

PREFACE; 1935-39

My family from time to time have exhorted me to write my War Memoirs; by that they meant "Tell us about Burma". I have tried on several occasions to comply with their requests but for one reason or another the results have ended up in the waste paper basket. Time however is moving fast and I feel that something must be committed to paper and that a better approach would be to describe the events which led to my service with the Fourteenth Army and more specifically with the 5th. Indian Division

Reviewing events, I am persuaded that determinism has played an important part rather than any deliberate moves by me. Let us begin in 1936 when as a 17 year old I was a Civil Engineering student at Loughborough. We all attended a talk by someone from the War Office who explained that the Royal Army Ordnance Corp would sooner or later (a euphemism for "when war breaks out") need numbers of qualified engineers to be commissioned as Ordnance Mechanical Engineers (O.M.E's) to be responsible for the inspection and examination of field guns and repairs to transport, optical equipment and so on. To this end two specialised sub units of the Universities Officer Training Corps would be set up, one at Sheffield and the other at Nottingham University College. The recruitment from the latter would be 50% Nottingham and 50% Loughborough. Twentyfive volunteers were called for from Loughborough for a three year part time course.

I thought no more about it until a fellow student tapped me on the shoulder and said "Join, the uniform is smart and comfortable".

Three annual training camps, Sunday training days and one evening a week on the rifle ranges followed during which time I became curious then interested and finally enthusiastic. During that period I formed friendships which proved rewarding and life-long.

CHAPTER ONE 1939-40

The idea had been that once trained we would be enrolled as O.M.E.'s (unclassified) What actually happened was that peacetime conscription had been introduced shortly before the War and I found myself being medically examined in a Baptist Chapel in Charles Street, Leicester in 1938. Nothing happened until November 1939 when I was called up and told to report to an Anti-Aircraft Battery in Sheffield. I managed to persuade "them" that there had been a "clerical error" and nothing more was heard until August 1940 when I was drafted to a Royal Engineer Training Battalion in Newark- "bring your own boots as we havnt got any ". By this time the British had been defeated in Norway and in France and things were very bad indeed. The fore runner of the Home Guard (Local Defence Volunteers) was raised and all roads leading into Loughborough were blocked and guarded and all road signs railway station names and other means of identifying where one was were removed. The bombing started. The training at Newark was relentless with "Stand-to" at dawn and confinement to Camp for the first month, after which every man had to carry a loaded rifle at all times. This period was known as "The Flap" when the Germans were expected daily. We slept on the floor and in the absence of black-out screens no lights were permitted.

After six months, whilst I was on guard at the camp gate I was summoned to the C.O.'s office to be told "I suppose you know that you have been granted a direct commission as an O.M.E. ?" You are to report to Chilwell Depot in seven days time" I realised that this was the result of a weird interview I had been through some time before when the defining moment was when the Chairman thinking to catch me out leaned forward and said "What is an AFG 1045 " Quick as a flash I replied, "A workshop repair indent to be prepared in triplicate and delivered to the Ordnance Workshop in duplicate with the damaged equipment" The Board were stunned, there was a muttered discussion and the Chairman began talking to me at length prefacing every remark with "When you come into the Corps". I had done it.

And so it was that I reported to Chilwell and three days later was posted as Officer in charge L.A.D. attached 1/8 Middlesex Regiment (Machine Gun Battalion).

It was difficult to get used to the change from the harsh treatment and discipline of Newark to the totally different life of an Officers Mess and the responsibility for eight

craftsmen.

CHAPTER TWO 1941-42

The 1/8 Middlesex were part of an anti-invasion force guarding the South East coast. They had recently been evacuated from Dunkirk after receiving a mauling in France. The L.A.D. was quartered in a succession of small civilian garages requisitioned for that purpose. At the age of just turned 22 I knew little about people and real life and soon began to learn, sometimes painfully and I was almost relieved when after six months of doing very little I received a Posting Order for India.

The Mobilization Centre was at Arnold, Nottingham where we were told nothing about our destination and purpose of the posting. There were about 30 of us mostly straight from a civilian job and considerably older than me. It was there that I met Eric Hough and we became firm friends. The night before our departure the two of us went "out on the Town" in Nottingham with a first class hang-over which had not lifted by the time we stood in the rain on a bomb-damaged dock in Liverpool. As we waited there lined up and miserable my heart lifted to see going up the gang plank two good friends of mine from College days, Tus Hill and Bob Goslin. The troopship was The Viceroy of India which had still not been divested of some of its peace-time luxuries, so that the two months we spent on board were like a holiday.

