time at Wagon lines for a couple of weeks.

18th. Novr. 1941 the fun started and we proceeded to turf out the Jerries from Sollum and the escarpment, and proceeded to turf them out of Bardia, Tobruk etc (if you remember it was one of the annual races up and down the desert first our turn and then old Fritz returned - got monotonous after a while). We with the heavy howitzers were considered too slow to do much chasing so we, as the BBC call it, "mopped up".

This suited old Dick McDonough as there was quite a bit of loot to be picked up at odd spots. We wandered around the frontier, Sidi Ornar, Oma Nuova Capuzzo etc.

Incidentally it was at Capuzzo that Capt. Paul Diver, George Fiveash and Peter Spencer were taken POW.

When we took Bardia one of the first people out of the town was George Fiveash driving a big Iti bus • Peter Spencer got away the same night that he was picked up and carried on with his 'batting' for Brian Kelly

By this time Mike Marshall was OC .A. Troop and Pip Evans OC B Troop, or perhaps I am a bit premature with the times.

We lost two guns at Bardia with prematures and also had Frank Byatt killed and ten men injured.

Xmas at Bardia was quite good on food 'Taken' from the Germans and Italians.

January 1942 we rested at Tobruk. By this time McDonough, Arthur Hughes and I were given the glorious rank of L/Bdr. At the end of Jan. we were all very excited with the news that we were going back to Cairo for a refit and leave - we started back and had got over half way when we were ordered back to the Gazala line.

On Feby. 5th we dug in at Gazala and stayed there for some time having occasional sorties and odd games with the Germans.

Gazala wasn't too bad when one got used to the Stukas and rotten canned beer. We went bathing in Gazala bay at times. We started a leave roster of approx. two men a time per bty.

Strangely enough I managed to have a week in Cairo in March!

We and the 67th. Med. operated a forward sniping gun and 234 Battery went out on raids with their 4.5's. The troops moved about and things were generally quiet until about the end of April when it was hotted up.

You know how things went from then - when the Free French, on our left flank at Hacheim, got mangled we did a couple of fast moves and eventually landed back inside Tobruk the beginning of June.

The second siege they started to call it - there was sufficient ammo and food for us to have lasted for some time but somehow the tanks got in past the South Africans AIT

defences) and were in possession of the town on the Saturday night. We then had a 360 degree zone of operational fire. We were firing well into the morning of Sunday and at dawn moved to fresh positions to defend the Derna road.

Nick and I were tapping lines to find one suitable for an OP and actually overhead the Dutch Maj.Genl. GOC giving the CRA orders to Cease-Fire 'No heroics'!

For the next three hours we made a thoroughly good job of destroying everything - it nearly broke Butch Burton's heart.

I should not like to repeat what he said about the South Africans.

Most of the lads were too dazed and tired to fully comprehend what was happening.

At ten o'clock the Afrika Corps collected us and marched us back to the town 15 miles away. "For you the war is over" they were chanting. I forgot to mention that about a week previously Ronnie White had been killed. He, Dick McDonough and George Warburton were out in an 8 cwt truck and were supposed to be surveying.

As you probably know, Tobruk was absolutely rotten with mines — ours, German and Italians. They had to move about 3 hundred yards so Ronnie travelled on the outside wing (a popular practice with us for short distances) and he took the full force of the mine when the offside front wheel went over it. Mac and George Warburton were badly shaken but not seriously hurt.

He was buried at Tobruk but things were so chaotic that I am not surprised you didn't find any trace.

Harry Newton and Brian Kelly were out in an armoured car the night of Satdy/Sunday so consequently managed to get away - Harry was killed later in an ammo truck he was driving, about September I think.

To get back to the gang. We spent several days in the cage at Tobruk before the Germans handed us over to the illiterate Italian bastards. The Jerries were really sorry and apologised profusely but explained that they had a war to fight further on.

From this time onwards the gang slowly broke apart, some going out of the cage before others.

I know that all the lads here would wish me to send you their heartiest greetings and best wishes.

They often talk about you.

As you probably knew, you were very popular and very much liked by all the lads and they still have a soft spot in their hearts for you despite the fact you became an RE and a Captain, no doubt they would claim that it was their tuition in 233 Battery that made you what you are, sorry, were

Signed Angus (Initials AGR)

Father however moved to the Canal Zone and the School of Military Engineering Middle East where he joined the 7th Engineer Officers' Course



S:- Commissions from OCTU - RE

AG4 (a)
Comdt SME RE BD

Copy to:- 'E'
AG1(b)
OZE
Pay

GHQ MEF
CRME/13823/A
24 Jan 42.

The following Cadets from the RE OCTU are granted emergency commissions (subject to His Majesty's approval) as 2/Lieuts in the RE wef 10 Feb 42. Those marked with an + are promoted to the WS rank of Lieut also wef 10 Feb 42.

- + No. 1863032 Cadet John Griffin BAKER
- + No. 1868277 Cadet William Jonah HARRISON
- No. 2093476 Cadet Benjamin Charles DUTTON
- No. 1881418 Cadet Robert Ian BELL
- No. 1947072 Cadet James Crichton MASSIE
- No. 1888972 Cadet James Gordon Ansbruther SMITH
- No. 959332 Cadet George Frederick ELEY

Notification of these commissions will be published in an early Appx to GOS.

(sd) R.C.O.HEDLEY, Major
for Brig.
Dep. Mil. Sec.

CERTIFIED TRUE COPY

W. J. Gen
W Ma J-Gen
E-in-C ME

He completed the course successfully and joined 3 Troop of 3 Field Squadron Royal Engineers but not before an alternative posting was offered to him. During his commissioning course his skill in desert navigation coupled with his previous activities in Eritrea brought him some unusual attention.

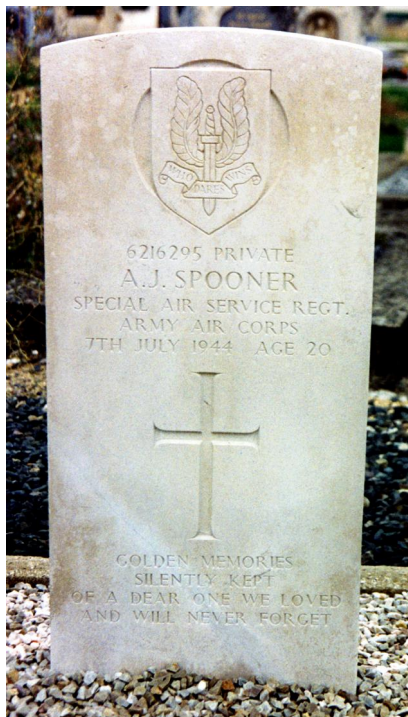
Formed in mid 1941 the early operations of the embryo SAS by parachute had been of very limited success. By the end of 1941 they were being driven to their targets – and recovered by the Long Range Desert Group. A decision was taken to equip the SAS with their own vehicles and clearly drivers and much more importantly - navigators would be required.

Father, by his own admission was a highly effective desert navigator and this view must have been shared by at least one of his superior Officers. He was visited by Paddy Mayne one of the original core Officers of the SAS who “invited” him to consider a transfer to the SAS.

Father declined.

It did not end a connection with the SAS. Father was reluctant to talk about it, but for all of his life he carried a feeling of guilt over his cousin Tony – how or why it occurred he was never really able to explain but he believed he carried responsibility for the fact that his cousin volunteered for the SAS.

Anthony Spooner died on 7 July 1944 in the Forest of St Sauvant near Poitiers serving with the SAS in conjunction with the French Resistance. He is buried with 27 SAS colleagues and one American pilot in the churchyard at Rom close to Poitiers. A memorial marks the spot in the forest where they all died.



Operation Bulbasket (Extracted from Wikipedia)

Operation Bulbasket was an ill-fated operation by 'B'Squadron, 1st Special Air Service, behind German line in German occupied France, between June and August 1944.

The operation to the east of Poitiers in the Vienne department of south west France, was tasked to block the Paris to Bordeaux railway line near Poitiers and to hamper German reinforcements heading towards the Normandy beachheads especially the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich.

During the course of the operation amongst other things, they discovered the whereabouts of a petrol supply train, which was destined for the 2nd SS Panzer Division.

The supply train was destroyed by Royal Air Force bombers the same night.

