

Three weeks in May
-
the diary of a young
Sapper in 1940

Peter W.E. Kidner

Preface

I joined 222 Field Company on 3rd May 1940, at Harnes, near Lille. I had just celebrated my 20th birthday and felt—and undoubtedly was—very inexperienced and naïve. I was given command of No. 3 Section, full of enthusiasm, and was blessed with an outstanding Section Sergeant in Sgt. Mancey, who managed and guided his very new subaltern with great understanding and skill.

Somehow I felt at once that 222 Company was a happy unit, and it only took a few days to feel part of the team. The catalyst seemed to be Dick Edwards (2 i/c), who was a good friend and teacher from the first. The other officers when I joined were Bill (E.G.) Bailey, Bob (J.Y.) Davies of No. 1 Section, and Pat (P.V. Keelan) of No. 2 Section. I should also mention Lt. Maurice Dutertre, our delightful French liaison officer.

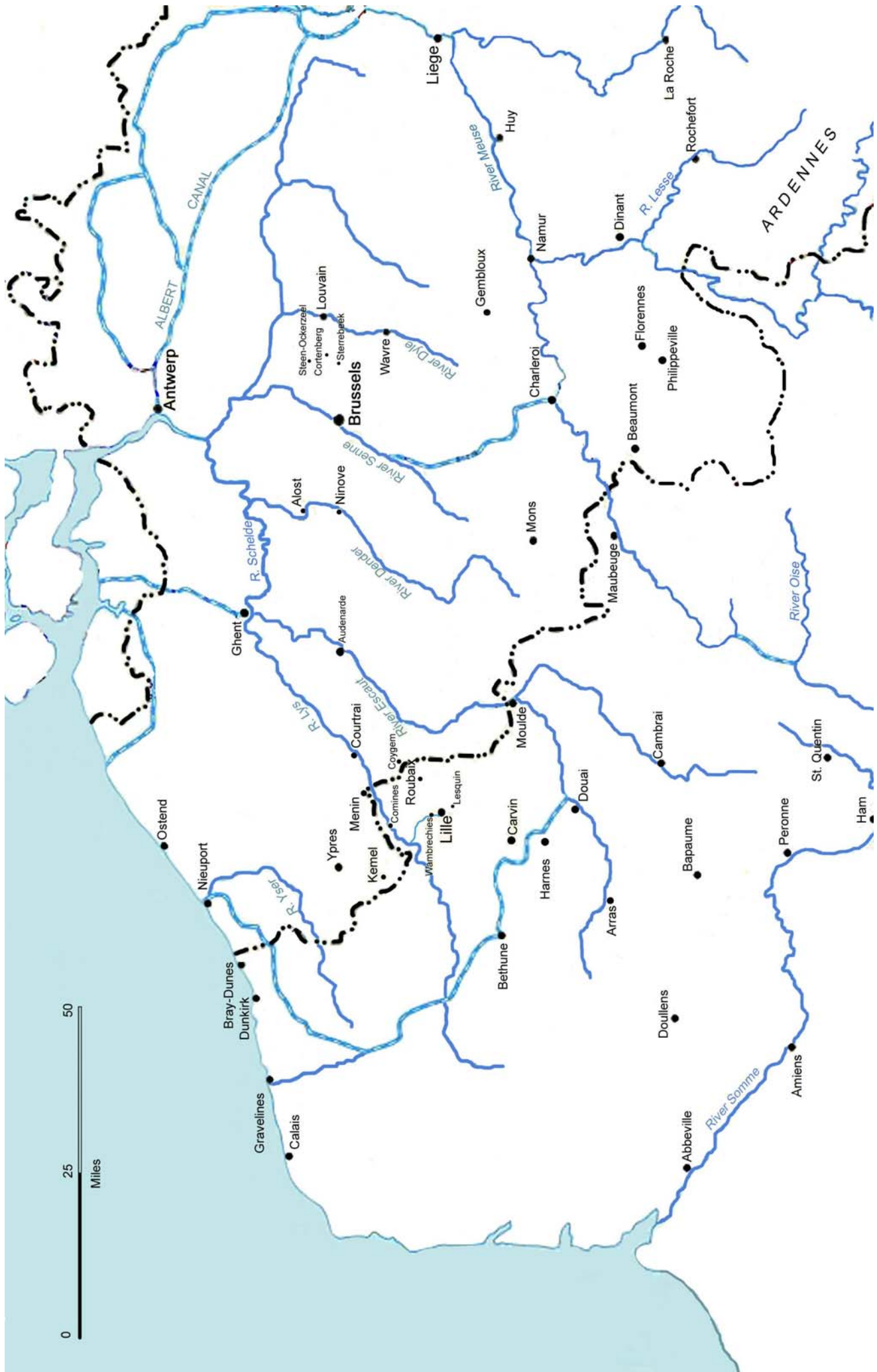
222 Field Company was a component of II Corps Engineers, in support of 3 Division throughout the period from 10th May until completion of the withdrawal from Dunkirk in early June. It was a 1st line TA Unit from London. The other components of II Corps Engineers were 217 and 234 Field Companies and 240 Field Park Company.

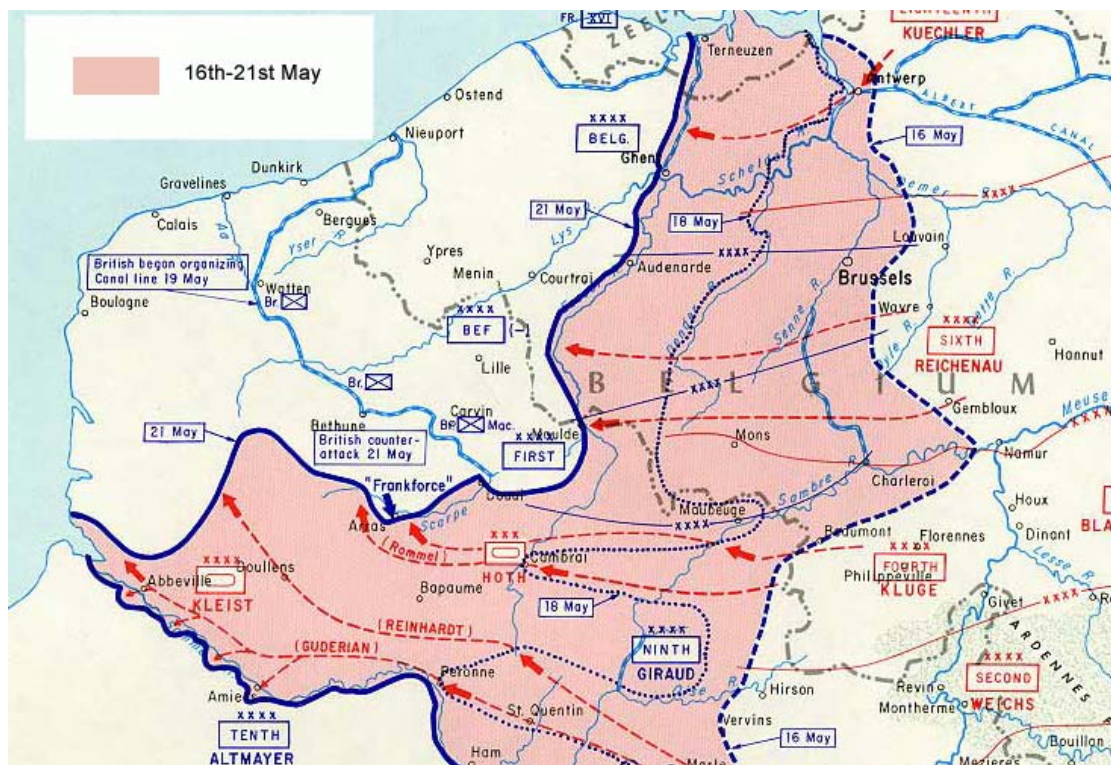
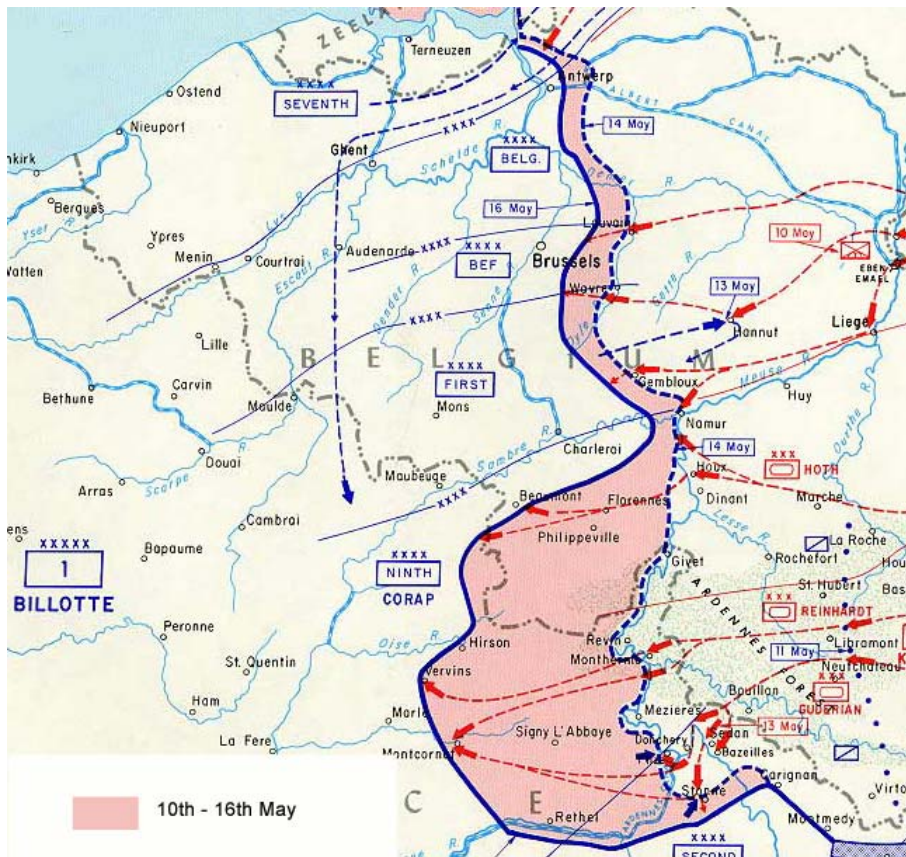
I wrote this account in June 1940 while events were still fresh in my memory.