Words cannot describe the emotions I felt when after several days in the Mersey, one afternoon I heard the unmistakeable rumble of the anchor chain and we slipped noiselessly down-river to join the waiting dozen or so ships which would be our convoy. We were never told what our route was; it was clear that the convoy had to sail as far as possible away from the submarine pens of Western France and North Africa and I suspect that we sailed towards Iceland and thence across the Atlantic towards America then doubling back to our first port of call, Freetown. No-one was allowed ashore. Days were spent in card games and chess and the evenings with drinking and cabaret type entertainment. There was one particular event which overpowered us then and is still strong in my memories. A young Captain got up one evening in the lounge and said that he would like to play and sing a song which reminded him of what we had left behind. It was "A nightingale sang in Berkley Square" When he finished there was a silence more eloquent than applause. To this day when I hear this song it all comes back.

We reached Cape Town Eric and I walked up and down marvelling at the abundance of goods, going for coffee and looking with disbelief at bowls of sugar things which had long since disappeared from places at home. Female escorts were organised for all and we had three days of enjoyment.

After the ship left Capetown the convoy broke up and we crossed the ocean towards India at fast P. & O. speed. Eventually we docked at Ballard Pier, Bombay where we saw the huge sign of which we had heard as legend "This is India. Keep your bowels open and your mouths shut".

It came as no surprise to learn that we were not expected and the authorities did not know what to do with us. We were therefore quartered in "The Premier Hotel of the East" the Taj Mahal, Bombay. More weeks of luxury followed and Eric and I swam, explored and enjoyed ourselves.

Later the group was split up and about half were posted to the Officers Training School at Belgaum in the South. The course at Belgaum was useful in that it gave a chance to begin to learn Urdu and to be instructed in the make-up and customs of the Indian Army. What was painfully obvious was that the instruction was looking backwards with the emphasis on skirmishes on the North West Frontier and not forward to what was about to happen. As I walked back to my quarter on the evening of 7th. December 1941, through an open window I heard a radio announcement that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour. The party was over. At the end of the course I was told officially that my report would be a good one.

The party was then further fragmented and about ten of us were posted to the Arsenal, Rawalpindi on an optical instruments course. Again we gained the impression that we were being moved from place to place because nobody knew what we were

there for. The course comprised elementary trigonometry, basic optics and hands-on experience with out-of-date range-finding equipment. I gained 100% in the exam but was only credited with 99% as they said my dedication was lacking. After six weeks of this mind-numbing boredom we were again split up and a few of us were posted to the Gun School at Poona, where to my horror I found that we were to undergo a six-weeks course on Ordnance inspection and examination- the identical course which I went through in the O.T.C. By this time frustration had taken over and I asked the Commandant of the school if I could be posted to active service. His answer was "You are now on active service" At these last two postings I gained something however. At Rawalpindi I learned how to ride a horse and ski, whilst at Poona I was introduced to sculling in fours and how to conduct oneself at a cocktail party. This was not war!

Then almost a year after leaving England I was posted to a unit, 101 Mobile Workshop Company in Sialkot. I was met at the railway station by a sun-grizzled Major of late middle age. He took me to see the unit, consisting of three empty sheds and an overhead crane on which was printed "Herbert Morris- Loughborough".

Life at Sialkot under Major Trowbridge in the fierce heat of my first Indian summer was one of the worst periods of my service. Communication with him was almost impossible; when he wished to see me he would come out of his office and bellow "White, come here" At one confrontation I told him that I had only one ambition and that was to get away from 101 and Sialkot.

Then one day something unexpected and wonderful happened, the Major came out of his office waving a piece of paper and shouting "White, White you've got your wish". It was a mobilization order to send a Workshop section to an Operational area. "Its yours White" he shouted "Get on with it". Guidance there was none help there was none, but starting from the bottom I found out for myself. Fifty two Indian troops had to be demanded from the Depot, they arrived in dregs and drabs and as a start were shown how to wear their uniform, then to be trained in soldierly skills, how to march how to shoot how to drive in convoy. Along with them I was given a British Warrent Officer and two British Sergeants who were of limited use at this stage.

I was promoted to Captain and asked for and was granted 10 days leave which I spent in Kashmir staying at the home of a good friend from College days B.K. Nehru.