The Special Air Service team had made their base camp near to Verrieres, the location of which was betrayed to the Germans.

In the following German attack on their camp, 33 men from the Special Air Service who were in the camp at the time, were captured and later murdered along with one American Air Force pilot who had fallen in with them, after bailing out of his P-51 Mustang.

Three other Special Air Service men, who had been wounded in the fight and taken to hospital were murdered by lethal injections while in their hospital beds.

Background

The men involved in Operation Bulbasket were part of the Special Air Service Brigade. The Special Air Service (SAS) was a unit of the British Army during the Second World War, formed in July 1941 by David Stirling and originally called "L" Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade — "L" being an attempt at deception implying the existence of numerous such units.

It was conceived as a commando type force to operate behind enemy lines in the North African Campaign.

In 1944 the Special Air Service Brigade was formed and consisted of the British 1st and 2nd Special Air Service, the French 3rd and 4th Special Air Service and the Belgian 5th Special Air Service. They were to undertake parachute operations behind the German lines in France, and then carry out operations supporting the Allied advance through Belgium, the Netherlands, and eventually into Germany.

In May 1944 the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) had issued order for the Special Air Service Brigade to carry out two operations in France. The two operations were Operation Houndsworth in the area of Dijon given 'A' Squadron 1st Special Air Service and Operation Bulbasket in the area of Poitiers given to 'B' Squadron 1st Special Air Service.

The focus of both operations would be the disruption of German reinforcements from the south of France to the Normandy beachheads.

To carry out the operation they would destroy supply dumps, block the Paris to Bordeaux railway line near Poitiers, attack railway sidings and fuel trains.

One unit they especially wanted to delay was the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich which was based in the area around Toulouse in the south of France.

The intelligence experts at SHAEF responsible for planning the Normandy landings, had estimated it would take three days for the panzer division to reach Normandy.

The officer in command of 'B' Squadron, 1st Special Air Service was a Captain John Tonkin with Second Lieutenant Richard Crisp as the second in command. Both men were briefed on the operation by SHAEF in London 1 June 1944. Over the next two days they spent time at the headquarters of the Special Operations Executive who had agents of SOE F section operating in the area under the command of Captain Maingard alias Samuel, who also had links with the two main French Resistance groups in the area the Francs tireurs et Partisans and the Armée Secrète.

Tonkin was also given a list of rail targets by Headquarters Special Air Service.

Mission

The advance party for Operation Bulbasket including Tonkin were flown to France by a Handley Page Halifax belonging to 'B' Flight, No. 161 Squadron RAF the special duties squadron.

Their drop zone was an area of the Brenne marsh 19 miles (31 km) south west of Châteauroux, which they reached at 01:37 hours 6 June 1944.

On the ground to meet them was their Special Operations Executive contact Captain Maingard. Two further groups from 'B' Squadron were parachuted in, one on 7 June 1944 and the second on 11 June 1944.

Also dropped at the same time were Vickers K machine gun armed Jeeps.

Once on the ground the Special Air Service Squadron set about preventing German reinforcements reaching Normandy. They targeted the rail network, laid mines, conducted vehicle patrols in their Jeeps, trained members of the French Resistance.

On 10 June a French railwayman informed Tonkin that a train composed of at least eleven petrol tankers was parked at the rail sidings at Châtellerault.

These were the petrol reserves for the advancing 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich. To confirm their location Tonkin sent Lieutenant Tomos Stephens on a reconnaissance of the area. Traveling alone by bicycle Stephens made the 74 miles (119 km) round trip returning on 11 June 1944, he confirmed the location of the petrol train.

He also reported they were too heavily guarded for the Special Air Service squadron to deal with.

Tonkin contacted England and requested a bombing attack on the train. That same night a force of 12 Royal Air Force de Havilland Mosquito bombers attacked the train in its sidings. The bombing mission was a success and they completely destroyed the fuel reserves for the 2nd SS Panzer Divisions Das Reich.

To prevent their camp being located or compromised by informers or German radio direction finding equipment, Tonkin regularly moved its location. The location of any new camps had to be close to water and a drop zone for parachute resupply. The camp located near to Verrières was near to their drop zone at La Font d'Usson and had an adequate water supply.

The Special Air Service Squadron had been at Verrières between 25 June and 1 July 1944. The local population had also become aware of the camp's location and Tonkin was warned by Maingard that if the locals knew, informers would soon tell the Germans.

Tonkin ordered the squadron to move to a new camp just south in the forest des Cartes. This new camp was also close to their drop zone at La Font d'Usson and they were expecting a critical resupply drop over the night of 3/4 July 1944. On their arrival at the new camp at Bois des Cartes the water supply from a well failed and Tonkin decided to return to Verrières until a more suitable camp site could be located.

German attack

The German SS Security Police had been informed that the Special Air Service camp was located in a forest near to Verrières. On 1 July 1944 they had sent agents into the forest to attempt to locate the camp and assembled an attacking force based on the reserve battalion of the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division Götz von Berlichingen which was based at Bonneuil-Matours.

With the arrival of the Special Air Service Squadron back at their old base camp, Tonkin set out himself on 2 July 1944 to try and locate a new camp.

He returned in the early hours of 3 July 1944 and soon after his return the Germans attacked, having managed to surround the camp during the night.

The force in the forest camp consisted of 40 Special Air Service men, an United States Army Air Corps North American P-51 Mustang pilot Second Lieutenant Lincoln Bundy who had been shot down 10 June 1944 and had fallen in with the Special Air Service and nine men from the French Resistance.

The Germans attacked at dawn and the fight was over by 14:00. As the Germans searched the forest the Special Air Service men tried to break out and escape.

A party of 34 were escaping down a forest track when they were ambushed and captured. The leader of the party Lieutenant Tomos Stephens was beaten to death by a German officer using his rifle butt. The Special Air Service men and the American pilot should have been treated as prisoners of war.

However their fate was determined by the issue of the Commando Order by Adolf Hitler which called for the immediate execution of commandos or parachutists, no matter if they had been captured in uniform.

The decision of who was going to execute them was the cause of an argument between the German Army and the SS. The result of the argument was the army would carry out the execution.

On 7 July the surviving prisoners of war, 30 Special Air Service men and Second Lieutenant Bundy, were taken into the woods near to St Sauvant, forced to dig their own graves then executed by a German firing squad at dawn.

Their bodies were then buried in a mass grave. Three Special Air Service men who had been wounded and hospitalized were killed by the administration of lethal injections.

The 34 men executed in the woods were re-interred in the village cemetery of Rom, Deux-Sèvres. The bodies of the three men executed in the hospital have never been located, but they are commemorated by a plaque among their comrades' headstones in Rom.

Withdrawal

Tonkin and the remainder of the Special Air Service Squadron escaped, regrouped and carried on with the mission until the order to cease operations was received on 24 July 1944.

During the period between 10 June and 23 July the Special Air Service Squadron had attacked railway targets 15 times, the main roads the Route nationale 10 south of Vivonne and the Route nationale N147 between Angers– Poitiers–Limoges were mined.

They also had some success attacking targets of opportunity. Over the night of 12/13 June 1944 Lieutenant Crisp, one of those later executed, was in command of a patrol that laid mines on the N147 in the Forêt de Défant, just before the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich arrived in the area.

The 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich during their advance to Normandy were responsible for the Tulle murders on 9 June 1944 and the massacre at the village of Oradour-sur-Glane 10 June 1944. The operations by the Bulbasket team amongst others delayed the arrival of the division in Normandy until the end of June.

The 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich was responsible for the capture of the Special Operations Executive agent Violette Szabo on 10 June 1944. They handed her over to the Sicherheitsdienst security police in Limoges.

Aftermath

In December 1944, after the German Army had been driven from the area, men working in the forest near St Sauvant discovered an area of disturbed branches and broken earth.

They started to examine the site and discovered what remained of a number of bodies. The local police force were informed and on 18 December started excavating the grave. A number of bodies were wearing Allied uniform; most of their identity tags had been removed but two remained which identified them as members of Operation Bulbasket, while another was identified by his name inside the battle dress tunic. A further body in civilian clothing was identified as Second Lieutenant Brundy.]

The 31 bodies were taken to Rom and reburied with full military honours in the village cemetery. The body of Lieutenant Stephens who had been beaten to death is in the village cemetery in Verrières.