Peter Kidner, 2007

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Front cover: Extract from a map of Europe showing the military situation on 21st May 1940





The above maps from www.dean.usma.edu

RECORD of WORKS and MOVEMENTS carried out by No.3 Section

222 Army Field Company, Royal Engineers

in

Belgium and France, May 1940

- 3rd May 1940 Joined Section from home.
- 3 - 10th May 1940 Employed on Works Services in Harnes-Lille area.
- 10th May 1940 Holland and Belgium invaded.
- Prepare for move. Section under three hours notice to move. Much .303 Ammo expended with Bren¹ on numerous enemy aircraft.
- 11th May 1940 Standing by for move; orders issued to move at 2100 hours; postponed till Midnight. All Section had hot meal at 2100 hrs and hot tea at 2345. Left section billet for Coy. Reforming area 2355 hrs. Some trouble with M.T.² due to cold. O.C.'s³ car has puncture at 0005 hrs.
- 12th May 1940 Travelling all night. Enemy attacks from the air expected, but not experienced. Arrived without incident and complete, but for O.C.'s car, at Steen-Ockerzeel at 0930 hrs. O.C.'s car (Renault) was being used instead of 8 cwt. truck; the latter had broken down on May 9th. Miles run today:- 110. Time (running) 8 hrs. Distance of 176 yards (10 V.T.M⁴.)

¹ Bren and light machine guns used the same .303 ammunition as service rifles.

² M.T. = Motor Transport

³ O.C. = Officer Commanding

⁴ V.T.M. = Vehicles to the Mile. Trucks in convoy would be spread out, in this case by about 176 yards, to discourage air attack.

Maintained during run, except for period 0200 hrs to 0330 hrs, when distanced was reduced to 80 yards.

Spent day resting. Billeted in grounds of the Castle of P.Otto Hapsburg. During night, all L.M.G⁵.s were manned for defence against airborne troops landing, after special warning from Intelligence.

At 2345 hrs, Col. Harrison, C.R.E. III Div arrived and issued orders for preparation of Demolition Belt on R. Dyle at Louvain.

13th May 1940 0030 hrs. C.O. called Sec. Officers' Conference, and issued orders for demolition work. All sections to be on jobs by 0500 hrs. Reveille fixed for 0300 hrs. No. 3 Section were on the move by 0345 hrs. An R-V had been made to collect explosives near the site; there was some delay owing to incorrect maps, but guide was left at R-V and section was at bridge sites by 0515 hrs. It was reported that Enemy were expected by 1200 hrs. Explosives received at 0530 hrs; consisted of G.C⁶. 550 lbs, ammonal 2000 lbs.

Our job consisted of two rail over road bridges, one a small R.S.J. span on brick abutments, the other a brick arch of about 20' span. They were both to be Final Demolitions with the idea of blocking the road. They were fairly simple jobs. The Section had them fully prepared by approx. 1130 hrs. There were a few points which brought out valuable lessons and experience:-

(i) The necessity for very thorough organisation of this type of job by the N.C.O. in charge. As it was, there was a slight loss of time due to the N.C.O.s not being certain what each man was doing, and hence what job to give a spare man.

(ii) The advantages of previous Reconnaissance. In this case the C.R.E.'s field engineer had carried out the reconnaissance and given a completely wrong impression of the jobs. Hence, we arrived on the site expecting two much larger jobs than we actually had.

⁵ L.M.G. = Light machine-gun

⁶ G.C. = gun cotton; small white bricks of cellulose nitrate, gun cotton burnt rapidly with an effect akin to chopping something with an axe, and used to cut steel girders. Ammonal, a powdered mixture of ammonium nitrate and aluminium, was a slower burning explosive which exerted pressure; ammonal was therefore used to heave the soil or to blow a brick built bridge.

(iii) The N.C.O.s were rather rusty in their calculations.

After completion, the Section was withdrawn to the home side of the canal, the M.T. hidden, and a hot meal prepared. The men had been working for nine hours without food since the previous evening, but were outstandingly cheerful and excited at having a real job to do. Firing parties (1 N.C.O. and 3 men on each bridge) had of course been left on the bridges. A hot meal was taken to these men immediately in containers. Leaving the Section under the Section Sgt. (Sgt. C. Mancey), I reported to Coy. H.Q., about three miles down the Cortenberg-Brussels road, for further orders, arriving about 1400 hrs. There I found the C.O., 2nd I/C., and the C.R.E. III Div., Col. Harrison. I arrived on our one m/cycle (we were two short all the period in Belgium), and got a meal, my first since the evening before.

I reported completion of our job, and also enemy air-activity. We had been unmolested, but many bombs had been dropped in Louvain, two miles away. There had been streams of refugees passing under our bridges the whole morning.

I got orders to assist No. 1 Section (Bob Moodie) in the demolition of a big R.C.⁷ bridge in Louvain, and returned immediately to see him and carry out a reconnaissance of the bridge.

On arrival, I found Bob Moodie had been preparing three small swing bridges over the canal and basin; also he had sunk a number of barges. We went off to the R.C. bridge, and found it was a heavy girder bridge of about 60' span, carrying the main road, and a single line railway. The approximate width was 40'. The bridge consisted of ten girders approx. 56" x 18", and a road slab about 8" thick.

We sent back for 1500 lbs ammonal, and I then sent for No. 4 subsec. of my Section, the compressor and tool truck. It was a big job, necessitating cutting a trench 24" x 10" deep across the road surface, down to the concrete slab. This was completed by about 1930 hrs by No. 1 Section, including having the bridge completely ready for firing. I withdrew my subsection at 1800 hrs, the bigger part then being completed. This job was completed in spite of continuous heavy traffic passing over the bridge, which was not interrupted. This traffic consisted of part of a retiring Belgian Division, and included much Medium Artillery and Light Tanks.

Leaving a suitable firing party from No. 1 Section, we returned to our

⁷ reinforced concrete

previous night's bivouac at Steen-Ockerzeel, arriving there about 2015 hrs. The men had a hot meal, and went straight to 'bed'. They had had about 5 hours sleep in the last 60 hours, but were still cheerful.

That night I was orderly officer. We received a warning from Intelligence that large numbers of airborne troops had left Germany during the evening, and to expect parachute landings. Hence we had the Bren guns mounted for ground defence with a definite fire plan laid down. I visited each picket about four times. However there were no incidents or alarms.

14th May 1940

This morning, reveille was fixed as 0730 hrs, as we had no orders for any jobs. During the morning received orders to take over a belt of craters about 2 miles east of Road Steen-Ockerzeel – Nossegem–Sterrebeek. We were to take over from 234 Fd. Coy., so I and Bob Moodie made a rendez-vous and met the section officer of 234 who was then in charge of the belt, and set off on a reconnaissance of the crater sites. There were five sites, one of which was later taken over by 240 (?) Fd. Coy., consisting of seventeen 75 lbs craters. Most of the charges were to be laid in Auger holes 8' deep, but there were two camouflets⁸. Both Auger holes and camouflets had been prepared, the latter having been blown, but no charges were laid. The stores for this were dumped near each site under guard of a party who, on receiving orders, were to place the charges, and on further orders, fire them.

I arranged with the subaltern then in charge to meet a truck of his at one of the jobs with my own firing parties. This was so that he could collect his men at the same time as I put my parties on the jobs, and the R-V was for 1700 hrs.

I then returned to the Company, to find that they had moved; however, a D.R.⁹ had been left to guide us. Accordingly I then joined the company at a chateau just outside Sterrebeek. I reported my plan to the C.O., and then went out again with a 30 cwt, lorry to keep the R.-V., however I found 234 had failed to keep it. I did not take firing parties as the C.O. had had

⁸ The augers, about 2" wide, when at the right depth would be withdrawn some 6 inches so that a small ammonal charge could be lowered to the base of the hole. When blown, this would create a camouflet, that is a small chamber perhaps 1 or 2 foot across into which could then be packed a much larger ammonal charge which, when blown, caused a crater. 75 lbs of ammonal would make a crater perhaps 10 feet across by 5 or 6 feet deep, sufficient to block most vehicles and light tanks.