Soon after my return from leave I experienced my first Monsoon and soon thereafter came our movement order. At that time there was a serious problem of Indian troops deserting as they were reluctant to go to a Theatre of War. "You'll never get them there, White" he bellowed, under my breath I muttered "Watch me".

When the appointed day of departure came I commandeered the remainder of the Company, armed them with rifles and bayonets and ordered them to form a tight ring around the Railway Station. I procured a master key for the railway carriages and the we set off from the unit through the bazaar and on to the Station. I led, the British Warrent Officer guarded the rear of the column and the two British Sergeants marched one each side. On arrival at the station the men were counted in and locked in their carriages. Major Trowbridge was at a loss for words except as the train slowly pulled out rather than bellowing he whispered to me "White White, you've done damned well" That made up for all the bullying of the past few months.

We were on that troop train for something like three weeks. By arrangement with the engine driver we stopped once a day for a cooked meal. This was prepared on flat wagons covered in a carpet of red clay on which oil burners stood.

At one such stop we were too near a village and my sepoy's began to disappear one at a time. I commandeered a horse taxi (tonga) and galloped round the bazaar rounding-up the absentees. A head count later proved correct at 52.

At Christmas 1942 we were still in the train, stuck in a siding in Calcutta due to Japanese air raids. Some kindly woman brought me a piece of Christmas cake.

We later transferred all our men and equipment to the narrow gauge railway

at Pavurtipur north of Calcutta. Then followed a 24 hour journey to the rail terminus where men, stores and equipment were transferred to a river ferry. Some time later we arrived at Dhubri where everything was off loaded onto a fleet of very ancient solid tyred Leyland trucks. Further progress was impossible that day as the single-track road to our destination Shillong operated a one way system up traffic at 6 a.m. precisely and down traffic in the afternoon. We camped at the side of the river overnight.

The journey next day up through the Khasi Hills was a roller-coaster ride, many men being physically sick. Eventually we arrived at our new parent-company No. 7 Mobile Workshop.

CHAPTER THREE 1942 -43

No. 7 Mobile had suffered in the retreat from Rangoon in 1942, having been abandoned by the Commanding Officer (he was later Court Marshalled) and being split up and reduced in number by enemy action. My fully equipped and trained section was reinforcement to bring the Company up to strength. The location was beautiful, in a pinewood with the Leave Station of Shillong with its Hotel, cinema and club only 5 miles walk away. Very soon it was announced that the parent Division, having been so badly mauled in Burma would never fight again. It seemed that the more I tried to get into the War the further away it receded.

Early in 1943 the whole 39 Division pulled out and began the long convoy journey (some 500 miles) to the Ranchi area in India. It was there that I was posted temporarily into the Netahat jungle about 80 miles away to take charge of a Light Mobile Workshop attached to the first Light Brigade since the famous one in the Crimea. The Workshop operated and moved in 22 Jeeps and the training role of the Brigade was Long Range Penetration as adopted by Orde Wingate and the Chindits. Living was primitive, training was exhausting and demanding and the dangers from wildlife were very real. There were herds of wild boar, wild buffalo, any number of snakes and tiger. The sepoys were terrified and sat up all night in their vehicles and thought I was mad to sleep on the ground. The Brigadier was a disappointment with a liver pickled in alcohol a temper to match and like Trowbridge shouted. That was one of the shortcomings of the Indian Army of that time. The senior ranks were time- expired alcohol-damaged and too witless to cope with war, having served their time in pre-war India.

Eventually I returned to my parent company, when it was announced that the 39th Division was to assume a training role and would move out of the Ranchi area to the North West of India at Roorki some 600 miles away. We had just settled in at Roorki when we were moved yet again to Saharanpur not too far away. By this time my overseas service had become a sad joke and this was reinforced when our new Lt. Colonel presented himself. He turned out to be a friend of Trowbridge differing from him in that he was clearly mad. In a matter of weeks he had reduced our well loved Workshop Commander, Major Ravenscroft to a state of nervous exhaustion and he was evacuated sick and we never saw him again.

CHAPTER FOUR 1944-45

By this time I began to realise that one or two of my fellow-officers were disappearing and I also realised that the end of the War in Europe was becoming a distinct possibility. My final exam for the London B.Sc. awaited me and to date I had done nothing to justify the time expended in the Army.

Then events took over. One day the Unit received a visit from a Staff Officer from G.H.Q. Delhi--We got the feeling that he was there to sound-out morale. I was told to take him back to the Railway Station after he had completed his inspection. On the trip to the Station he asked casually "How do you get on with Jock Finlayson?" I jumped in and told him that we all thought he was mad and had all taken a solemn oath as to what we would do if we ever met him later in civilian life. "You should wangle a posting" he said. "Tell me how to do it" I replied. "Here is my office address, come and see me" was the reply.