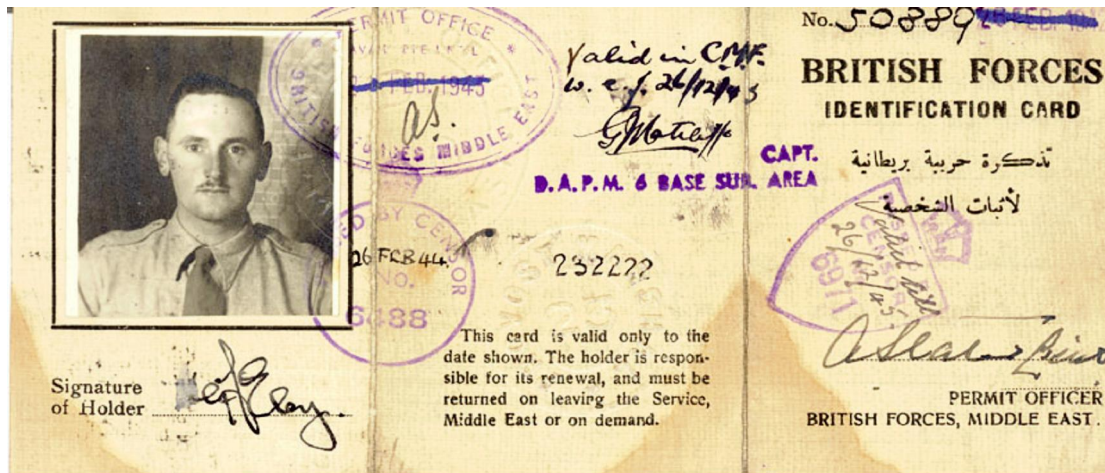
The bodies of the three men murdered in hospital have never been located, but a memorial plaque was erected beside the Special Air Service graves in Rom cemetery



Father took up his post as a junior Sapper Officer with 3 Field Squadron RE

2/11 G.F. Eley.
 3rd Fd Sqn. R.E.

 In the event of my death
 (which is very unlikely)
 the contents of this photo
 album are to be sent to
 my Mother
 Mrs. F. Eley
 2 Shaftesbury Crescent
 Derby
 F.E.



<p>Name ELEY George Frederick</p> <p>Description Lieutenant <i>Captain 1943</i></p> <p>Unit Royal Engineers</p> <p>Height 5'-11"</p> <p>Colour of Eyes Brown</p> <p>Colour of Hair Black</p>	<p>IMMUNITY — EGYPTIAN CRIMINAL AND CIVIL COURTS.</p> <p>1. Under the provisions of the Convention dated 26th August 1936 to Article. 9, Treaty of Alliance, Egypt, no member of the British Forces in Egypt shall be subject to the criminal jurisdiction of the Courts of Egypt, nor to the civil jurisdiction of those Courts in any matter arising out of his official duties.</p> <p>2. The holder of this pass is a member of the British Forces, Middle East.</p> <p>3. This Immunity from the jurisdiction of the Egyptian Courts does not, however, imply that offences may be committed with impunity against the Egyptian Laws or against the person or property of residents in the country, but merely that these offences will be dealt with by the Appropriate British Courts which have been constituted for the purpose.</p> <p>4. Should the holder of this pass receive a summons to appear before any Egyptian Court for any criminal offence he or she will formally inform the Court that immunity from the jurisdiction of the Court is claimed in accordance with Article 9 of the Treaty of Alliance.</p> <p>A criminal offence is one for which a penal award by way of imprisonment or fine can be made and includes contraventions of any sort.</p> <p>5. Immediately the holder of this pass receives a summons to appear before any Egyptian Court he or she will report to Headquarters, B.T.E. or Headquarters, R.A.F., Middle East, through the usual channels, full particulars of the charge and the court to which summoned together with confirmation that action as in paragraph 4 above is being taken.</p> <p>6. If the holder of this pass is used for damages or debt, in a Court of civil jurisdiction in Egypt, and such claim is concerned with a matter arising out of his or her Official duties he or she will at once report the case through the usual channels to Headquarters, B.T.E. or Headquarters, R.A.F., Middle East.</p> <p>(C.R./Egypt/80983/A).</p>
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Some while later, as a junior engineer officer he was in Tobruk when it fell.

He and his entire unit were able to leave the town by the western gate. They travelled west and then south and then east for a considerable amount of time

The fog of war, thickened by clouds of sand reduced visibility to a matter of yards but they joined a convoy speeding eastwards to safety. After several miles my fathers driver attracted his attention "Sir" he added quietly "This convoy is not British!"

Close inspection revealed this to be correct – my father and his three vehicles were now an integral part of the Afrika Korps!

It seemed more sensible to continue in company with the advancing Germans and to seek a suitable moment to pull out of the convoy to "refuel", and when a suitable moment occurred under the cover of the sandstorm they parted company with their unwelcome colleagues and waited for the end of the convoy to disappear into the distance before turning further south to seek a less travelled route

After about six hours driving, they arrived on the ridge overlooking the coast road to see the British Army in full retreat.

My father sat and watched as the army moved eastward. "A penny for your thoughts" said the man beside him.

"I have just come out of Tobruk and there are not that many Germans there. I was just thinking never have so many run so far, so fast, from so few"

At that he turned to the man beside him, leapt to his feet, cracked up a really smart salute and said " Sorry General".

The 23rd of October 1942 saw him as a junior Engineer Officer leading his troop of sappers to clear "Boat Track " – a path for tanks through the minefields at El Alamein.

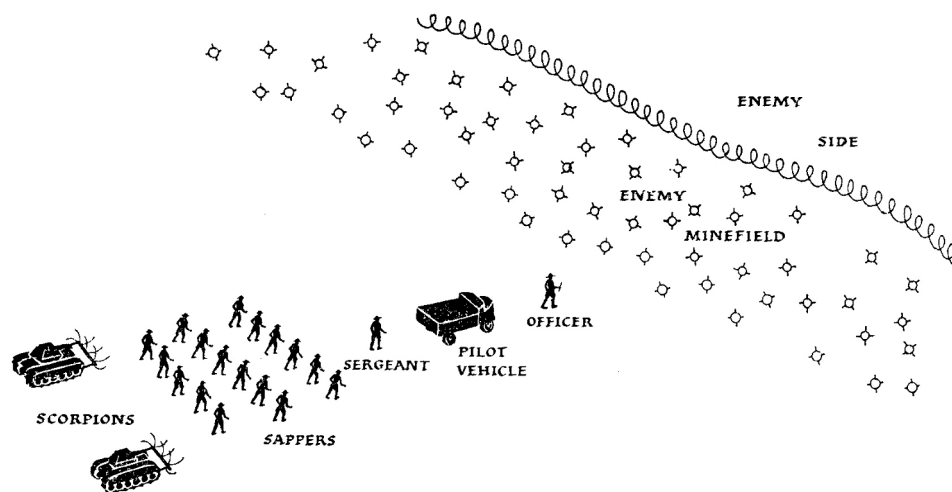


Extract from " Alamein " by C E Lucas Phillips

THE SAPPERS

Hard on the heels of the leading infantry there followed the mine-lifting teams

Each division was responsible for making its own gaps.



4. THE APPROACH TO THE MINEFIELD – Diagrammatic only.

Thus, in 51st Division, six gaps were made through the first enemy minefield and four through the second minefield. The armoured divisions of 10th Corps were to make their own separate passage by the 'corridors' that Montgomery had prescribed; the northern corridor, which straddled the boundary between 51st and the Australian divisions, had been assigned to 1st Armoured Division, and the southern corridor, passing through the New Zealanders, to 10th. The progress of the mine-lifting teams of these divisions depended in the first place upon the progress of the infantry, and on the northern corridor the infantry did not get right through on the required path on the first night, but on the southern corridor they did.

It is on this southern corridor, therefore, that we shall devote our attention for the first night.

Unlike 1st Armoured Division, 10th did not provide their sappers with a protective force to fight off enemy opposition. Gatehouse considered that the New Zealand infantry, who would be ahead of his sappers, would be quite sufficient protection. In the event, there were a few slight delays. In 10th Armoured Division, therefore, the mine clearing force was composed almost entirely of Royal Engineers, but with detachments of the Royal Corps of Signals and the Military Police.

The force was under the command of the divisional CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Gilbert McMeekan, a tall, strongly-built officer of fine presence and vigorous personality.