⁹ Despatch Rider

orders that charges could be withdrawn to a central dump, but to be kept ready for immediate dispersal to sites. I left a note at the R.-V. pinned to a tree asking 234 to meet me at the last site if they did turn up. So I had to collect 234 Coy.'s parties as well as the explosive stores; the latter came to 1275 lbs ammonal and other stores, with the result that I had to make two journeys back to Sterrebeek. At the last site I found 234 Coy. had abandoned the craters altogether, leaving the explosive stores, including 300 lbs ammonal by the roadside unguarded. However, after ascertaining that all Auger and camouflet holes were safely covered, I left 234 Coy.'s personnel billeted in a large café outside Cortenberg, where they were picked up by their own Coy. next day; then I returned to the Company. At the Camp at Sterrebeek, the officers were in the Chateau¹⁰, and the Coy. just outside in the vicinity, except No. 3 Section, who were some 500 yards away in the wood at the entrance to the estate. The charges from the craters were dumped in a pit near 3 Section, so that the section guard could keep an eye on it.

I found that the N.C.O.s and firing parties from Louvain had returned safely. They had had one 30 cwt. left with them for this purpose. Hence after a meal, Bob Moodie and I sat down and wrote out a report on the success of the Louvain demolitions for the C.R.E.

The N.C.O.s in No. 3 Section demolitions had reported to me that:-

(i) The demolitions were completely successful and in each case the road was blocked to a height of two-thirds that of the abutments (about 14 feet) with masonry and brick rubble, and twisted rails and steelwork.

(ii) That the cable electric had not been sufficiently long for safety. (It had been 200 yards in each case, with the firing parties sheltered by a house). The house (in one case) had collapsed by the concussion of the explosion, and paving sets and brickwork and ballast had been thrown for some 300 yards.

(iii) That many of a belt of Anti-Tank mines across the road, some 100 yards from one of the bridges, had been exploded by flying rubble. This actually improved the effectiveness of the mines, as the rubble completely hid those which had not exploded; there were still plenty of unexploded mines left to do their job.

(iv) That they, and more especially the streams of refugees, had been

¹⁰ Le Chateau Ter Meeren

twice machine-gunned from the air, and once attacked with tear gas. This tear gas attack necessitated the parties wearing their masks for a period of some twenty minutes, and caused considerable panic amongst the refugees who were almost entirely women and children. There were apparently no service casualties from the machine-gun attacks.

I also reported that on my recce. of the crater belt I had found a track which provided a detour to one of the craters, giving its position, and stating that I would carry out the preparation of another crater on the track first thing next morning, unless otherwise ordered.

No. 1 Section N.C.O. on the R.-C. bridge in Louvain also reported that its demolition had been carried out with complete success. The total charge had been approximately 2500 lbs ammonal, placed as a single pressure charge across the centre of the bridge. On firing, the bridge had broken in half below the charge and came away from the abutments leaving a clear gap of 60', the span of the bridge. The canal below, after the debris had fallen, was about 10' below the road surface.

15th May 1940

We had a good night's sleep up to 4 a.m., after a dinner consisting of bread, butter, bully and Champagne. However, we were woken at about 4 a.m. by a terrific noise of aircraft, zooming and diving just above us – or so it sounded. This was followed by a heavy explosion and then very heavy rifle and L.M.G. fire. After the many warnings we had received, the same idea came to us all – parachutists. So in about three minutes we were all outside, but in our vicinity there was nothing happening – it all came from the direction of 3 Section camp. Accordingly I went down through the wood to the Section, to find everyone up. One of the sentries reported that a Do 17 had come over, and had been shot down nearby by three Hurricanes. The aircraft had blown itself to pieces with its own bombs on landing, but one member of the crew had baled out at a height of about 2000', with the result that the whole section, including the Bren gunner, as well as a nearby R.A.S.C. unit, had had some target practice. The parachutist landed about 500' away, and a party had gone out in the Bren 15 cwt. truck, but had found the R.A.S.C. already on the spot. The Bosch gunner had, in the previous ten minutes, increased in weight considerably, and was quite dead.

Early that morning, the C.O. decided we were in a bad spot, as the Chateau was a very obvious and easy target for bombers. Accordingly we

moved to another camp s.w. of Sterrebeek, about one mile out. I heard later that the place was severely damaged by bombing the next morning. Soon after arriving in our new camp, I took out a small party to prepare the extra camouflet, as I had had orders from C.R.E. to do so; also I left orders for the explosives (2000 lbs) to be put in a dump on a site about 500 yards from the camp, and left under a guard. The camouflet was successfully blown, and I and the small party returned about 1400 hrs. The rest of that day was spent with a well-earned rest. We also took the opportunity of obtaining a lot of chocolate, sugar, and a wireless set locally – all given by inhabitants who were leaving. During the afternoon a post came in, and I had a bath!

This camp was in an orchard surrounding a very nice private house in the basement of which we formed a mess. The occupants had left, but returned about 1600 hrs to collect some more property. We immediately got up a tea-party for them—the mother, with her son and daughter. We held it out in the orchard, while the company band played swing in the bushes out of sight. It was a great success, accompanied all the time by gunfire and aircraft, (some of our own as well for a change), of which we took little notice.

After tea, the C.O. helped them take a lot of their property to a place just west of Brussels in his car.

Today was invaluable to the company as a good rest and time for a bit of sleep and perhaps a wash. We spent a good night there that night without any alarms or incidents of any kind.

16th May 1940

We woke up this morning to a comfortable breakfast at 0800 hrs, and heard the 8 o'clock BBC news on our old set which was almost in pieces. That morning we spent peacefully, with a parade at 0930 hrs in full marching order – really a kit inspection, and spent the rest of the morning on M.T. maintenance, checking rifles, Brens, Ammo, etc. The guards on the ammonal dump reported that a Jerry 'plane had been over at about 0600 hrs at a height of about 50 feet, without apparently spotting them—anyhow, they took no interest.

At 1600 hrs in the afternoon, I got the order to place charges in crater belts and be 'Ready to Blow', on orders from the local Infantry commanders, when they retired.

We were off in under 20 minutes, and each party (there were four) went

straight to their jobs, as they already knew their routes & jobs. I went off to see each party in turn on the jobs in the C.O.'s car. (This car had rejoined us on the evening of the 12th).

When I got to the second party, which was the same job as had been abandoned by 234, I found 217 (?) Coy. already on the job. They had apparently had the same orders as us about that particular site, at the same time. I left them to do the job, and sent my party back to the Company. However, I felt that there had been a mistake, and that perhaps one crater site had been left unattended. Accordingly, I went up to the C.R.E.'s H.Q., which was only 4 miles away to make sure. I was lucky in catching him just as he was leaving. He told me that the crater belt was alright, but to report to 8th Inf. Brigade H.Q. immediately. 8th Bde H.Q. was some 5 miles further forward, just behind Louvain. I had some difficulty in finding it, but arrived there at about 6.15pm. It was in a small house, just below the crest of a hill, and Jerry was apparently only 500 yards off. They were shelling all around, and I watched the shells bursting, about 30 a minute, in a wood some 200 yards away. It was very tight stuff – Field guns I imagine – and you could see the very flat trajectory of the splinters; trees were cut by splinters only a foot above ground level, ten feet or more from the point of burst.

I was shown into a conference, actually a Bn. Cdr.'s conference, which had just started. It was a very interesting twenty minutes, during which I found out the whole situation on our immediate front. After I had been there ten minutes, Jack Davies turned up: He had been sent up from Company, but I had short-circuited the message by meeting the C.R.E., which incidentally saved a great deal of time. When the conference broke up, the Brigadier called me and told me to make arrangements for the infantry to pick up my firing parties, who numbered 4 N.C.O.s and eight men. This I did, but no one was quite sure who would be retiring along which route. However I got an assurance from each Battalion concerned (Suffolks, East Berks) that they would pick up the parties. The Brigadier told me that the Infantry would be holding a line east of the Cortenberg-Sterrebeek line at least up to 0600 hrs next morning. So I decided on an R.-V. for the firing parties for 0500 hrs at a point about 1 mile behind this line. This R.-V. was about four to six miles from the farther craters, but was as near to them as possible. I then set off with Jack Davies back to see whether all the craters were ready for firing. As we were driving back along the Louvain-Brussels main road at about 55 mph, an ME 110 appeared flying very low—about 40 feet— diagonal to the road—about 15°

from it. It apparently saw us, as when it came into sight, it immediately banked over to come straight down the road; however it was not quick enough to get us into his sights. Whether he meant to have a shot at us or not, we felt thankful that we had been travelling fairly fast. About 400 yards further on, just opposite the biggest of the crater jobs, we saw a 'plane crash about 150 yards from the road, and burst into flames. We rushed up to it on foot, and found it was a British Lysander. At first we could see nothing of the occupants, but then heard a cry, and found the gunner in the edge of some crops about 50 yards away from the 'plane. He had jumped before the plane crashed, and was not very seriously hurt, but in considerable pain. A bullet had hit him in the thigh, fracturing his thigh bone. We put on a field dressing, and by then an ambulance had arrived to take him off. Then we found the pilot—alive, but fatally injured. He talked quite cheerfully, but had about 30 bullets in a straight line from his right shoulder to his left thigh. We got them away in the ambulance, and I then continued my round of the craters. They were all complete and ready for firing. Then I, Jack, and the surplus personnel from the cratering parties returned to Coy. H.Q. to find the Company had moved. However, Jack had the map ref. of the R.-V., which was some 20 miles N.W. of Brussels.