The next problem was how to wangle a visit to G.H.Q. Delhi. I therefore staged an argument with Finlayson, worked him into a rage and he then ordered me to report sick.

This I did and by devious means the medical inspection had to be in Delhi. I travelled to Delhi, stayed with an old College chum, Ernest Brett, looked out my Staff Captain contact, was wheeled into the office next door and was confronted by two Staff Majors reminding me of the Cheerible Brothers. So you want to get away from Jock they asked. "More than that" I replied I want to go on active service. They explained that the Staff under Lord Mountbatton would not accept anyone from India Command unless his record of Service had been scrutinised and they were then prepared to accept him. "So" they said "Go to the Hotel down the road, have a slap-up lunch and come back here at 3 p.m."

I remember that lunch- every detail- the Palm Court Orchestra played the second movement of Schuman's piano concerto and I sent the salad back because it was not clean. What have I done, I kept saying to myself. I didn't have to wait long.

Promptly at 3 p.m. I reported back. "You're in" they chortled. "Yes, but where" I replied. "You are now Adjutant E.M.E. H.Q. 5th. Indian Division" "But where" ? I persisted. They then fell about laughing and said "Completely surrounded by Japanese forces in the Arakan". "Thank you very much, may I go now?"

On my return to my unit I was careful to say nothing. Days past until one day I received my posting orders. I immediately began to pack, ordered a truck when I received two deputations, first from My Indian N.C.O.s to say goodbye (the grape vine in India meant little was secret and second from Sgt. Crabbe of Jock Finlayson's office. "Quick", he panted the Colonel has just seen a copy of your posting order and he is beside himself with rage" All hands then threw my kit into the truck slammed up the tail-board and I jumped into the front seat and I told the driver "Jhitni jaldi ho sakhai," meaning "Get a move on". There was no pursuit and in due course I arrived at Movement Control Calcutta. "Go next door to the Officers' Shop and buy yourself some jungle green uniform and 3 Blankets, lightweight, jungle olive green.

By this time The Americans had arrived and Calcutta swarmed with them. They had taken over the rail communications to the Operational Areas. They hated the place, as one G.I. moaned to me "Aint seen a white woman for 38 days". "You'll get used to it" I said "we did"..

The rail journey North was somewhat different to the trip I made in 1942. There was a restaurant car with waiters. Looking out of the carriage windows one could see from time to time, down the hillsides or poking out from the jungle growth railway carriages and the occasional locomotive with wheels in the air. The American policy was not to spend time recovering damaged rolling stock replace them with new stock and forget about the crashed. "Yes sir", boasted a US colonel over dinner "We've increased transportation efficiency by 80% and soon we'll be perfect"..

By this time the 5th Indian Division had, with others, defeated the attempt by

the Japanese to surround and destroy them and two of its Brigades were flown out, one to the siege of Kohima and the other to the siege of Imphal. The military situation had arisen by what the Japanese called "The March on Delhi". They had crossed the Chindwin river and using little known jungle tracks had advanced almost to the 14th Army railhead at Dimapur and in the process had surrounded Kohima and the Imphal plain to which the retreating 14th Army forces had withdrawn. Imphal plain contained an all-weather airstrip and stores, Dimapur had 11 miles of Army supply dumps and access to India via the railway..