He was very fortunate in the sappers under his command. His own divisional units were three Cheshire squadrons originally recruited in large measure from the New Brighton Rugby Football Club — 2nd and 3rd Field Squadrons and 141st Field Park Squadron. The 2nd Squadron, commanded by Major Jack Perrott, was not to come into action this night, but 3rd was led by the remarkable Peter Moore, the fighting sapper who had himself devised the new drill now to be so severely tested. Because the tasks ahead were too big for his own divisional units, two Army Field Companies — Nos 571 and 573, commanded by Major Yeates and Major Brinsmead respectively, reinforced McMeekan.

McMeekan was required to clear four 16-yard gaps, which were a continuation of 30th Corps' 'Bottle', and 'Hat' routes, and a spare route named 'Ink'. Brinsmead took Bottle on the right, Moore took Ink and Boat in the centre and Yeates took Hat. The routes had to be carried right the way through to the final infantry object beyond Miteiriya Ridge.

The barrage crashed down, the New Zealand infantry closed up to it and the sapper reconnaissance parties, immediately on their heels, stepped out on a compass bearing according to the drill.

McMeekan was on Boat route, immediately behind Moore's squadron; he was perhaps the only man to follow that barrage in a staff car and he sat right out on the roof of it 'in order to see the troops'. This was the route designated for the tanks of the Sherwood Rangers and for Gatehouse's own divisional headquarters.

That route we also shall follow first.

There was a No Man's Land of about a mile before the first enemy minefield, the location of which was well enough known. The gapping parties of 3rd Field Squadron walked forward to within 500 yards of it, with their sandbagged pilot vehicle driven by Sapper Shaw, their mine detectors, their large reels of white tape, their tin mine-markers, their pickets and lamps.

They waited expectantly for the blue light from the reconnaissance officer, while the guns trumpeted behind them and the barrage roared ahead. McMeekan found it 'soothing'. The moonlight, not yet obscured by dust, wanly illuminated an other-worldly scene in which the few score sappers seemed to be alone in a realm of noise.

'We felt rather lonely and naked', recorded Moore, 'without any escort of infantry or tanks.' But this was his only concern. His men had been trained to a hair for what they had to do and each man, as he waited, went through his own part in his mind.

The blue light showed ahead and they were off. The machine guns began to crackle like electric drills and their tracers flicked along the line. A few shells began to fall. The pilot vehicle, creeping towards the blue light, blew up and burst into flames. Enemy machine guns and mortars turned on it at once, like steel filings drawn to a magnet. Moore, Driver Shaw and one or two others leapt for fire extinguishers and in about ten minutes put out the signal flames.

Thus there was a trying delay right at the very start. McMeekan looked at his watch. It was 11.20. Twenty minutes late, and time was already the most precious factor. He moved right up and sent runners out laterally across the minefield for news of the other routes. Signals arrived to lay telephone cable, but the shelling increased, the wires were cut and telephone communications were never of any value. Wireless, as we shall find, was little better and throughout the night communications were the one shortcoming that bedevilled him.

Moore's sappers got down to work at once in their echeloned teams, sweeping with their detectors, feeling with their fingers, marking and pulling out the mines and taping the sides of the lane. This was the real thing at last after weeks of training. Knowing that time was precious, they worked as fast as their delicate and dangerous task allowed, moving forward yard by yard, eyes to the ground, ears turned to the detector's alarm, trying to ignore the distracting sounds of battle all around, trying to be cold-blooded in the heat and emotion of conflict.

At first they worked without serious interference from the enemy, but before long a German heavy machine-gun came to life very close on their left hand. Moore dispatched Lieutenant John Van Grutten, the casual young Cambridge undergraduate, to attack it with rifles and hand grenades, and the gun was silenced. The squadron pushed on, got right through the first minefield, lit the little orange and green lamps and sent word back to the Sherwood Rangers that the gap was through. The squadron prepared to move on to tackle the next minefield.

Moore, however, was anxious. A detachment of Military Police should by now have come forward in lorries with a load of pickets to mark the route forward between the two minefields. There was no sign of them; what could have gone wrong? He looked at his watch. Time was terribly important.

Then in the dusty moonlight he saw a small figure moving slowly towards him. As the figure came nearer he saw that it was staggering under an enormous load of pickets; by the broad red band round the man's helmet, he saw also that he was a Military Police corporal. He spoke sharply to him: 'Good God, what are you doing here? Where's your lorry?'

The little corporal answered with unconcern. 'Sorry to be late, sir. Afraid the lorries got shot up. A lot of casualties, sir. So I've carried up as many pickets myself as I could. I'll be right back for some more, sir.'

What had happened was that the two Military Police lorries, 100 yards back, had both been hit by shellfire. All the redcaps, including the sergeant-major, had been killed or wounded except for the little lance-corporal. McMeekan arrived on the scene, provided some of his reserve sappers to replace the Military Police and looked after their wounded, but the little corporal meantime went ahead alone. McMeekan did not see him again, but the route was marked and lit all the way before dawn.

Third Squadron hurried forward to the next main enemy minefield. They were in the thick of the battle now. The din increased as the enemy weapons replied to our own more vigorously. German and New Zealand dead lay in greater numbers, and many wounded waited anxiously for help to come.

The second minefield was found to be much more thickly sown than the first. Trip-wires and the booby-trapped Italian Red Devils became more plentiful. The S-mines were encountered wherever there was dead ground and Moore, crawling to a flank to find a deviation, was saved only by the eye of an alert subaltern beside him from putting his hand down upon the deadly horns.

As his teams topped Miteiriya Ridge, the enemy's fire increased in intensity and the sappers' casualties grew. All their expertness and all their coolness were called for as they handled the infernal machines in the dark, following the precise drill that they had been taught and trying to make themselves insensitive to the devil's carnival around them.

It needed guts to stand up and stay standing up when everyone else was either lying down or running, for they were now right up with the leading infantry beyond the crest of the ridge. In the left of the squadron's two gaps, two of the detector operators were hit one after the other, but on both occasions the stalwart Sergeant Stanton took his place.

It was in this second minefield that Moore most felt the need for protective troops to fight off enemy posts interfering with his work. Several enemy machine-guns were now firing at his team from both flanks and although most of the bullets were whistling overhead, a German heavy machine-gun opened accurate fire from only seventy yards away on the right. It became difficult to make progress, for any movement brought immediate fire. Moore was about to send back for his reserve Troop to attack the position, when a New Zealand officer, seeing their difficulty, attacked the position with two of his men with tremendous dash and, amid an eruption of bursting grenades, killed or captured every man in the post.

McMeekan, having received a message at about 3 am that Moore had reached his final objective, went forward at once. His staff car having been knocked out, he rode this time in an armoured car. His Intelligence Officer followed in a sandbagged jeep, with Driver Crump at the wheel. They began to approach Miteiriya Ridge, with McMeekan standing up in the turret of the car and other men clinging to the outside of it.

Half a mile from the crest of the ridge an air-burst shell from an 88 detonated within a few feet of them. A corporal was badly wounded and McMeekan was shattered by concussion. His right ear was bleeding and the ear-drum broken. A tremendous roaring filled his head, which felt about to burst. There was a small wound in his right arm.

Some New Zealand infantry came up and applied shell dressings to both men. McMeekan sat on the ground, put his head between his knees and in a minute or two felt better. He remounted his armoured car, which was undamaged, and drove on over the half-mile of the rough gradient to the crest of the ridge.

The shelling was now considerable and many dead lay strewn over the rocky slope. He found that a bank ran along the crest of the ridge and that Moore's few vehicles were tucked in under it. Moore himself arrived very soon and reported that both his gaps, Boat and Ink, were making good progress, not much behind time and that his teams were, in fact, in front of the infantry. It was 3.30 in the morning and 8th Armoured Brigade was due to start through in half an hour. The urgency of the situation pressed hard upon the two officers. A report came from Brinsmead that Bottle gap was through on the right, but no news could be got from 571st Field Company on Hat. So McMeekan set out to discover for himself, transferring from the armoured car to his jeep.

Almost quite deaf, he took the wheel himself with Driver Crump beside him, but he had to change places with him when he failed to hear a Maori's challenge to stop him and a bayonet flashed menacingly against the side of the jeep. A hundred yards on another party of Maoris roared at them and Crump shouted in his ear: 'They say we've run into a minefield, sir.' McMeekan dismounted and found a trip wire wrapped round the back axle.