So off we went (the car & 2 30 cwts) on the journey through Brussels, Ninove, up to Vendelen, near Alost. We had no difficulty in finding our way, as there were M.P.s, and traffic direction lights until we reached the open Brussels-Ninove road. Brussels was burning fiercely in three or four places as we went through – at about Midnight.

17th May 1940

I arrived at Vendelen, at 0230 hrs approx. We were in an orchard – quite comfortable. My R.-V. at Sterrebeek was for 0500 hrs, so I left almost immediately in a 30 cwt. truck, after a hurried meal of sorts. I got down to Ninove without incident, but as I left that town entered a solid mass of refugees and military vehicles. We had just topped the crest of a hill, and I could see nearly five miles of the road and pavement; no-one was moving at all. However, after nearly an hour of waiting, things began to sort themselves out, and I eventually got on. It was then just gone 0400 hrs. We rushed through Brussels, deserted but for troops, holding A/T¹¹ positions at every corner. It was there that I first saw our 25 pdrs in position in the streets for A/T work over open sights. There were also

¹¹ anti-tank

some French 75s.

We carried straight on down the Louvain Road as far as Nosseghem, where we turned right down towards Sterrebeek. Here everything was absolutely deserted, and, as I found out later, we were actually in front of our own lines. Just outside Sterrebeek, I found a carrier stopped beside the road; I enquired of the N.C.O. with the carrier what was happening, and he said that their carrier Platoon was covering the rearguard – they were, I believe, the Suffolks.

I found two of my men walking up to the R.V. and four under the hedge at the R.-V. There should have been 12, but it was obviously stupid to wait, (I had had orders from the C.O. to come straight back); in fact, the other six were still up on their jobs, and were picked up later by the infantry, who had actually retired by other routes, and later remembered the cratering parties and sent up carriers for them.

It was then about 0515, so I picked the men up and went straight back. This time the roads were clear the whole way. Brussels, seen in daylight, was obviously a wonderful city. All the streets were wide and well kept, with beautiful buildings everywhere, no small or dirty little shops. I stopped on the bridge over the canal as I saw Motherwell, of 234, preparing the bridge and I also had some men of the Buffs I had to drop there. The bridge there was a very wide R.C. span, and had nearly four thousand lbs of ammonal on it! The rest of the journey back to Vendelen was without any important incident. The truck was always full, as we gave some stragglers and some women and children lifts as far as Ninove.

We got in about 0615; had a good breakfast and a shave, and went off to sleep till midday. We had all had a fairly exciting 24 hours. After lunch, I went around the section checking this and that, and about 6 o'clock went off to a field some 600 yards away, where a Jerry 'plane had been shot down that morning. When I got there, I found troops had almost pulled the plane to pieces. All the instruments, and anything else which a jack-knife and a pair of pliers could remove, had gone. After a fairly detailed examination of the 'plane, I returned to the camp, only to find my own section just moving off for a demolition job somewhere just east of Alost. I had only been away 30 minutes, and I was a bit fed up. Jack Davies went in charge of the section. However, they did a good job, which was the main thing. That night, we slept in a house just opposite the orchard. It was a very pleasant farm house—but the stone floor was a shade hard! We drank a couple of bottles of Champagne that evening with our bully

beef and cheese!

18th May 1940

Next morning we had a late reveille, and spent the morning checking M.T. and equipment. About midday we got orders to move back again—to Moen, some ten miles N.E. of Roubaix. Moen is about five miles inside Belgium. We were billeted in a large farm, and on arrival, the first thing was a meal. We had a very nice one in the farm house – scrambled eggs, new bread and wine. After that we heard the B.B.C. news (1 o'clock), but the good lady of the house insisted on adjusting the set at frequent intervals, and we were rather rude—mainly in English though!

The Company then spent a pleasant afternoon resting. I wrote some letters and went to sleep on the top of the hay in a barn.

At about six o'clock the C.O., who decided we ought to move as the farm was too obvious a target, gave orders to move. We went off independent of any orders from C.R.E. to a wood about 2 miles away where there was excellent cover. It was also a good place for a quick get-away! We were feeling rather apprehensive, as everything—guns, tanks, infantry—seemed to be going back past us, and we had had no orders for some while. We saw the Coldstream Guards come back, marching well and in perfect step, but obviously all in. They were really tired—eight days fighting with next to no sleep. We spent the night there, but I was Orderly Officer, and stayed up all night looking round the guards and piquets. At this time, we had a guard (2) on the entrance, a prowling guard (2), two Brens mounted for ground defence, and one Bren on its 15cwt mounting as a mobile unit. This meant ten men awake all the time, and 30 on the alert as reliefs. It took a lot out of the men at times, but they realised the necessity and didn't grumble. All the time rumours of spies were very rife, and there were many of the red Very lights about – supposed to be signals to show the position of individual parachutists after landing.

19th May 1940

However, there were no alarms, and after breakfast—0830 hrs— we got orders to move again, to a place called Coyghem. We arrived there about ten o'clock, and sections went direct to section billets. We were in a farm some 800 yards from the rest of the Company. The owners were just moving out, but were leaving everything locked up for “when they came back”, and would not let us inside the big farmhouse. We got all the M.T. hidden away in barns, and a meal going, and then I went off on a motorcycle to Coy. H.Q. to see what was happening. When I found the C.O., he gave me orders to move again—an hour later—to Lesquin.

Lesquin is a town not far from Lille, where the Company were working earlier on in the year. I got back to the Section straight away, and saw everyone got a hot meal; and then we moved off – at about 1230 hrs. Sections were to move independently at 15 minute intervals.

All the drivers knew the Lesquin area, so we took a short cut, and arrived in Lesquins at the same time as H.Q., although they had started well before us. We met them in the outskirts of the town at a fork – each coming down one of the roads, meeting at the fork at exactly the same moment.

In Lesquin, we again each had a farm as section billet, and we set up a Mess. 3 Section had a farm which had just been evacuated, and we had fresh milk and boiled chicken for supper! The men slept in a big barn, and I slept in the farm-house. This house was very dirty, and I did not make use of a bed.

20th May 1940

A quiet morning, except for some enemy air activity. There was an aerodrome just outside the town¹² which was bombed a lot. We saw five Hurricanes take off and go straight up into a large formation of Messerschmitt 110s. Three of the Hurricanes were shot down, but we saw no MEs hit.

During the afternoon we again moved—to Wambrechies. Just as we were starting—at 1600 hrs—I got orders to go with Jack Davies on a bridge demolition reconnaissance. The C.R.E. wanted a report as to whether the bridges over the canal Comines—Wervicq—Menin—Courtrai were properly prepared for demolition by the French. It was a good 25 mile length of canal, 15 miles away at its nearest point, and the C.R.E. wanted a report by 1830 hrs!

However, off we went in Dick Edwards' truck to Menin, where we separated; I went west to Comines and Jack east to Courtrai. We arranged to meet again at Menin at 1800 hrs – it was then 1700!

There were a lot of bridges, and it was clearly impossible to do the lot in the time. We met at 1810 – each about half finished, and decided to let the C.R.E. have what information we had obtained, and finish later. We had under 20 minutes to do 15 miles, so we found ourselves dodging refugees at over 60 mph! However, we got back by 1830. The C.R.E. said there was no very great hurry, but that he would like the full report by

¹² This is now the Aéroport de Lille-Lesquin

2030 hrs. So off I went, this time on a motorcycle which I borrowed from the C.O.'s D.R. This bike had the whole exhaust pipe missing, and accordingly made a terrific din, but nevertheless went very well. I did the reconnaissance and got back to the C.R.E.'s office about 2115 hrs, where I found the C.O.

The French had a curious idea of a demolition belt. Along this stretch they had just prepared each alternate bridge approximately, and completely ignored those bridges in the towns.

After quite an interesting discussion with the C.R.E. and C.O. on what was happening, I returned to the Company. They were in the grounds of a big house just outside the town (Wambrechies¹³).

I had only been there some minutes, when we got orders to prepare to move off for a demolition job. We had a conference in the cellar of the house – over bully beef and champagne – on the jobs. There were four big jobs for each section – all bridges over the canal – the Lys.