The third Brigade of 5 Ind. Div. travelled up from the Arakan by road, along with Divisional HQ which latter contained EME HQ.. I arrived at Dimapur and waited a few days to enable Kohima and Imphal to be relieved and at the latter place I joined HQ IEME along with the rest of Divisional HQ. From Imphal there were only two serviceable tracks to Burma, the Palel track (partly metalled) and the Tiddim track (unmetalled). The latter wound its way through the Chin Hills some rising to 9000 feet which were covered in hundreds of miles of thick jungle. The task of 5 Ind.Div. was to pursue the Japanese forces along the Tiddim track. The task was made much more difficult by two factors; first the monsoon was about to break and Mountbatton ordered that the campaign would continue throughout the rains "Stumps will not be drawn"). Second, an enormous explosion had occurred in Bombay Harbour destroying many ships loaded with warlike stores for the 14th. Army. In consequence of the first, the track became a quagmire and of the second that no new four-wheeled drive vehicles were available. We lived in cavities scraped into the hillside we were always wet and the food was Spartan. Having advanced some 125 miles along the track a serious problem occurred. The Recovery Company (O.C. Major "Scrubber" Dale) had a heavy Workshop lorry driven by an Indian Army Officer which proved too heavy for the track, which gave way. The lorry plunged hundreds of feet down the thickly covered hillside and was never seen again, leaving a gap of several hundred feet in the track. The decision was made; those on the Tiddim side of the gap would press on and those on the Imphal side would (somehow) turn the vehicles round and return to Imphal. It was during this confusing time that I found myself in charge of Rear Divisional H.Q. with a wireless truck and a British Wireless operator. I was put to the test when a signal came through: 1/9 Royal Jats ambushed by enemy forces send Carrier platoon immediately. I had no idea where the Carrier Platoon were; I grabbed a 500cc B.S.A. motorcycle and ventured onto the track up and down I went avoiding holes several feet deep and sliding on the mud. I was in despair, unit camouflage and the thick jungle cover had concealed everything. after perhaps half an hour of searching I saw peeping out from the trackside grass (6 feet high in places) a small metal sign with a number painted on. Turning off I came upon a clearing and there were the Bren Carriers. I saw to it that they were refueled ammunition checked and every man ready and clear as to the task and off they went .Such clearings were rare and it was not easy to find suitable places to bivouac. One was directed by one's nose avoiding Japanese latrines or their corpses Another moment of truth occurred on the journey back to Imphal .The leading vehicle broke down and the convoy was stuck no passing was possible. The convoy commander, Major Peter Cranmer the Warwickshire cricketer strode down the convoy calling out for "Someone from REME". Some one poked me in the ribs and said "That's you mate". Some are born great, some have greatness thrust upon them. I went to the vehicle and did the usual tests and to my utter amazement it started ! We were off !

Back in Imphal things had improved, the extensive damage of the siege had been cleared away, buildings had been repaired and made usable -there was even an Officers' Club. I began to cough.

Mountbatton came to talk to us on his self appointed task to speak to every officer in the Division. He coined the memorable phrase "You call yourself the Forgotten

Army, but as nobody at Home has ever heard of you ,you cannot be forgotten !"

By November 1944 that part of the Division which had moved forward of the track collapse and had taken Tiddim had returned via the Palel track and the Tiddim track was abandoned. The Division then moved further back to Maram, a bleak and forbidding spot towards Kohima. It had been the site of a battle between the Japanese and the British 2nd Division and the corpses were attracting rats of a size which beggars belief. We lived in dug-outs in the hillside and at night the rats came out. They ran across my sleeping bag and it was necessary to lie there holding a bamboo cane and lashing out to ward them off. Later poison was issued and the problem disappeared. It was at Maram that I enjoyed my first Ensa concert. The Royal Engineers had bulldozed an open air amphitheatre out of the hillside, the R.E.M.E. had erected a stage and produced generators for the lighting and our spirits were raised by an hour of singing and buffoonery. It was wonderful.

As we perched on our hillside we witnessed an unending procession of enormous trucks grinding their way towards Imphal. I found out later that they were transporting a complete road. Enormous rolls of hession which were being laid onto the Palel track and then sprayed with bitumen. We were to test the worth of this project later on our return to Burma.

The next move was again towards the rear; the Division having been given an air-portable role and it was being withdrawn to retrain the Brigades and to give all time to recuperate. The Division camped at Jorhat in the area of the tea gardens of Assam. During this period I was sent to Calcutta to report on the progress of the design and construction of vehicles being modified for air-portability. It was at Jorhat that all officers were invited to an enormous drinks party by the tea planters, many of whom I discovered had been at Loughborough College as students. It was a good night.

In February 1944 (if I remember rightly) orders came to move back into Burma. This involved an "approach to contact" of some 300 miles, down the Palel track now a road with its covering of "bit hess", down to the Chinwin where the crossing was made via the longest bridge- of- boats in the world. Before crossing I checked my part of the convoy; I had put the water tank trailer in charge of someone I thought could be relied upon a British W.O. 2, recently posted to us and placed him at the rear of the convoy. At the Chindwin he was nowhere to be seen. The loss was serious since we would be crossing the Dry Belt on our journey. I had to take the blame but the interesting fact was that the W.O. complete with water tank breezed in when we had almost reached Rangoon, no apology, no explanation. To me this was a clever piece of desertion to avoid the battles ahead.