It was a near squeak, but as the two men bent to remove the wire, McMeekan saw to his delight a German skull-and-cross-bones sign with the warning Achtung Minen. He had stumbled on the Germans' own gap through their minefield.

Close by he found also the reconnaissance party of 571st Field Company. McMeekan learnt from the sergeant in charge that, led with great daring by Lieutenant Herbert Darville, they had been right through to their objective beyond the ridge, had put up their guiding light and were waiting for the gapping party to work up to them.

By now McMeekan realized that there were no infantry in front of him, that 6th NZ Brigade had been unable to gain their objective on this front, and that he and his sappers were the foremost troops. He was not deterred. There was still just time to make a path for the armour if the German gap was a safe one. He decided to test it.

The reconnaissance party had a detector mounted on bicycle wheels, which they called a 'pram'. Conscripting Grump into the reconnaissance team, McMeekan made off over the crest to the German lines. Two men operated the pram, with McMeekan and three others lined out on either side, looking for any fresh marks in the sand which might show that the enemy had closed the gap at the last hour: six men ahead of the whole army, strolling slowly along, eyes glued to the moonlit ground. Impelled by the urgency of the hour, the little sapper party paid no heed to the fire, but McMeekan was careful to keep a man glued to his less deaf ear.

The luck could not last long. About 150 yards beyond the crest, two machine-guns opened up close on their left, the tracers flicking just over their heads, narrowly missing. They dropped to the ground and McMeekan made a rapid appreciation. He contemplated completing the reconnaissance by crawl, but his watch showed him that it was already 4.30. No time. With three gaps swept and a fourth clear for at least halfway, he thought he would be justified in calling the armour forward. The roaring in his head forgotten, he felt all Africa within his grasp if the tanks could be shepherded through within an hour. He crawled back with his little team as fast as he could.

He hurried back to Boat gap, where his armoured car still was, to call on the armour by wireless. But both the wireless set and the operator had been badly shaken when, at the moment of his having been blasted by the air burst, he had fallen on top of them. He wished ardently that he had had his own Signaller McKay with him.

It was maddening to him that the whole plan might fail because of a single faulty wireless. He jumped into his jeep again and drove as fast as he dared back down the Boat gap and found that 8th Armoured Brigade was already rumbling up. He shouted to the first squadron leader that the way was clear, and close behind he found Neville Custance, the brigade Commander, himself. Custance told him that the column on the Hat route was well up but, as was to be expected, did not know what was in front. McMeekan replied: 'Very well, sir, I will go over and guide them.'

He made his way across with the greatest difficulty, obstructed by wire, trenches, and gun-pits, found to his disgust that the column on Hat had received orders to halt and doubled back again to Boat, bent on urging the armour to hasten forward before first light.

He found a gunner officer and asked for the use of his wireless to speak to brigade headquarters. The gunner demanded to see his identity card and McMeekan produced it, fretting at the delay. A few seconds later another gunner asked for it, and the card fell from McMeekan's hand, which was quivering with rage and impatience. Then Douglas Packard, commanding 1st RITA, whose guns were coming into action under shell-fire just behind, turned up and took the irate, determined and almost stone-deaf CRE to see Custance personally.

But it was too late. Half an hour too late. The tanks of Flash Kellett's Sherwood Rangers ahead had been brought to a halt by the enemy.

While McMeekan had been trying to get the Hat route opened up, the sappers of 3rd Field Squadron had been 'working like demons' to Complete Boat, Moore, like his CRE, was getting more and more anxious about time. He was ahead of the New Zealand infantry, but his men were as steady as rocks under the continuous fire as they crept forward, sweeping, marking, lifting, taping.

It was getting on towards six o'clock and the sky was beginning to change from black to grey and the stars to fade as he watched his men work through to the very end and saw a sapper put up the last marker. Then he turned and raced back as fast as he could through the gap that had been made. At the end of it, in the expanse between the two minefields, he saw the tanks of the Sherwood Rangers lined up, nose to tail, waiting for the word to go forward. He jumped on to the leading tank and shouted to the officer in the turret:

'For God's sake, get up as quickly as you can, or you'll run into trouble.'

The tanks moved immediately, and Moore himself led them forward. They climbed up the rocky slope and came up on the crest. Moore could see the stalwart Sergeant Stanton standing at the head of the gap in the half-dark, boldly waving them on. They answered his signal and as they debouched from the head of the gap their black shapes became silhouetted in the dull grey light before dawn.

A few hundred yards ahead a screen of dug-in anti-tank guns in the enemy's main battle position was waiting for them. There was a terrible 'clang' as the tank that Moore was leading was hit by a solid shot. He at once ran back to the next tank in the line and guided it round in front of the first. Within a few feet of him it suffered the same fate. He ran back for a third, with a like result.

In the first five minutes six were hit and burning. In a very short time the Rangers had lost sixteen tanks. The markers put up by the sappers were knocked down by shell fire, so that other tanks, trying to open out to a flank, went into the minefield.

Faced with this situation, Flash Kellett tried to call forward the machine gunners of The Buffs, who formed part of his Sherwood Rangers regimental group, to suppress the enemy anti-tank guns. He could get no answer from them on the radio. He therefore summoned his field gunner, Major David Egerton, commanding B Battery, 1st RHA, whose OP tank, a Honey, was next to his own in the column. Could he, Kellett asked, do anything about those chaps in front?

Egerton, a young Regular officer, looked through his spectacles into the pre-dawn, which was still too dark for discerning anything at a distance but solid, black objects.

The intimidating streams of red tracers from the German 50-mm wove their patterns all around, and the flames of burning tanks glowed on either hand. But all that he could see ahead were the flashes from the enemy's guns, stabbing the darkness somewhere ahead. He said: I don't think I can do any good, sir, but I'll try.'

He called his battery into action by wireless. The eight guns, led by Captain Peter Jackson, were still far back in the minefield lane, within the confines of which it was impossible to deploy. Jackson therefore without hesitation took them right forward and they deployed in a 'crash action' 300 yards in front of the minefield, Downham Troop on the right, Sahagon Troop on the left. It had all the atmosphere of a horse-artillery action in the old tradition, in front of the whole army. So close were they to the enemy that a German 50-mm gun was attacked and silenced by Lieutenant Pat Grant with hand grenades.

The two Troops opened fire immediately over open sights, but the only targets they could engage were momentary flashes in the night from unseen weapons, and fall of shot could not be observed. The shapes of his own guns, however, were dimly silhouetted and began to be more clearly revealed as the sky grew paler. They came at once under heavy fire, from antitank artillery machine-guns and rifles, but resolutely continued to engage.

Egerton's own tank, 200 yards ahead, was hit. He walked back to his battery through the hubbub. He found both Troops to be suffering heavy casualties, men dropping at the guns every minute, but they continued to engage.

The approaching dawn, however, brought an end to the gallant little action. Seeing the Rangers' tanks themselves beginning to withdraw to the cover of the ridge, Egerton gave the order: 'Cease firing; prepare to withdraw.'

The hump-backed 'quads' drove up in the dissolving gloom, led by the Troop-sergeants with the steadiness of a drill-order. Their distinctive shapes, familiar to the enemy in many a lively action, brought a new access of fire. The quads drove on, wheeled right and left of their Troops, hooked on to their guns and drove back, very fortunate that only one of them was knocked out.

Some twenty wounded still lay out on the ground to be picked up and evacuated. Captain David Mann, leader of Downham Troop, began to do so but was himself mortally wounded. Captain Jack Tirrell, leader of Sahagon, an ex-ranker officer who already wore the ribbons of the MC and DCM, had better luck, however, and got his wounded out piled high on his Honey. It was almost full daylight and, as the crimson radiation of the approaching sun glowed behind the rocky crest of Miteiriya, the funeral plumes of the smoking tanks were dyed blood-red.¹

Meanwhile the order came from McMeekan for the sappers to withdraw also, their task completed. Flinn drove some of them back in his Chev. He then made two further trips up to collect wounded, New Zealanders, sappers and badly burned men from the Rangers' tanks.