It was quite dark by then, but the Section were quite ready to move. Our four bridges were in Courtrai. We had a lot of extra explosives issued – about 2000 lbs. We moved off about 2330 hrs; I rode in the front of the leading 30 cwt (and got very cold). It was a journey of about 16 miles, and we arrived soon after midnight. Our orders were to have the bridges ready to blow by 1000 hrs, and as it was very dark, we only did a few simple preliminary jobs, and waited for the light.

The bridges were all large, and were interesting examples. The first was a beautiful 3-arch masonry bridge with a Martello tower at each end. Each of these towers were about 60 feet high and 30 feet diameter. They, and the bridge, were built in a very attractive grey stone.

¹³ Wambrechies is now a commune of the Lille Metropole.



The second bridge was an old, very heavy, steel arch. It was highly decorated with cast figures, and was a bit awkward to get at.

The third bridge was a beautiful steel bowstring of about 120' span or more. The last was a 3-span R.S.J. rail bridge.

As we had four jobs, I of course put one subsection on each. These parties were rather small, but they got the job finished.

21st May 1940

As soon as it got light, we started on the bridges. The average charge on each bridge was about 1000 lbs, but we got them all completed by 10 o'clock except some of the charges on the underside of the steel bow string. Here the bridge was supported on masonry abutments, and was a good 12 feet clear of the water. It was impossible to climb underneath, so we had to find a boat of sorts. We had found an old motor launch previously, some way up the canal, and two of the drivers soon got the engine running. We had used it on one of the other bridges, and brought it down to the Bowstring, looking like Cowes Week!

About midday, we had orders to "improve" the demolitions, but that it must be ready to blow at any time with 15 minutes notice. We did this as far as the materials available allowed. Nothing much else happened that day, but it was an enjoyable one. The C.E. came round, and congratulated us on the jobs. While he was on the central bridge, a Belgian Divisional Cdr. came up and said that his Division would be coming back that night; this

started an argument as to where the Belgian Division was! The Belgian General appeared to have no certain idea as to where his troops were.

About 3.30pm, I went back to Coy. H.Q., which was then at Leowe some eight miles S.W. Here I did a stupid thing – I went to sleep on a m/cycle! However, neither I nor the cycle was hurt, so I found the C.O in a pub in Leowe. We were both rather tired and dirty, so we went up the road to another Estaminet and had a steak and chips and Bière Blonde: very welcome it was too! The C.O. had nothing of importance to tell me, so I returned to Courtrai. There, nothing new had happened, and the general view was that nothing would happen for at least 24 hours. So we prepared to have as good a night as possible. I found a house near each bridge, and allowed half the men to get to sleep at a time, the other five being on duty on the bridges of course.

I made the acquaintance of the owners of a really beautiful house on the side of the canal just by one of the bridges. It was a huge house, beautifully furnished—the pictures, silver, and furniture must have been worth thousands – kept by two very nice old ladies; staying there was an attractive girl, about 25, who spoke excellent English—she had lived in England some years. I asked if I might sleep there – just bring in my sleeping bag into a spare room; they showed me a large room, full of spare furniture, which I said was excellent; when I came back I found they had cleared it out and made up a bed for me! They gave me a key to the door of the house, and offered to put up my N.C.O.s. So I had an extraordinarily comfortable night—with, however, one alarm.

22nd May 1940

At about 0300 hrs, a long R.A. column came through, and a captain jumped out of the last truck, shouted “All right, I’m the last; blow your bridge - Jerry’s just behind!” and dashed off! Luckily, the L/cpl on the job, knowing that orders should be in writing from the C.R.E., came straight to me, after waking all his own subsection. It was of course a false alarm—the bridge was not blown for another 24 hours, and Jerry was nowhere near. When the bridges were actually blown, the house I slept in was completely destroyed.

Earlier, about 2200 hrs, Pat Keelan turned up to see how things were, and so we both slept there. Next morning, after a late breakfast, I went round checking everything up, to see that everything was still intact.

Nothing of interest happened during the morning- except one rather nerve-wracking incident. We had some trouble over the railway bridge, as trains were still using it every 15 minutes or so. This had caused breaks in F.I.D.¹⁴ more than once, through sparks from the engine, and necessitated checking over the circuit completely every time a train came over. Then, when several of the men were on the bridge, a train came across, and a spark dropped on one of the main 100 lb gun cotton charges – and it went up with a terrific flare! I thought it might detonate and put the whole bridge up! We soon replaced that charge however.

During the afternoon the C.R.E. came around two or three times, and told us the bridges would have to go up that night in all probability.

Around six there was a sudden crop of rumours about Fifth Columnists. One of these told of enemy agents dressed in battle dress, saying they belonged to the Buffs. When I returned to Section H.Q. a few minutes later, I found four very weary infantrymen, claiming to be Buffs. They said they were the sole survivors of their Battalion, and had had no sleep for four days. Whether this was true or not, I was certain they were no enemy agents. I questioned them, and mentioned it to the C.R.E., and saw them off with another infantry Bn. By that time they had more than made up for two days without food!

The C.R.E. had assured me that two of the bridges – the old masonry one, and the Railway bridge – would be blown at 8 o'clock. Nothing happened until nine, when I got orders to hand over the four bridges to three companies. From then until 0130 the next morning I was chasing bad tempered and tired O.C.s to get a signature for the bridges. I eventually got a signature for each, but we blew the railway bridge at midnight, before I had handed it over. It was nearly but not quite a complete success. One of the main girders was not cut. I think this must have been due to the F.I.D. being cut by the sparks from a train; trains were crossing up to an hour before. We only had two F.I.D. circuits, as we could get hold of no more Cable Electric. However, 110 Fd. Coy. took it over and finished it off with only another 150 lbs Guncotton.

Just after this, Jack Davies blew a small steel bowstring quite near. He cut it $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ span, and it dropped dead true into the canal. It was a very nice show, but would have been better if it had turned over.

¹⁴ F.I.D. (Fuse Instantaneous Detonation)

At this period there were a series of terrific explosions just outside the town. Some people thought it was bombing, others gunfire, but it turned out to be another R.E. unit blowing up our own bomb dumps at Courtrai aerodrome, after it had been evacuated by the R.A.F. It was from the canteen there that we got an extra cigarette ration. The canteen had been abandoned by the N.A.A.F.I. staff, and we took part of its stocks rather than leave them for Jerry.

23rd May 1940

By 0130, I had signatures for all the bridges and collected the section together at a pre-arranged Rendez-vous. We left at 0200 hrs.

Later that day a lot happened in Courtrai. Jack Davis stayed with a small party on his two bridges until 1630 hrs. At about 0500, the town was heavily shelled, as the IIIrd and 44th (?) Divisions were coming back. During the day, the infantry were busy making the north bank of the canal as good a defensive position as possible—loopholing houses, building blocks and so on.

By early afternoon things began to happen; first, orders came to blow all bridges. These were all successful, except the main steel arch bridge in the centre. This I had left complete, except that the charges in the road surface had not been laid or connected, owing to the very heavy traffic. These charges were to have been placed as soon as the bridge was closed to traffic, and details were fully explained to 11th Field Coy R.E. who took over.

However, Jack Davies took charge of a composite squad to re-fix charges on this bridge. He had about a dozen of our Company, and a dozen others, and got the bridge successfully blown within three hours. Within ten minutes of blowing, Jerry m/cycle units and light tanks arrived on the other bank. We had a hot reception for them waiting!

When the bridges in Courtrai went up, nearly every house on the Island was demolished, including the one I slept in the night before! It was a tragedy, for the population in that area must have been at least one thousand, living there at the time, and included a hospital and maternity home which had not been evacuated. There were six bridges round the Island, with an average charge of 1200 lbs.

We left Courtrai for Vierstaat at 0200 hrs. It was an eerie if uneventful

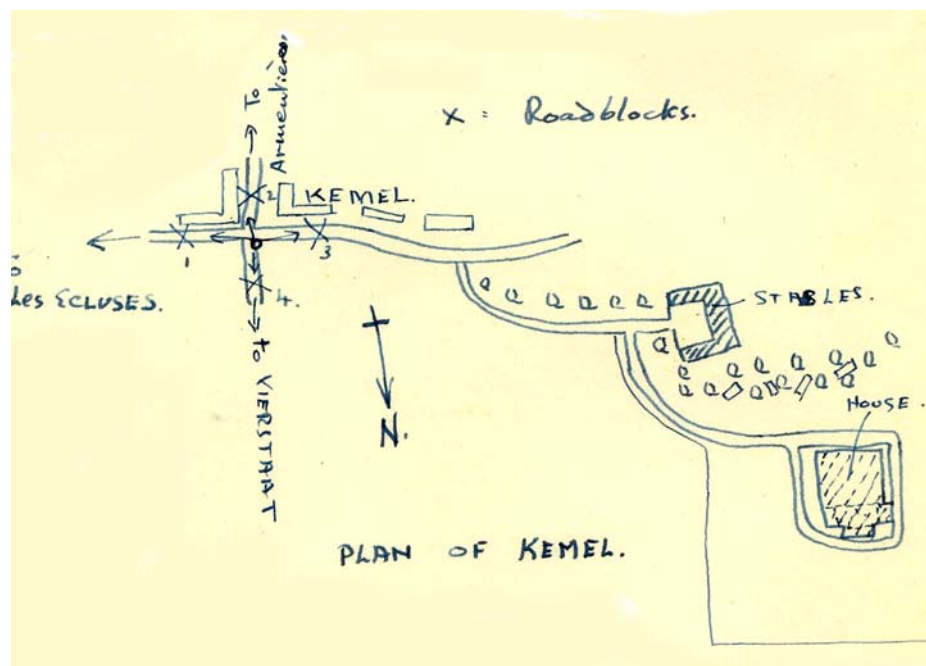
journey. We went via Menin and Werneton, and then N.W. to Vierstaat. All the way as far as Werneton we were near the canal (Lys), and there was a thick ground mist. Every now and then we threaded our way through road blocks of derelict cars, railway trucks or farm wagons; all were manned—some by French, others by British Infantry. Occasionally we passed through silent villages, all shuttered and badly bombed.