Having crossed the Chindwin the convoy saw left and right evidence of the retreat in 1942. There were cars left by the refugees when they had run out of petrol, and numerous wooden posts indicating Japanese graves. The teak forests were disappointing the trees being much smaller than we had imagined. Then came the Dry Belt; having lost the water trailer my personal position was made much worse; We were all issued with canvas water containers (chaguils) Mine had been suspended over the side of the Jeep to keep it cool. Unfortunately it had rubbed against the tyre and all the contents were gone. The Divisional forming-up area was Monywa where in due time we crossed the Irrawaddy in amphibious trucks (DUKWS). From then on we were in enemy territory and at Meiktela 9 Brigade of the Division with their air-portable role landed on the air-strip while Japanese machine guns were waiting at the far end. The Brigadier was sacked. At Meiktela my bivouac was next to a British 5.5 field gun which made sleep difficult.

After leaving Meiktela contact with rear formations ended and the road behind us was closed. The Division then adopted the tactics developed by the Chindits, thrust into enemy territory rely on air supply completely and practice all-round defence. Thus the battle was shut down in mid afternoon, a defensive ring was set up and at about 4 a.m. the next day a spearhead column would set out for the next location. I was the

R.E.M.E. representative in this column, whose task was to locate and occupy a site for Divisional H.Q. ahead of that body. On the first trip we were ambushed by the Japanese whose tactics were to create an obstruction in the track then attack the column when it stopped to investigate. The problem was overcome but thereafter the column was provided with a troop of tanks and some infantry. Nevertheless the column ran into ambushes on two further occasions.

At night the mosquito net was banned due to another Japanese tactic of infiltrating and bayonetting nets. One day my Colonel said "Go and do a bit of looting, we need some sugar". A sack of sugar was duly found but the temptation to search just one more deserted bungalow was too much. The driver drove bonnet forward into the front drive and as we got out were met with a hail of machine gun bullets. Taking advantage of cover provided by a large water but I used an Italian tommy gun to cover the driver as he managed to turn the vehicle round. As we raced off enemy bullets passed between us as we crouched in the Jeep.

Up till this time the R.A.F. had not been sighted. We were soon to see what the Army called a "Brock's Benefit". The column was held up outside a village occupied by the enemy. As the Infantry slowly made their way forward over open ground, devoid of cover, out of nowhere came Typhoons firing rockets into the village and detonating an enormous enemy ammunition dump. It was spectacular.

The end was obviously approaching and my C.O., Lt. Col. K.G. Fryer kept nagging me about my future. "Go for a Permanent Commission" he said "I have watched you and am convinced that you are right for it". With some misgivings the application was duly despatched to H.Q. In a few days it was returned as having been incorrectly addressed. "That settles it" I said "Fate has decided that I should not do this". The C.O. was annoyed, but said "if in the future I can help any of you I would do it" I was to remember that in the future when help was needed.

The pace of advance was speeding up and 20 or 30 miles per day was not unusual. Enemy resistance stiffened and Div. H.Q. endured frequent low-level air attacks so low that the pilots were clearly visible. The retreating Japanese, trapped on one flank made attempts to cross over by infiltrating our defences at night and we lay quietly and observed them.

As the Division neared Rangoon contact was made with British guerillas, flown out from London days before, naked except for a lungi, skin dyed an appropriate brown and wearing a "uniform" of a red arm band on which was woven a black spider. Their task was sabotage and spreading alarm. This they did using hand grenades ready primed but encircled by hospital tape soaked in acid. These they quietly deposited beside groups of sleeping Japanese or in their vehicles. By dawn the acid destroyed the tape and the grenade exploded. They were clearly enjoying their work.

The monsoon arrived early grounding the transport planes on which the Division relied for all supplies (free-fall or parachute), and Div. H.Q. was put on quarter rations. After all this time I cannot remember the details of our diet except that supper consisted of one pineapple chunk sitting on a hard biscuit. The road side was littered with dead Japanese and dead horses and later on the Japanese survivors, starving. The Division came to a halt at a village called Waw just north of Rangoon and it was there I received a signal to say that I was eligible for repatriation to UK. after nearly four years abroad. The Colonel said "Stay with us" That would have meant another six months at least of overseas service and a part in (what it was thought) the next move, the invasion of Singapore. I thought about my incomplete Degree and opted to accept repatriation. Innoculations were necessary and to this end I travelled a few miles north to what was left of Pegu. It was in ruins and by now with other troops of 14th. Army. Despite the crowds and confusion I noticed an officer standing at the side of the road. I stopped and greeted the friend of nearly four years ago Eric Hough. The conversation went like this. "Hi Jim, what are you doing here?" "Getting ready to go home" I replied. "So am I" he stuttered, and inserting himself into the Jeep said "Let's go".