Dirty, tired, thirsty, 3rd Squadron withdrew full of pride that they had done their job. So excellent had been their training that they had not suffered a single casualty from mines; nor, indeed, had any other RE unit in the division. They relaxed and began to brew up for breakfast. Sergeant Stanton took off his steel helmet. A shell burst about seventy yards away and a splinter from it embedded itself in his skull.

All along the 30th Corps front, as well as in the sector north of Himeimat, where 13th Corps were attacking, the dust-clouded moon looked down on similar exploits. Only on Miteiriya Ridge, however, did the sappers succeed in making a way for the armour right through to the final goal, for in the other tank corridors the infantry themselves were brought to a halt.

Thus the mine was the weapon that most seriously obstructed the break-out of Eighth Army's armour. On Miteiriya Ridge an extra half-hour of darkness would have done the trick, though whether, even so, the armour could have got through is a question that the next night's operations were to answer.

Alamein C E Lucas Phillips

My father was a junior Officer in 3 Field Squadron under the command of Major Moore

Amongst his papers after his death I discovered this citation written recommending his Squadron Commander for a decoration –it resulted in the first of Major Moore's 3 Distinguished Service Orders

"On the night 23/11/41 I was with 3 Coy of 3rd Field Squadron RC, working on 'Giant' tank minefields. The east of these minefields was an 'Hilary' ridge, and by the time the sixteen yard gap was cleared it was very nearly dawn. As the first of our tanks approached the minefield, Major P.D.M. Moore D.C. AS my squadron commanded over them, and jumping on the leading tank he guided them through the gap. By this time it was almost light and considerable fire was being directed on to the gap and its approaches. He then walked back through the gap to his squadron and organised it for the local defence of that area of the ridge, where they stayed for six hours, until Major Moore considered the situation sufficiently stabilised to warrant their withdrawal.

1/2/42
P.D.M. Moore

As the Eighth Army pushed forward my father found himself once more in Tobruk and then Bengazi as Garrison Engineer.

His career as a Garrison Engineer was punctuated by occasional disaster – here in his own words are a few of the more memorable events



“ My next round of failures which so nearly reached success, was in Benghazi. I was appalled to find that there was a bakery but we couldn’t get bread because there was no fuel for the ovens. This, of course, was a R. A. S. C. responsibility - a Corps which I found occasionally lacking in imagination. I was tired of army biscuits so I invented the Eley Constant Feed Venturi Burner , which would run on sump oil.

Bread was produced for a day or two - the O. B. E. was within my grasp, when my device not only blew the back out of the oven - it blew the back out of the Bakery.

The explosion occurred during an air raid, and I hoped the General wouldn’t hear it - he didn’t, but he heard of it and I was in trouble again “

“ The military engineer is a man of many roles and duties – water supply, bridges, roads, etc. I seemed to be doomed only to explosives and destruction until one day wider horizons opened.

An unhorsed cavalry Subaltern informed me that it was an engineer’s responsibility to provide 1115 men with latrines.

I found that Sapper Officers, when told this, sent off their tired men to dig holes for the soldiery.

I read the rules - which stated that each unit must dig its own holes - the Royal Engineer would provide the seats.

This afflicting intelligence for a time kept the rest of the Brigade from worrying me - and me from the necessity of making seats; until one C. O. with more sense of hygiene than humour, called my bluff - he had got some holes and I had better produce some thunder boxes!

Nothing daunted, I set my lads to work - my first experience of production line and critical path analysis. Shortly there came, not thanks from the unit, but an irate Officer - the holes were so big they were trapping his chaps just behind the knee and just under the armpit!

Lack of attention to detail caused this engineering failure. I asked the Sergeant what size he had made the holes. He didn’t know - he told the Corporal who also didn’t know, but Sapper Snooks, who came from a village in Cumberland said that when his Father had been apprenticed to the local joiner and undertaker, it was the custom to make the hole in the privy seat by drawing around the brim of the undertaker’s hat.

There were no top hats in the desert so they had used the rim of a steel helmet “

“ After Benghazi I was sent back to Tobruk now bypassed by the war - prior to going down to Alexandria to embark for Sicily and/or Italy.

In a few short weeks I put up several ‘blacks’.

Because some senior officer felt that sharks had moved into the bay because of the food provided by many dead bodies in the water, he declared the harbour unsafe for swimming.

I undertook to clear the sharks - which I’m sure I did, although I never saw any before or after. My patent gelignite launcher hurled a great deal of explosive around the swimming beach in a calculated arc.

Nothing could have survived it.

Unfortunately, I neglected to inform the Navy - they had a diver down at one of the wrecks about half a mile away, searching for gin doubtless. I always felt that the fuss they made through official channels was really because of the loss of the gin, rather than the comparatively light damage to the diver.”

“ My next trouble there was through my stores Officer -who as a regular officer always knew he had to do things “ by the book “ and his stores book told him he had no nails.

So he ordered - and obtained, a trainload of nails - not an enormous transgression in a world at war you might think. But there weren’t many trainloads of nails in the Middle East - and now I had got one of them. The trouble was, as higher authority pointed out:

(a) The war had passed by,

(b) There was no timber of any sort for several hundred miles in any direction to knock the nails into - I’ll bet they are still there! “

“ Having pointed out that the war had passed by, higher authority then ordered me to construct a floating pipeline in the Harbour 200 ft. long.

A man who rejoiced in the title King’s Harbourmaster gently explained to me that it was impossible to bring a ship within 1000’ of the jetty as he had 98 wrecks in the Harbour which were a danger to navigation.

I passed the tip on to the Army - and added for good measure that, in any case, as I knew from experience, floating pipelines were useless and I preferred to construct a submarine line.

The reply was curt in the extreme, and concluded with the information that 200’ of 18” dia. floating line was on its way to the railhead.

That Railway again!

Somebody had spent all the war building it, or blowing it up and now they were determined to use it. In fact the instructions now went further:-

- (1) Construct a floating pipeline.*
- (2) Sort out and repair the damage to the old Italian petrol storage installation (this had already been blown up 3 times and was a rare old tangle of pipes.)*
- (3) Lay an overland pipeline several miles to El Adem.*

Now I saw the master plan conceived in Whitehall and nurtured in Cairo.

They could bring petrol to the railhead in tankers to feed El Adem, or pump it down to ships to take across the med.

The fact that there was no longer any necessity for the complicated operation deterred them not so I laboured on.

Just before completion of this useless exercise, with just a little sorting out of old pipes and pump remaining, I got my order to leave at once for Alexandria and Italy

Happily I handed over before the first attempt was made to get a vessel to the end of my pipeline for an experimental pump-through the installation and up to El Adem.

I was standing by the gangplank of a ship in Alex harbour when a dispatch rider came roaring up.

A message for me before I left the Middle East for ever –

How nice of Cairo after all we said to each other over the years –

Not at all, it was from my unhappy relief in Tobruk.

The telegram said

“ 20, 000 gallons sea water delivered to rail tankers at El Adem. What is wrong? “

I walked up the gangplank, tore up the telegram and watched the pieces sink in the Med. “

Following the invasion of Italy he continued as Garrison engineer in Benevento, Rieti and Capua

One of my more successful ventures was nearing completion - the clearing of the town's old sewers blocked by bomb damage.

It would have saved me a lot of trouble if the R. A. F. had cut the bridge over the Volturno for which they were being paid, instead of cutting the sewers running into it.

I mention these sewers only in passing since I learned it was intended to recommend me for a 'mention in dispatches' for clearing the sewers so quickly and probably preventing an epidemic~ I was horrified, having; failed to obtain a gallantry award when I was a fighting soldier, I didn't want a mention for repairing the sewers. I let it be known that I wasn't very happy – and the matter was quietly dropped

My next failure some months later was an engineering success -it was a political failure.

At the time I was Garrison Engineer of Rieti - a small town some '60 miles north of Rome.

It was this town which was chosen by the famous tenor Gigli to make his comeback. There had been some murmurs of collaboration with the Germans and he wanted to try out a provincial audience of Italians before trying Rome or Naples.

Because of possible trouble with the locals the A. C. C. didn't particularly want the performance to take place –

Me I wanted to hear Gigli.

The local Opera House had been damaged by near misses from bombs and had a crack down from dome to basement.

The Town Mayor decided that it was the local engineer officer's duty to declare the building unsafe for public performances.

From the depths of my inexperience I examined the building and declared it safe - and signed a paper to say so.

Today, I would be much more cautious!

