

DESERT WAR RECOLLECTIONS of William Louis Mountifort Conner (1915-1997)

Transcriptions of WLMC's dictated memoirs of his World War Two experiences as a tank commander in North Africa. They cover, unedited, his army training, travel to Egypt, battle preparations, the Battle of Alamein and pursuit of Axis troops across North Africa, hospital and convalescence, officer training in Palestine, becoming an Army Education Officer in Egypt then Cyprus – all against the background of his being part of the Oxford Group network. He ends by reading an extract from Penelope Lively's Moon Tiger, which he believed summed up life in the tanks better than anything.



Corporal William Conner at the Royal Armoured Corps training centre in Bovington, Dorset, 1941

Training [Tape 1 00:00]

World War 2 began on Sunday September 3rd 1939. The Prime Minister spoke to the nation at 11 o'clock in the morning on the radio, and almost immediately all the London air raid warning sirens sounded off. I well remember walking casually, if not entirely slowly, towards the nearest air raid shelter, and wondering if this heralded the arrival of some monstrous form of new warfare, with new weaponry of disruption. But in fact nothing happened, and the all-clear sirens went off some moments later.

I'd been working at the headquarters of Moral Re-Armament since I came down from Cambridge in 1937 and was presently involved a good deal with the publishing department. And now, in the first year of the war, I continued this, and also with Tom Shillington and others undertook the air raid caution duties in that part of Berkeley Square where we had our various buildings. This was during the first Blitz period. Like some 30 odd others engaged in the same work, we were classified as doing work of national importance, and our call-up to the armed forces was deferred. For me this

ended in July 1941, when I made my way to the Royal Armoured Corps training centre at Bovington Camp in Dorset.

We were a motley array of individuals who arrived on that day, about 30 of us, eyeing each other with curiosity and some suspicion. And eventually we were herded into a very large barrack room and designated '98B Squad'. The process then began of separating us rapidly from all traces of civilian life. The first step was to march like some very out of place group of scarecrows in this very military area of military buildings and military personnel down to the quartermaster stores, where we were issued with ill-fitting battledress, boots with an equal lack of concern about their fit, much hairy underwear, and after this process, and a close-crop haircut, it was amazing how quickly one began to find oneself being separated from any trace of identity or image that one may have had about oneself, or that anyone else may have had about oneself, one hoped.

Back to the barrack room, and then there began some weeks of rapid movement, from barrack room to gym, with pretty effective, rather sadistic sergeant-major instructors. Back again to lecture rooms on all sorts of subjects: wireless, gunnery and so on. Short pauses to visit the NAAFI for a cup of tea. But broadly speaking it was quite a hectic existence from dawn till dusk, and before very long one had got the reflexes required whereby one jumped to salute anything with a pip on its shoulder that moved within about 100 yards of one. And to submit oneself to a regime of personal discipline and of acceptance of military behaviour every second of the day when one was outside the barrack room.

Of course there was great comradeship, created largely by a common sense of exposure and vulnerability, which was particularly true with the square-bashing, which in a way was quite fun. But one always had to keep ones wits superbly about one, out of sheer fear of landing oneself with an extra parade or fatigue in an already extremely full and busy and exhausting life. But there was lots of humour, and the drill sergeants were amusing. Like the man who comes up behind you and blasts into the back of your neck:

"Are you a poet?!" And you reply "No."
 "Take one place forward. Do you feel anything?" "No."
 "You must do, I'm standing on your hair! Get a haircut!"

Gradually we came to more technical training, on wireless and gunnery, and the whole driving and mechanical side of dealing with tanks. But I think the main marvel of those first few weeks was the speed with which every sense of an individual having any rights or liberties or indeed reason for existence other than to react to the requirements of the army machine were entirely removed. And I suppose one could say one became the complete totalitarian man in an incredibly short period of time.

The second great memory one has of this time was the all-pervading sense of humour of the ordinary English working man. I think that this was the ever-present lubricating factor in what would otherwise have been an extremely friction-obsessed period. Whether it was by night or by day, or in the midst of some frightful night operation in the rain, it was the capacity to see the humorous side of the situation that enlivened and enlightened everything. And this was something, together with a close exposure to a very wide range of human nature that perhaps one wouldn't normally get in life, these were the great things about this period at a training unit.

Journey to the Middle East

The Firth of Clyde into the setting sun, the craggy mountains of Arran to the north, and I suppose every one of the thousands of troops on board the different ships began to wonder whether or when they would ever see the shores of Britain again.