We then left a message for his C.O. and Eric insisted in attaching himself to me. He persuaded my Colonel to issue him with a movement order and then came the difficult bit. We were to report to a Repatriation Centre in Gaya, India. There was no way of flying out as there were no airstrips. There was no wheeled transport since the nearest available was at Meiktela several hundred miles north. The country in the vicinity was riddled with Japanese stragglers and suicide groups. I said "We walk and take our luck" Colonel Fryer made his contribution by lending us a Jeep and driver on the understanding that it had to be returned after 24 hours. A search was made for rations, our revolvers were handed in, a bottle of rum was opened and we all sang "Lay that pistol down mate " until the A.D.C. to the General rushed over to advise us that the noise was likely to wake the Jap.

We set off next day at dawn and drove at furious speed until reluctantly we released the Jeep. The atmosphere was disturbing. Total silence, no birds or animals and no humans. All had been displaced by the recent battles. We were alert for sight or sound of the Japanese. We walked. Later that day, Eric gave up. "Its no use Jim" he said as he collapsed onto a stone, "We wont make it ". "Eric " I said "Get off your backside, "We will". Then the miracle happened. Out of the forest pattered an elderly Burmese man. As we already knew the wretched Burmans had been reduced to a terrible state by the Occupation and their request were "Cloth, Oil and tinned fish " This one wanted cloth. I showed him my only dark green hand towel and he produced a little bag containing coloured stones. The deal was struck and we walked on. I have lost track of events on that journey north; already I suspected that I had a fever. Some time later I said "Stop, I can hear something" and yes I was right, the unmistakable sound of a Dakota aircraft running up its engines. We found it just as the door was being slammed shut by one of the American crew. "No Limeys" they shouted. "Stop" I said "we'll pay" "Wadya got Limey ? I showed my pieces of coloured glass. "Jeez, emeralds " they said "Come aboard". I cannot remember how far the plane took us and after the next walk we saw our first truck which took us a bit further. Then we stumbled on an Army reinforcement camp where we were refused admission (I suspect that they thought we were deserters). This was where Eric's rank as Major did the trick. By a combination of threats and bluster we were allowed in. There was an airstrip close by but all planes were still grounded. We lay listening and every time we heard an engine running up off we ran-but no luck. After this my recollection are muddled and hazy, due I think to the fever. I can remember boardind a river steamer where again we were told "No beds for 14th. Army". We must have been on board at least 24 hours as I remember sleeping on the crowded deck. After that was a nightmare trek along a deserted railway track (very bad for the feet). Later we reached a small railway station and we inserted ourselves into a cattle truck. Later still we changed trains and squeezed into an already overcrowded 3rd. Class carriage. All the world seemed to be on the move and we were amused to hear an upper class woman's voice saying "You must let me on, I am a Colonel's wife" The remarks from home-bound British soldiery were unprintable.

We eventually arrived at Calcutta with just a few days to spare, Eric to The Grand Hotel and I to Army Base Hospital, spilling-over with casualties. To leave the Ward the only way was to walk across beds. They pumped me full of drugs and before long Eric burst in "Get your skates on, I've a taxi outside and the train for Gaya goes in one hour". On arrival at the station drugged to the eyeballs I found that for the 48 hour journey there were no spare bunks. An Army Chaplain looked over the side of his top bunk and said "You do'nt look too good, have my bunk".

On arrival at the station for the Camp at Gaya it was afternoon. We lined up beside the track while a 15cwt truck took two passengers at a time. The queue was endless and we literally stood up all night waiting to be transported. At about 6 a.m. we flopped to the floor of a bamboo hut and slept..

At Gaya camp I saw my first woman in Army uniform a Medical Officer who carried out what was called an F.F.I. This was a procedure to ensure that we were free from

infection. This consisted in walking slowly in line past her table and saying "I'm O.K." Then came the long train journey to Bombay and boarding a P.&O. liner. However, things were very different from the conditions in the Viceroy of India in 1941. In the latter we dined in style with a waiter standing behind each officer's chair and champagne and caviar when we reached Bombay. The return ship had been stripped of everything down to the bare metal plates. Sleeping was in rows of double bunks squeezed together leaving just enough room to undress. The "lounge" was a room completely bare with no chairs : there was no alcohol on board and meals were taken in a shift system. On deck it was the same, nowhere to sit down backing my assertion that I stood up all the way from Bombay to Gourock. As the European war was over the chosen route was via Suez and the Mediterranean at top P. and O. speed. At Port Said we stopped to take on a few more troops who looked at us with disbelief; blimey ! said one , you look like a lot of dried-up monkeys !