We arrived at the X-roads at Vierstaat without incident – about 0315 hrs, and here I found an H.Q. D.R. curled up asleep in the ditch beside his machine. He gave me instructions that the Company was at Kemel, two miles away, and told me that we were the first Section to come in.

I arrived at Kemel and found the Company in a beautiful country house belonging to the Mayor (?) of Brussels. We parked the M.T. round the garden and got down for some sleep. I found the O.C. asleep in a room in the house, and immediately went to sleep as well.

We were up about eight and immediately camouflaged the vehicles in a bit of wood bordering the garden and, while Dick worried Petrol, ammunition and ration points, we had a quiet morning on M.T. maintenance, rifle inspection, etc.

At about 1300 hrs, we got a warning that Jerry tanks were operating in the vicinity, and that road blocks were to be erected at all important road junctions, and then manned. So we immediately got busy.



I built two excellent blocks (nos. 2 and 3, above) of light steel rails and barbed wire; for the latter. we stripped a large field of wire—some 1000 yds in all. Pat built blocks Nos. 1 and 4, utilising some railway trucks he found. We built a post at the cross-roads to cover them with A/T rifle and L.M.G. fire. However at 1830, just as we were finishing, we had orders to move to Les Ecluses, a small village on the Lys some eight miles east.

We were off very shortly, but a bit annoyed for once. We had arranged a big dinner party with the mayor, and we had only time for the glass of sherry!

We soon arrived at a farm near Les Ecluses, in which we all slept (with our M.T.) in barns. We had a good supper in the farm house, and a good night's sleep. We heard the 9 o'clock B.B.C. news that night on the radio, as a result of which the O.C. announced that we must be very nearly surrounded (Jerry had reached Abbeville and also Ostend(!)). We thought the O.C. was just in a pessimistic mood and thought no more about it. Actually he was right.

24th May 1940

This morning we had a late reveille, but about 0800 hrs orders came to R.V. at Les Ecluses, a point on the Lys about eight miles north of Wambrechies, to site a defensive line, with the C.R.E. and C.E. So we (O.C., Bob, Pat and myself) left after breakfast for the R.V. leaving a point for the sections to come to at 0830 hrs.

So we met the C.R.E. and C.E. and walked slowly down the canal siting platoon positions and weapon pits. No. 3 Section came last, so it was not until after 1100 hrs that I rejoined the section. During this time a lot of Jerry bombers came over (Heinkel 111s mostly) and suddenly we heard a salvo of bombs on their way. We all jumped into a ditch (the C.E., Brig. Phipps was in his best Service Dress, and got very muddy) but the bombs burst about half a mile away, and did no damage.

When I got back to the section, we immediately got the sections on the jobs. This took some time, as each position had to be carefully explained to the N.C.O. in charge. However we soon got going. We had five platoon positions to dig, each consisting of fifteen weapon pits. Three of these were in a wood and were hard work. These had also to be built up to some extent as the ground was very damp. There were some interesting positions - two were in old Bosch pillboxes from the last War,

which we cleaned up. They were 4' thick reinforced concrete, and it was useless to try and knock any further loopholes in them, but we tried for a time. As a matter of fact, they were excellently sited, and needed no important modification. There were three positions in a thick hedge, which had grand fields of fire, but were quite invisible from the front.

In several of the positions, we came to masses of old Bosch wire, shell fragments and so on.

The work went on all day. There was quite a lot of bombing all day, and we were machine-gunned from high up (5000') several times, quite ineffective. I set up Section H.Q. in a little copse just off the main road. Here the cooks did their job – sending the food round in containers. We worked until 1900 hrs, and then returned for the night to our farm (which was at Freulingheim – 2 miles away).

25th May 1940

Continued the job all day, starting at eight and finishing at eight in the evening. I moved Section H.Q. to a farmhouse, which was more suitable and central. Today was a hard but uneventful day, and the men worked excellently. We have now completed 72 weapon-pits, with crawl trenches and camouflaged – not so bad in under two days.

Pat Keelan has had a more interesting job. Yesterday he put down 2000 yards of Double apron fence, and today, he burnt down a small village – about 20 wooden huts, to give a good field of fire. It was rather heartbreaking turning the people out. Yesterday I put 2 section posts in the garden of an old Belgian couple – both over 70. I advised them to leave, if they had anywhere else to go, but they said they would rather die there than leave the cottage in which they had lived their whole lives.

All day, Jerry has been bombing Armentières. We have seen well over 100 planes – HE 111s and Do 17s and 21s today. I watched one circle over us, quite slowly at about 10,000 ft. He spent about 10 minutes choosing his target, and then we followed the bombs all the way down. There is no opposition now to the Bosch 'planes at all, and only occasionally do we see any A.A. fire, and then it is always wide of the mark. I should like to know what has happened to our fighters.

Late in the evening, about 30 Ju 87s came over, & bombed some target near here – rather too near. About ½ mile away is an A.S.C. petrol dump,

with some 500,000 gallons of petrol, in an old brick factory.

A good day's work. We returned to our farmhouse.

26th May 1940 Started digging again at 0800 hrs. Early in the morning we had a warning of numbers of Bosch tanks, which were operating behind our lines. We were to improvise some sort of explosive grenade to use against them. I provided an ammonal bomb consisting of $\frac{3}{4}$ lb ammonal sealed into an M. & V. tin¹⁵, with a primer tube running down the centre to take a primer, det. & safety fuse. It was a pity they were never used!

After midday, I was called back to Coy. H.Q., so I left Sgt. Mancey in charge. When I got to H.Q. I found I was to go into Armentières with Pat Keelan, to reconnoitre the bridges there. I went in with Pat, in his truck, with one subsection. All the bridges were supposed to have been prepared for demolition by the French, but, in fact, the majority had not been touched.

All the while, Jerry was bombing the town, and some came unpleasantly close. When we were about to return, Pat and I were moving across the square by the church at about 5 mph, when three bombs came down around us – all within 100^x. But we were none the worse. I was still sitting on one of my ammonal bombs.

When we returned to the Company at Freulingheim, we found the Company just moving out. Apparently Jerry was nearly on us, and we had to shift pretty quickly. The O.C. gave me orders to :-

Take firing parties to two big bridges in Armentières (one the main road bridge, & one the rail bridge over the river) and double bank the French firing parties, as these were not considered trustworthy. I was to stay there until either relieved or ordered to blow. I was then to return to the Coy. at Hoogstaade, 45 miles north. The Company had no maps of this area.

The rest of my section was to remain with the Company.

I spent an uncomfortable night in the Customs House, with a drunk crowd of so-called French Engineers, while Jerry bombed the place at intervals. There was heavy gunfire, quite near, all the time. But it apparently came

¹⁵ Meat and Veg.

from the East, West and South. We are on half rations.

27th May 1940

At 0500 hrs, a 2/Lieut Scott, of 214 Company, arrived with a party and took over the two bridges. I warned him that I disliked and distrusted the French 'Génie' who were there.

Later, I heard that Scott's party were badly shot up when they tried to blow the bridge. They got it up however. It was a big R.C. bowstring, of about 200 ft. span.

We were away almost immediately. We went up through Messines. We should have turned off at St. Eloi, but I missed the turn, not having a map, and got to Ypres. Ypres was deserted and badly knocked about. One end of the Cloth Hall was still in scaffolding – being rebuilt from the last War. The other end had been hit by a bomb the day before yesterday. Ypres must have been a beautiful town. I am glad I missed the turn at St. Eloi.

All the bridges in Ypres have been blown, and there is only one way out – the way we had come. So I decided we had better get back to St. Eloi as quickly as possible. Then Dvr Attwell's 30 cwt had a puncture! He changed the wheel in one minute dead, and away we went; (one 30 cwt., and the compressor).

We got back to St. Eloi, and turned right, and finally, about 0800 hrs came to a big cross-roads, with a large notice board saying HOOGSTAADE. So we parked behind a few houses, and I sent out my 2 D.R.s to see if they could find the Company. They came back saying they had scoured the country for 3 or 4 miles round, and could not find the Company.