The next six weeks as we sailed away to an unknown destination were filled with episodes, some dramatic, frequently macabre, perhaps more than anything else, excruciatingly humorous. The North Atlantic was full of submarines, and the convoy had in constant attendance a low-flying sub-spotting Sunderland flying boat. We went way out into the Atlantic in the direction of the Azores at first, and looped round later towards West Africa. A 48-hour stop in Freetown Harbour was of great interest. I remember the little bum boats full of the local population surging out to surround the different ships as they laid anchor, and the most extraordinary things written on these canoes. I remember one had written on the side *I love the God* and on the other *F*** Hitler*. And these boats were full of divers who would plunge down into the murky deep after any *sou* of a coin. Their eyesight was so good that they quickly spotted a Glasgow tanner, which in fact was a copper coin wrapped in silver paper, and refused to go after it.

After 10 days of living in one's clothes it was pleasant to strip off and get out out in the tropical heat into a monsoon-like downpour, which enveloped the whole place for an hour or two.

Some days further down the coast the ship was rocked by a shattering explosion, which turned out to be the ship behind us running into a mine, and was last seen heading in a maimed condition for the coast of Africa. By this time the sea was a deep blue, and the weather hot and sunny, and we rounded the Cape and finally put in at Durban.

The overriding memory of the whole voyage was of course the appalling, uncouth and uncomfortable and sordid conditions in this great bottom hold in which one lived. Where some hundred or more mess decks, a simple strip of table with a bench on each side, accommodating 9 men on each side – this became one's home, base, eating place, for the whole of the journey.

One was squashed in there, stripped to the waist, encased with sweating humanity. Meals were brought by one or other in turn in a bucket from the galley: a bucket of tea usually, and a bucket of some sort of skiddy (?). I well remember a miner Taffy Jones as he poured this slush into our mess tins that were passed to the end, describing the sheets of sweat pouring off the negro cook's brow up in the galley as he'd collected it – by way of giving us some kind of savoury incentive, I suppose. Of course one ate everything and drank everything in the two unwashed mess tins one possessed – tea in one, some kind of stew in the other, and whichever was emptier was passed back again for the last course, some kind of duff. These tins were washed in some sort of bucket of cold salt water, really quite the most unhygienic thing you can imagine.

Mess decks contained everything from old socks, endless cigarette ends, the whole place was enveloped in a permanent cloud of tobacco smoke. And at night, each man had his hammock and all his kit and everything else rolled up in a bundle. This was stored at the end of the hold, and when time to sleep came, each man got his hammock, selected a couple of hooks on the low steel ceiling and slung it up. So that by about 10 o'clock at night there was a complete ceiling about four foot off the floor of white bulging canvas. And apart from the breathing atmosphere which was

utterly foul, the language was of a most fantastically variegated sort, and once again the saving grace was the extraordinary, laughable flow of dialect and language and conversation and hyperbole that went on the whole time.

The duty officers who of course lived in officers' quarters somewhere on the surface were supposed to come down at mealtime and enquire at each mess deck if there were any complaints, but they soon gave up on this as the barrage of obscenity and negative comment was too much for them. The whole atmosphere must have been much like that of a Dickensian bedlam hospital, and as we were in the lower of the two main holds, the RAF having been allotted the higher one, one often wondered in the earlier stages of the voyage what the scene would have been if we had been hit by a torpedo.

One memorable evening I decided to hang my hammock near a broad ladder that went up to the next hold, and where there was a faint current of fresh air. And this I did rather earlier in the evening than anyone else. As I prepared to relax I pulled off my battledress, and slung it over some convenient wires that seemed to be passing nearby. And suddenly there was a blue flash, and all the lights in the ship went out. Well I fortunately was lying there in my hammock, and the most extraordinary happening unfolded in the next hour or two beneath me. Here we had 2000 men, all with their hammocks and belongings tied up in bundles and stuffed away in a store at the end of the hold, striking matches, cursing, swearing, stumbling, fighting, striving to find their hammock and hang it up and finally get into it, a process that took every bit of two hours. I really found my sides aching with the fantastic flow of language that accompanied this process. Nobody knew what had gone wrong, and nothing much was done to rectify the situation until the next day.