In about two weeks out of Bombay we caught sight of the first piece of Britain, Ailsa Craig and at night our first sight of British towns lit up lit up since the black-out nearly began nearly six years before.

We docked at Gourock to see an amazing sight-the liners Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth waiting to repatriate US personnel who seemed to cover the decks of the two ships like greenfly. Then came the anti-climax we waited day after day to be disembarked. After many days came the next piece of nonsense, customs officers arrived to find out if we had anything to declare. As most of us had little more than a kit bag the whole thing was a farce !

Eventually we disembarked to a waiting train to find on each seat a gift from a grateful nation, a small eccles cake and a single sheet newspaper. That proved our ration for the next 24 hours. The train wandered about hour after hour until we made a stop in York. Someone was deputed to see that the engine driver did not start up until we were ready and we made a mad rush for the Refreshment room. A few were lucky enough to secure a pint of beer.

At about 6 p.m. we de-trained at Nottingham where I was able to put a call through to my home in Loughborough. We were then taken by truck to who-knows-where in the suburbs. By about 11 p.m. my father arrived in a neighbour's taxi running on illegally acquired petrol and just before midnight I reached home.

On the troopship bringing us home we received "conditioning" over the ship's Tannoy by an Army psychiatrist warning us of the sort of reception we might expect on arriving home. No one ! he boomed will ask you where you have been or what you've been doing all these years. You will be just in time to help with the washing-up and to hear about the bomb that landed two streets away. He was spot on. Over the years well meaning friends have mumbled something about "Chindits" or P.O.W's. The newspaper man who threw the Daily Telegraph onto my bed in hospital later said "Burma, wasn't yer ? That were a popgun war !".

The object of this narrative is to say what happened to me not to be a launch pad for grievances real or imaginary and so I will say only this about my home coming , it was unbelievably awful and for rehabilitation I looked elsewhere.

The Army were not yet ready to release me and I served another 12 months before I was free. The Vicory Parade for the 14th Army was overlooked until 50 years later I joined the thousands of others and marched past the Queen in the Mall. The roar of the crowds and the shouts of "Well done" made up for everything.

POST SCRIPT

The Imphal cough eventually brought me down and I spent two years in and out (mostly in) of hospital until I was able to work full time in 1952. In 1959 I was commissioned into the Territorial Army and found myself in charge of the very unit of the OTC

in which I had trained in the pre-war years. The wheel had come full circle. Later I was promoted to Major and was second-in-command of the whole unit until in 1968 I felt enough is enough and I resigned. The Unit did me proud at the final Regimental Dinner after which came the ceremonial burning of the Service Dress I had purchased at a Nottingham tailors in the dark days of 1941

P.P.S.

One year after the expulsion of the Japanese from Burma inflicting on them the greatest land defeat of the war (not with standing the American successes in the Pacific) Burma was declared independant and set up its own government. Shortly afterwards the entire cabinet were murdered by "rebels".

About one year after that India was declared independant, split itself into two nations (India and Pakistan) and in the process over two million people were massacred. In spite of the military victory in Burma, the Japanese surrendered not because of it but because of the atom bombs. Was it all worth while ?

"And everybody praised the Duke,

Who this great fight did win"

"But what good came of it at last ?"

Qoth little Peterkin.

"Why that I cannot tell", said he,

"But twas a famous victory"

Robert Southey
(The Battle of Blenheim)

Further reading:

- (1) Defeat into Victory Sir William Slim Cassel
- (2) The Retreat from Burma 1942 J.Lunt Collins
- (3) Not ordinary men John Calvin Leo Cooper
- (4) Burma-The turning point I.L.Grant Zanpi
- (5) Burma-The Longest War 1941 -45 L. Allen Dent
- (6) Ball of Fire- the story of the 5th. Indian Division Antony Brett-James Gale & Polden
- (7) Quartered safe out here G. MacDonald Fraser Gale & Polden
- (8) From Kent to Kohima The Story of the Royal West Kents. Clarke & Tillott
Gale and Polden