There were quite a number of people there, and one officer told me that II Corps Report Centre was at Bevereu, 10 miles W. So I went there on Cpl. Sidgwick's bicycle. Bevereu was a small town, packed with officers of all descriptions—all with convoys behind them, looking for II Corps. There were Gunners; A.A.; Sappers; Infantry and many others. But II Corps was certainly not there! I could scarcely get through the place for lorries, guns, tractors. Later they bombed the place heavily.

I returned to the Hoogstaade cross-roads, but nothing had happened – except that some Me 109s had machine-gunned the main road a few times - and someone had seen three Spitfires! This was great news. We must be sending fighters from bases in England.

An hour later I went back to Bevereu, but there was still the same confusion there. On my return, I had just passed a convoy of 3-tonners proceeding towards Bevereu, when some Me 110s came over very low; I hopped into the ditch, while they machine-gunned the convoy. They were using cannon shells, and soon the lorries were blazing – and they were full of 6" Howitzer ammo.! This went off at intervals of a few seconds, and apart from blocking the road, made an unearthly row! Wonderfully, no-one seemed to be hurt.

As I returned to the section, I noticed people were destroying their M.T. Why? There were six big Scammells blazing a few fields away. I went a short way up the main road and found rows of vehicles in the ditch.

We waited at the cross-roads for another hour, during which we were machine-gunned twice more. However the road was getting rather empty. I saw a Brigadier in Service Dress, with, I imagine, his batman, riding pillion on a m/c! I asked a Gunner Major what the position was. He said he had got separated from his unit, and said that Dunkerque was the place to make for. I thought we had waited long enough, so we set off towards Dunkerque.

We had been going 10-15 minutes and were just passing through another village, when I saw, standing beside the road—Dick Edwards, as usual with Blue cap, Service Dress, and no belt! And there was the rest of the Company, parked round a field. Relief!

We parked in the field, and I found the O.C. Apparently there were two Hoogstaades! We were awaiting orders, rather apprehensive. The main road was lined with vehicles ditched, and the fields were full of burning trucks. Jerry 'planes were overhead nearly all the time, bombing the villages around. However there was one cheering thing: British fighters were about and we saw at least six Bosch planes shot down. One Jerry pilot opened up on some refugees—women, old men and children—with a sub machine gun, just as he was about to land by parachute. He was half full of lead before he actually reached the ground—everyone had a shot at him!

We had a good meal! I was just eating some Bully when the O.C. told me to take all my M.T. and stores, and all kit we could not carry ourselves, to the canal about 7 miles away and destroy it. We were NOT to burn it.

This was tragic, and upset the drivers a bit – they had always taken a

pride in their M.T., and now to smash it with sledgehammers was heartbreaking.

There followed a hectic ten minutes sorting out the kit we wanted to keep, and then off we went.

The road ran beside the canal on a high embankment twelve feet above the canal and surrounding fields. At one point there was a deep pond in the field beside the bank. We ran the trucks at an angle over the bank, and they all turned over as they went down – except one. One disappeared in the pond.

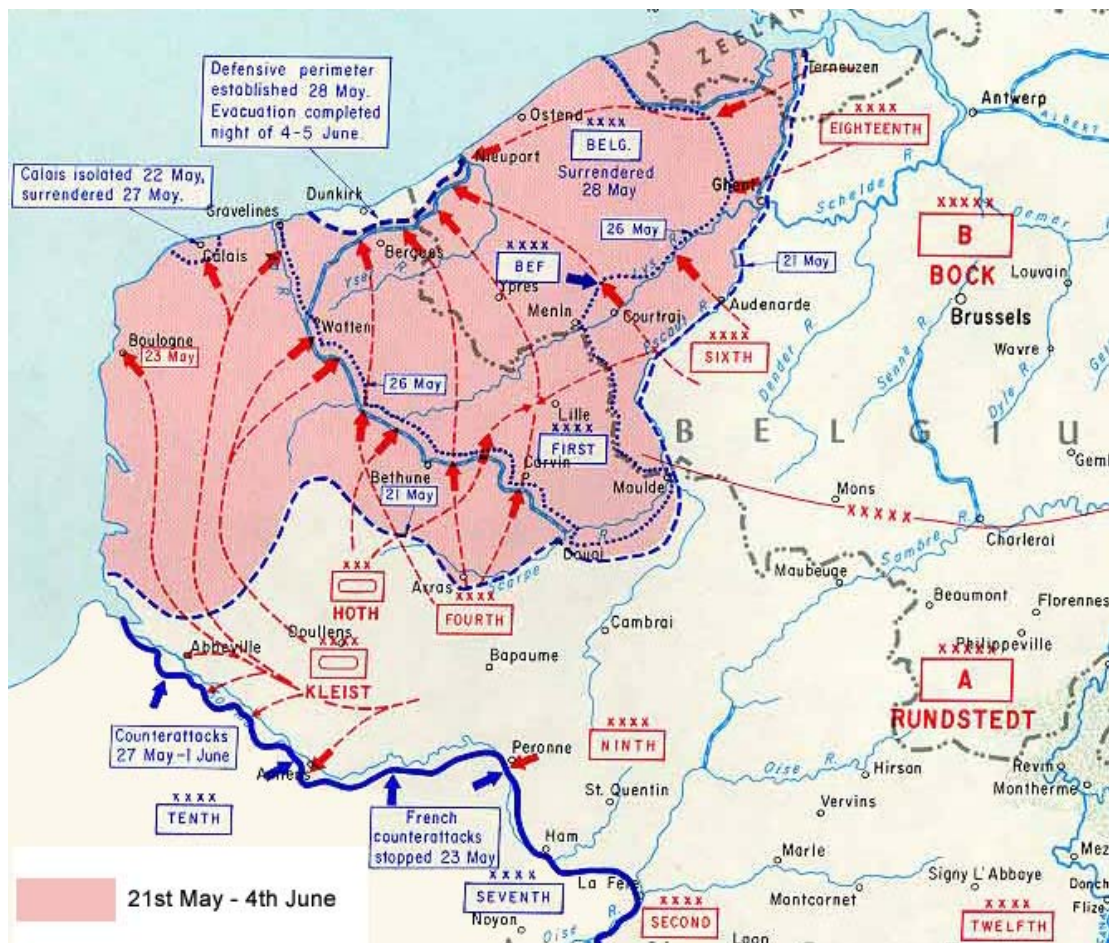
The truck which did not turn over negotiated the bank in an incredible way, and set off at about 20 mph across country on its own. After negotiating several hedges and ditches, it hit a tree and stopped. The amusement of this anyhow helped to cheer us up.

We kept one 15 cwt. truck to get back in. We had 17 men, an Anti-tank rifle, an L.M.G. and some ammo. on that truck. I later put it into a pond near our farm, where it disappeared completely.

That job done, we all felt that things were suddenly much worse. However, a little sleep—we had had very little indeed during the last few days—cheered everyone up considerably. I had now just what I stood up in, my haversack and my sleeping bag. I lay on the grass in the field and watched the planes high up above – and felt it was too pleasant there to believe there was a war. The Section had fitted up the wireless, and had got some dance music from home. we were never unable to find a way of fixing the radio – although it was a mains set – a fine ten-valve German model, which we had picked up at Sterrebeek.

At 1845 that evening we got orders to move.—by march route. We did not know our destination, but guessed it was Dunkerque. We set off at a good pace, by subsections, and for the first three hours, kept our 10 minute halts religiously. At one of these halts, I was leaning against the wall outside a farmhouse, when up strolled—Bee, who was with me at Sherborne. He was a gunner, and just going into action with his battery.

About 2130 hrs, we joined on to another column, including 234 Coy. and 108 Fd Park Coy. We closed up into threes, and from then on just kept going. We kept to side roads and tracks, and there were frequent delays, although of only a minute or two at a time.



Above, Map from www.dean.usma.edu

As it got dark, we noticed the red glow of Dunkirk burning ahead. As the night got darker, it appeared to grow brighter, and lit the whole sky in front of us.

21st May 1940

After midnight, we got onto main roads again. The men were keeping a good pace and formation. We were getting near Dunkirk, and it was a fearsome sight. Great columns of flame leapt from the burning oil tanks many hundreds of feet into the air, and there were innumerable smaller fires. I could read a map by the glow, although we must have been three or four miles from the town.

We passed through many villages – all had been bombed to some extent. As the dawn began to break, we kept round to the east of Dunkirk, and could see the great pall of smoke lying across the country from the fires – we had seen it for several days now. We passed under that smoke, which

was blacker overhead than any natural cloud, down a tree-lined road above the low lying marshy ground, intersected by many dykes.

Then there came a halt. There were a lot of other units on the road, and we could see them held up a long way in front of us. We moved on slowly, but there was a lot of pushing by some parties of men. Some of these apparently had no officers with them, and had lost all sense of discipline. Once or twice there was a lot of shouting, which nearly came to blows.

We now saw what the hold up was about. A bridge on the road had been destroyed by a bomb, and there was only a narrow improvised footbridge across – little more than a plank –about 15” wide with no rails. The men were slow getting across. Some were starting to get panicky, & everyone said that as soon it got light the Bosch would start bombing the roads – he had done that the previous day.