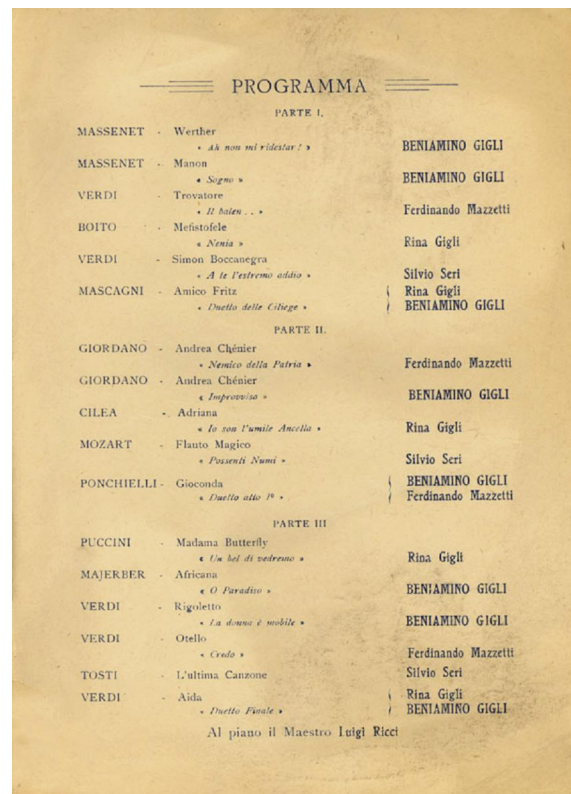
The performance took place and was an enormous success.

The crowds who came to boo remained to cheer. They took Gigli back into their hearts again.

He went on for hours and I suddenly remembered When he was in full throat that Caruso could crack a wineglass , and here was Gigli who spurned the title of the second Caruso and insisted that he was the first Gigli giving voice inside a large cracked box with 2, 000 excited Italians stamping in unison.

However, he went on to fame and never knew of the Sapper officer who risked his reputation -nay his life - to launch. him.

I was told afterwards by my C. 0. that it was the most reckless decision made by a British officer since the brave but misguided attempt to charge the Russian guns by the Light Brigade.



I still have the programme for the performance!!!!

On a lighter note whilst Garrison Engineer at Benevento he was faced by a different problem.

Summoned by the local British Commander and the Town Mayor he was required to survey and assess the buildings in the town which had been heavily shelled and to declare which buildings were safe and could be repaired which buildings were so badly damaged that would need to be demolished or blown up

The heaviest damage was in the area around the railway station and the majority of the buildings were so damaged that demolition was the only solution.

One building however was reprieved,

Built in 1860 by Giuseppe Alberti and still in 2008 owned by the Alberti family the Factory of Benevento was not demolished

To this day the label on a bottle of Strega proudly states

Stabilimento G Alberti

Prezza La Stazione Ferroviaria
(near to the railway station)

I wonder if the Alberti family realise the debt they owe to a young Officer of the Royal Engineers



AS Garrison Engineer at Capua he clearly had some talented staff under his command as evidenced by these items presented to him





My parents met in Tobruk and conducted their courtship not only against a background of war but also over considerable distance and time.

Later when both had been posted to Italy my Father would – when he could - borrow his Commanding Officers jeep and use it to visit his fiancée.

On one occasion returning home in the early hours and exceedingly tired he fell asleep at the wheel and wedged the jeep irretrievably into a ditch.

He was faced with the double problem of returning to his unit, and more importantly returning the Major's vehicle.

In the early morning light he realised he had chosen a ditch alongside a Vehicle Park for his accident – moreover the Park was full of Jeeps.

The Stores NCO was surprised to be woken by an Engineer Officer who wished to check his vehicle inventory and was understandably surprised to find that he had more Jeeps in his Park than on his inventory

Result. One jeep buried in the ditch, my Father on time to return to his Unit (and a better Jeep for the Major)!!!

This story may well have passed into Royal Engineer folklore because there is an apocryphal story that in the 1980s at the end of a major exercise in Germany the Royal Engineer Bridging Units were reputed to have crossed 5 major German rivers despite having only 4 Bridging Units

The subsequent Inquiry is believed to have revealed the truth. Each Unit was required to hold 25% spares – judicious and co-ordinated demanding of spares and simple mathematics $25\% \times 4$ and exquisite logistics equals 4 Bridging Units and 5 rivers crossed.

I have often wondered which time served Supply Office taught them!!

Despite his poor driving record Father survived and in the fullness of time his matrimonial proposal was accepted

A week before the wedding he sent this note to his fiancée

24/3/45.

Capt G. J. Egan RE
360 was Sec RE
cmf

Darling

- Padre's name. Rex D. H. Priest.
Church ^{del Santo} English Church
Via Babuino. Rome

Time - 1000 hrs 2 April 45

Reception - Pincio (I think)
(try to bring some girls)

For heaven's sake don't fail
to get Lucia accommodation and
also accom for night 2 April.

The ring has not yet arrived
but if it doesn't I'll get some wire
face & eyes feeling up remarkably
well.

Don't worry. This time next week (1000 hrs) we
shall be in church.

all y love
Gordon

Robert says you're terrible excited

XXXXXV

On 2 April 1945 he was married in Rome to Sister Ada Maud Ibbotson of Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps



CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF MARRIAGE

The statutory fee for this certificate is 3s. 9d.
Where a search is necessary to find the entry,
a search fee is payable in addition.

Given at the GENERAL R
SOMERSET

Application Num

Registration of Births, Deaths and



Marriages (Special Provisions) Act 19

Marriage outside the United Kingdom Command:- C.M.F. at G.H.Q. 2nd Echelon C.M.F.

No.	Date and Place of Marriage	Name Surname and Nationality	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname
18	Second April 1945 at Rome, Italy.	George Frederick Eley (English)	25	Bachelor	Capt.R.E.	362 Works Sect. R.B.	George Edward Eley
		Ada Maud Ibbotson (English)	31	Spinster	QAIMNS/R	92 Br.Gen.Hospital	Frederick Ibbotson

Married in the All Saints Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of England in accordance with Sec.22 of the Fore:

This Marriage was solemnized between us { (Sgd.) Ada Maud Ibbotson } in the { (Sgd.) Annie Roberts } presence of us { (Sgd.) Edward Scholey } by me:- Sgd.

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of the certified copy of* an entry made in a Service Departments Register.

Given at the General Register Office, Somerset House, London, under the Seal of the said Office, the 13th day of September

* If the certificate is given from the original Register the words "the certified copy of" are struck out.

Section 3(2) of the above mentioned Act provides that "The enactments relating to the registration of births and deaths and marriages in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (which contain provisions authorising the admission in evidence of, and of extracts from, certified copies of registers and duplicate registers) shall have effect as if the Service Departments Registers were certified copies or duplicate registers transmitted to the Registrar General in accordance with those enactments."

CAUTION.—Any person who (1) falsifies any of the particulars on this certificate, or (2) uses a falsified certificate as true, knowing it to be false, is liable to prosecution

SA 013581

Army Form B. 295 (CMF)
Army Form B. 295 (CMF)
(in parts of 100)

No. _____ Regiment **RE**

PASS

No. **23222** (Rank) **CAPT** (Name) **G.F. ELEY.**

has permission to be absent from his quarters/duty, from **2nd April 45** to **14 April 45.**

for the purpose of proceeding to **Jschia.**

(Station) **Field**

(Date) **20 Mar 45**

[Signature]
Commanding

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P.S.S./B/D126/100Mx100/11-44

Army Form B. 295 (CMF)
Army Form B. 295 (CMF)
(in parts of 100)