Another mile on we came to a canal, where we turned right down a track. It was now really beginning to get light. On the far side we could see the flat ground running across to sand hills about a mile away. But between those sand hills and ourselves was a long line of troops—marching, or rather walking—in the opposite direction. We wondered whether we would have to come back all the way on the other side. The men were tired and were beginning to straggle badly. We must have done twenty miles by now - and most of them had hardly marched at all for several months. We tried to keep them in threes, but after a while gave it up, and let them make their own time. We kept along the canal bank for some time, until we came to the remains of a little village (Furnes, or its suburb) with a bridge. Sure enough – across this we went and started back the other way – part of that long black line we had seen on our way up.

We were all feeling a bit weary now, but our legs just seemed to go on unfeeling. It would have taken an effort to stop them. Maurice gave me a short, and said – “Have a drop of water”. I had one and found it was rum. It cheered us up. I noticed that one of my Section—Pritchard— had disappeared. I noticed this because he had been strumming the step on a ukulele of his for the last two hours, and had always been well up in front. No-one knew where he was. I found later he had dropped out, one of the few men who did. Not being with the Company, he was longer on the Beaches, and got wounded by bomb splinters later on.

We passed through La Panne about an hour later. It was here that Nobby Chapman – C.S.M. – got a lift on a m/c. He was 51, and as it was he died

on returning to England of pneumonia on top of general exhaustion. Later he stood in the sea for some hours directing operations while the Company got away to the minesweepers.

About seven, we came into the little seaside resort of Bray Dunes, where we stopped. The Company straggled in during the next hour, and only a few failed to turn up. We had marched close on thirty miles in about twelve hours. I sat down on the doorstep of a house near the front and smoked a cigarette, and ate half our chocolate emergency ration with Nobby and Dick. In ten minutes I was so stiff That I could hardly get up again.

We fixed an Assembly area for the Company, and found somewhere where we could wash. I then had to report to the C.R.E. I was sent with Wilkes to find an assembly area on or near the Beach for ourselves and 108 Fd. Pk Coy. We fixed an area on the sand dunes on the eastern edge of the town. It was a good area, all hillocks and hollows, with three Bofurs guns at three corners. These gave one some sense of protection, although they were more likely to draw the enemies' attention

Bray Dunes was a dead place now. It had been a popular resort of about 5,000 inhabitants, with a fine promenade lined with cafés and hotels. The beach was wide sand, with sand hills east and west of the town.. Now the little town was shuttered and deserted with only a very few civilians, who had refused to be evacuated, left. The shops were empty, and there was no food, and very little water to be had. There had been only a few bombs.

On the front, in a big hotel, was a British emergency hospital. In it were several thousand wounded. The only other visible occupants were a few thousand very weary British (and a few French) soldiers. They were for the most part asleep, in doorways, seats on the promenade and in groups on the beach and sand dunes. There were a number of lorries which had been taken down to the beach, and a lot of M/Cycles. Motor Cycles were the only vehicles which had been brought to the coast. Everything else, with some exceptions, had been destroyed inland.

We managed to get hold of some rations for the Company, and set up a comfortable mess in a little villa facing the sea which we shared with some French officers. From here we could see everything that happened in the vicinity from the big bay window. The previous owners had wisely removed all the glass.

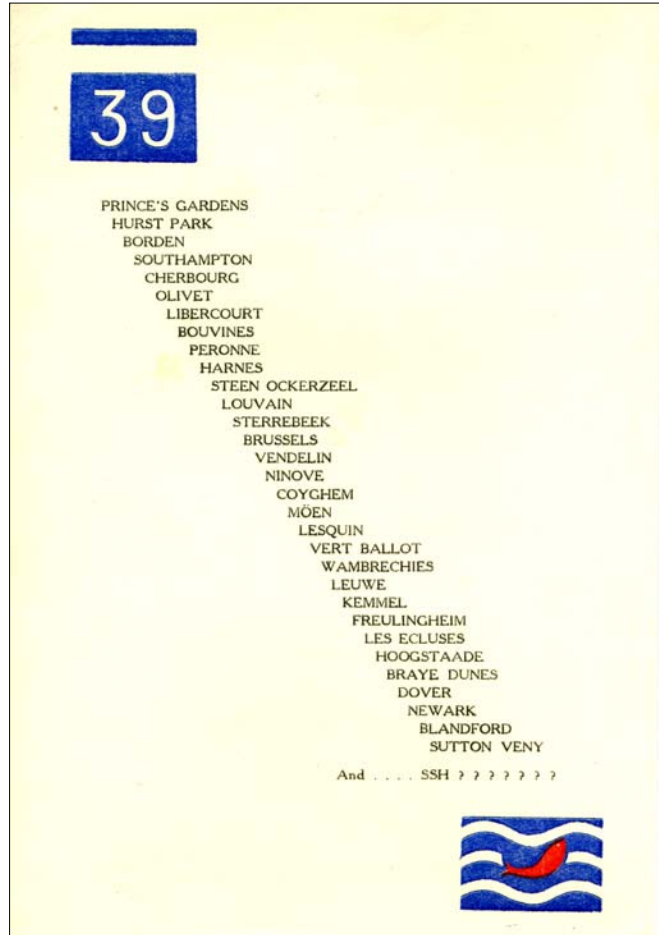
There were no ships to be seen other than the occasional patrolling destroyer. Once six French cruisers passed two miles off shore in line astern – going full out. They were shelling the German batteries at Nieuport, some six miles east of us. With our glasses we could just see the shells bursting. It was magnificent.

German planes were over us continuously, but took no notice of us, and seemed satisfied with bombing Dunkirk. Dunkirk was burning as merrily as ever. There was a gentle west wind, so the smoke was all going away from us.

In the afternoon a number of Destroyers came up and moved slowly up and down about two miles off-shore. They put up a big A.A. barrage but never hit anything. Our Bofors guns were in action almost continuously all day. They actually hit two 'planes during the afternoon. A formation of Dorniers came over in a close Vee, at about 2000 feet. The three Bofors opened up and one gun hit two 'planes with one clip of five rounds. The first glided down out of sight to the east, while the second came straight down in a power dive into the beach about ½ mile away, where it blew up with a tremendous crump. Everyone cheered and a lot ran to where it had crashed, but there was very little left of it to see. It certainly cheered us up at any rate.

So the day was spent either sleeping in the brilliant sun, or watching the Bosch bombing Dunkirk. Very occasionally we saw some British fighters. We had a foot inspection.

No. 3 Section was picked up from the beaches at Bray Dunes on the evening of 29th May 1940, by cutters from minesweepers standing off the coast. The next morning they were transferred to HMS Calcutta. The Section was still complete except for one man, Sapper Pritchard, who had been wounded a splinter on the beach on the 29th. He was able to rejoin the Company in due course.



Above: The 1940 Christmas Card of 222 Field Company listed the scenes of their operations in the previous 12 months, but wasn't saying where they were off to next...

Below: HMS Calcutta, to which Peter was transferred after being picked up off the beach



Officers Mess
Chiseldon Camp
TELEPHONE CHISELDON 240

June 4th 1940

Dear Dad,

As I expect Mum has told you, I got home on Wednesday evening. We disembarked at Sheerness, and came straight up here, arriving at 4 a.m. on Thursday.

I managed to get 48 hrs leave on Saturday, and was home all Sunday; however it was quite unofficial, and I hope to get a week when we have reformed.

At the moment everything is upside down. Up here, we have two officers & 80 men from the Company, the rest being split up in several places somewhere in England. Any day now, we will move to a Corps troops reforming area, and when sorted out, will, I hope, get some leave.

Last Monday week, we marched over 30 miles to our embarkation point, near Dunkirk. We left at 6.45 p.m. on Monday, and arrived on the coast at 6.15 a.m. on Tuesday, having marched almost continuously. Some of the men were in a very bad way, as they had not marched at all for six months – too much M.T.! However, my section was only one short when we arrived.

Of course, we all lost our kit – except what we could carry. I thought of your telling me to expect to lose things in war! I know what to take abroad now: I had not opened my valise once while I was in France. The kit I used was: my washing things stowed in your leather-covered basin, which was invaluable, and my suitcase, with, sleeping bag, spare clothes, and necessary oddments, books, etc.

On Tuesday evening the Navy arrived. About six o'clock, twelve destroyers steamed up, and anchored off the beach. We started embarking at nine o'clock. We had to wade in up to our chests, and I, in the last boat but one, did not get aboard until one in the morning. The Captain of our destroyer gave myself & the other officer – our 2nd i/c – the full use of his cabin,

a hot bath, and a bottle of whisky. Heaven!

Our work during the weeks in Belgium was, of course, almost entirely demolitions; they were usually done in a great rush, but always successful, and great fun. The experience gained has been simply enormous.

Really, I thoroughly enjoyed the whole time. We were always busy, and any job was new and interesting. I have yet to see a Bosch anywhere but in an aeroplane! We saw rather too many of them.

So far as I know, we had no casualties at all in the company, unless they happened in the last two days.

I hope to see soon. If I get a week's leave, & you cannot get home, I could come up to Lincoln.

With love, from Peter