No. _____ Regiment **QAIMNS/R.**

PASS

No. **221449** (Rank) **Sgt** (Name) **ELEY. A.M**

has permission to be absent from his quarters/duty, from **2nd April 45** to **14 April 45.**

for the purpose of proceeding to **Jschia.**

(Station) **Field.**

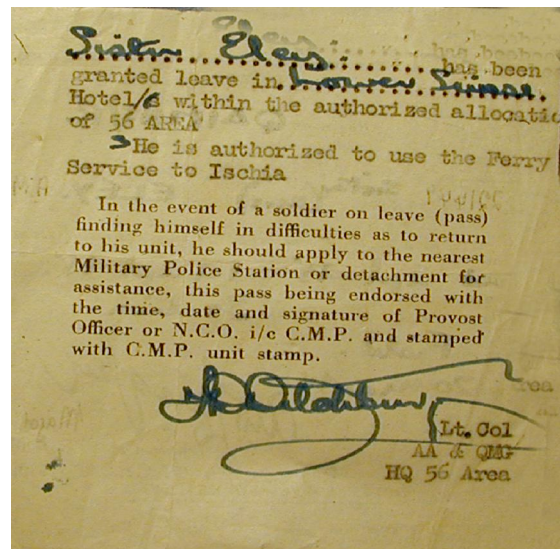
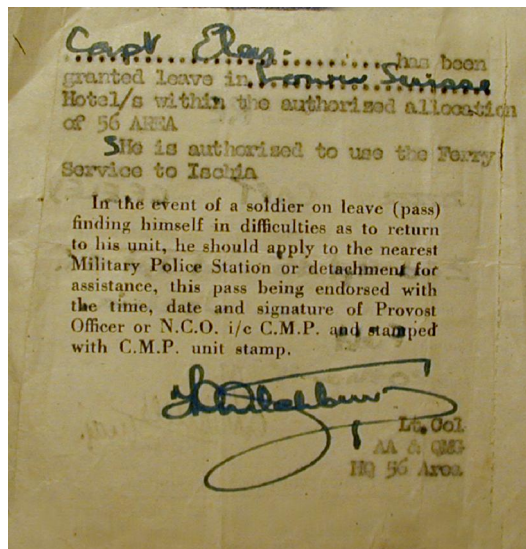
(Date) **20 Mar 45**

[Signature]
Commanding **R.A.M.C.**

Registrar, No. 92 General Hospital

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P.S.S./B/D126/100Mx100/11-44



After a honeymoon on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples they joined a troop ship to return to England via the Cape of Good Hope. On the first night on board a tannoy message announced " Captain Eley to report to the Orderly Room as Duty Officer "

An elderly ex Indian Army Captain seated at the same table said " Before you jump up and rush to the Orderly Room – check Kings Regulations – Officers returning home on marriage "

When he finally reported to the harassed Orderly Room clerk he was able to quote the appropriate regulation word perfectly - " Officers returning home to the United Kingdom following marriage and accompanied by their wife were excused Duty Officer duties for the duration of the voyage!

His military career languished somewhat and by 1945 he was back in England as a senior Captain in the Royal Engineers.

By this time the Americans had entered the war and there was little work for middle ranking engineer officers. My father secured a posting as the camp commandant for a prisoner of war camp in Wales.

He arrived at the camp on a warm summer evening to find a prisoner of war camp, with watchtowers, barbed wire and huts and two gates open to the world.

He walked into the camp, - totally deserted. After some moments he found a hut which was occupied. In it was a sergeant and two British privates.

"I am the new commandant, where are the prisoners? " he asked

"Aahh" said the sergeant, "It's Thursday, we only count them on Sundays."

My father was somewhat confused.

"The situation here" said the sergeant " is that the war is virtually over, none of the prisoners wish to escape and most of the farmers round here need workers. We count the prisoners on Sunday, they work on the land all week and we count them the following Sunday ".

My father sat down amazed.

On Sunday the camp was full; 134 prisoners were lined up counted - and walked back out of the gate

That situation continued until well into 1946 shortly before my birth.

During his time in Wales only one thing marred the tranquillity of the stay. And that was the delivery of the mail.

My father could not understand why mail was delivered on some days and not on others.

One morning he waited for the postman. The postman was in fact the postmaster from Llandidrod Wells. He arrived mounted on a horse after climbing the fifteen miles from Llandidrod into the very centre of the Brecon Beacons.

My father inquired as to why there was not a daily delivery. "I only deliver when there is a parcel" said the postmaster.

My father, at that time was writing daily to my mother and she to him, looked straight into the postmaster's eyes. "You will only deliver mail if there is a parcel" he said.

"That's correct said the postmaster.

"Wait one moment" said my father and disappeared into his office. In the office he wrapped a house brick in brown paper addressed it to himself and using the HMSO stamp provided stamped it.

He returned to the postmaster "Here is a parcel" he said handing it to the postman.

The postman looked at the parcel regarded the address and said "But it's addressed to you"

"Quite correct," said my father, "I have just posted a parcel which you must now take down to your office and return to me tomorrow morning "

The postman could not fault the logic, nor persuade my father that his action was not correct.

"Here is a parcel" my father said, "Tomorrow you must deliver it together with any other post that you have"

After some discussion the postmaster was unable to refute the logic of the statement and for the remainder of my father's stay in Wales the post was delivered daily. After about two days it was agreed that carrying the brick backwards and forwards was unnecessary.

By May 1946 it seemed that the War Office had forgotten him completely. He approached his sergeant.

"Sergeant" he said "when I arrived you were running this camp on your own. I am about to leave, you will continue to run the camp on your own. Sign this form accepting responsibility for one prisoner of war camp 134 prisoners; twenty nine tons of coal and five tons of coke."

I still have the note

Subject - Handing Over The Morgan
Bunkers.

6.2.
677 G.P.W.W. May 9 1946

The above camp, complete with
bunkers stores as per AB531, 29 tons coal
5 tons coke and 134 P.W. were today
handed over by me to Sgt. Maguire.

For Capt. R.

I certify that all items shown
as on charge in the bunker inventory
also 29 tons coal & 5 tons coke
and 134 P.W. were today taken
over by me from Capt. R.

date 9/5/46

Sgt. Maguire
N.O. 1/10/46

No one from the War Office has ever approached my father to ask what he did with coal, the coke or the prisoners of war – perhaps they are still there!

My Mother was discharged on 14 December 1945



Sister (Mrs.) A. M. Eley Q.A.I.M.N.S(R)

Madam,

Now that the time has come for your release from active military duty, I am commanded by the Army Council to express to you their thanks for the valuable services which you have rendered in the service of your country at a time of grave national emergency.

At the end of the emergency you will relinquish your commission, and at that time a notification will appear in the London Gazette (Supplement), granting you also the honorary rank of Sister. Meanwhile, you have permission to use that rank with effect from the date of your release.

I am, Madam,

Your obedient Servant,

Lieut. B. B. Hurd.

The War Office
A.M.D.4.
14 DEC 1945
Initials *ss*

My Father was discharged on 4 September 1946

Army Form X212
(Original)

EMI

RELEASE CERTIFICATE
EMERGENCY COMMISSIONED OFFICERS—REGULAR
ARMY
(CLASS "A" RELEASE IN U.K.)

T/Captain G.F. ELEY (232222)
Royal Engineers.

The above-named has been granted **111** days' leave
commencing **16 May 46** and is, with effect from **4 Sep 46**,
released from military duty under Regulations for Release from
the Army, 1945.

The War Office
AGI (Officers D)
Office Stamp
24 JUN 1946
Initials *[Signature]*

NOTICE.
By Command of the Army Council.

This certificate is not valid unless it bears the official War
Office stamp, showing date of issue.

This document is Government property. Any person being
in possession of it without authority or excuse is liable under
Section 156 (9) of the Army Act to a fine of £20 (twenty pounds),
or imprisonment for six months, or to both fine and imprisonment.

IF FOUND, please enclose this certificate in an unstamped
envelope and address it to the Under Secretary of State, The War
Office, London, S.W.1.

(8417)

P.T.O.

He was however required to remain on the Army Reserve of Officers. With the passage of time Father realised that many of the junior Officers who had served with him had now become Brigadiers or even Generals so he wrote to the War Office to enquire what rank he might expect if he were ever to be recalled for Service

This was their response

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
STANMORE
MIDDLESEX

Telephone: STOnegrove 6377 Ext 61

21st DECEMBER 1965.

P/23222. / AG7(Res)

Sir,

1. I am directed to inform you that the Ministry of Defence, Army, has recently carried out a review of the officer reserves in relation to the Army's requirement for general mobilization.
2. This review has revealed that it is unlikely that it will be found necessary to recall you to active service under any foreseeable circumstances for which general mobilization might be declared.
3. This letter does not absolve you from your liability to recall but it is simply for your information and convenience to know that this liability is unlikely to be invoked.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

John H. H. E.
Director of Manning (Army)

Lieut (Hon.) Capt. G. F. ELEY, R. E. R. A. R. O.
23222