After two very memorable weeks ashore at Durban, we re-embarked, this time on the *Mauritania*, which, because of its speed and the remoteness from aircraft or submarines, was used unescorted for transporting large numbers of troops from South Africa up to the Middle East.

Some days out of Durban we were approaching the Equator, and the heat and humidity became very great. One was constantly in a state of sodden and prickly discomfort. Going up the Red Sea it seemed as if this great grey, sluggish, undulating piece of water was just smouldering like molten lead. At Bashira (?) we shipped off one poor unfortunate chap who succumbed to heat-stroke. Tied up in his hammock, and with minimal ceremony, he was dropped over the back.

Arrival in Cairo [Tape 1. 17:48]

Finally we arrived at Port Tewfik at the southern end of the Suez Canal, and took the train to Cairo. I recorded in my diary at the time the thrilling and rather unreal sensation of entering the outskirts of Cairo for the first time – and little did I realise that I was going to get to know this great city so well in the years after the war.

To see Cairo first as a troop arriving in a foreign country does not of course give it a very fair chance. We were trucked out to the old Turkish barracks in Abassieh, and here in the very ancient stone barrack rooms we were issued with the usual three biscuits or square bits of mattress on which to sleep on the concrete floor. Little did we know that every crack in the ancient plaster wall had from time immemorial been inhabited by colonies of ladybird-size bugs. At night when the lights went out the men were looking forward to their first night's sleep on terra firma.

At first all went well. Then, after a few moments, bedlam broke loose. Matches began to be struck, accompanied by obscenities fierce and foul. The bugs had come. Out they marched, they crawled all over one, and one's arms and legs, waddling hither and yon. Great pea-size beasts, that fastened on you and sucked your blood. Soon everyone was shaking blankets and trying to squelch the monsters with their boots. I eventually killed 29 on my own person, and then finally decided it was a hopeless task and went to sleep. In fact they did very little damage, made very small punctuations to most people, but one or two men who were highly allergic to these things walked around the whole night, and didn't sleep at all. There was no real remedy short of burning down the whole block, which of course today has been done.

Mark you, we were innocents abroad. Later one discovered how to defend oneself. The best method I found was to sleep on the verandah outside on a folded blanket and to surround myself completely with a little wall of DDT.



Stationed in Cairo

The next few weeks in Abbassieh Barracks was an acclimatisation period made up of doing guard duties, lectures, short courses in gunnery and wireless and mechanics, but this mainly occupied the mornings. By the afternoon one was able to find ways and means of slipping off into Cairo.

Here of course was an absolute wonderland. Cairo was quite different from its present state. The population was much less, social life was much stratified. The streets were full of allied troops from Britain, but also New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. The Gezira Club was really a great British country club with its swimming pool and bars and so on. The shops were quite fascinating.

The people were tremendously friendly, but of course one only met the shopkeepers and shoeshine boys, and was quite unaware of the professional classes of Egyptians, many of whom, perhaps very cultivated people who'd been educated at Western universities, would be jostled off the pavement

by some boorish louts from the British Army. And no doubt the presence of the European forces was very much resented by many people in the country, but one wasn't aware of this because one was in communication with a sector of the population who were only too delighted to take one's pay off one for anything from a postcard to various forms of precious stones alleging to have originated from the pharaoh's tombs in Upper Egypt.

The sun shone, and the atmosphere was gay, and spirits high in Cairo in those days. There were three main categories of British and allied servicemen there. Firstly those at the General Headquarters, the main centre for the army's activities in the whole Middle East theatre, was located in the centre of Cairo. It carried a series of long tails behind it, of intelligence people, secretaries, civilian personal assistants, staff officers of all sizes and ranks. They lived a fairly comfortable life with air-conditioned offices in some cases, and the Club in the afternoon.

Then there were the newly-arrived troops who poured into Cairo from the big camps outside the city, like ourselves. And the third group were those who'd been up in the Desert for a couple of weeks or months and who'd come back for a week or ten days' leave.

Alexandria was much the same, although there of course the proportion of personnel spending their leave there was greater than of those in Cairo. But the mingling of men who only the day before had been up in the forward positions in the desert added a certain realism to the scene and probably heightened the sense of gay abandon and life that we had in Cairo and Alex in those days.

During these weeks of waiting at the Royal Armoured Corps Depot at Abbassieh, we were liable to be called on to provide drivers for various chores that arose. One I remember was when the first 100 jeeps to arrive in the Middle East from America had to be conveyed from Tel El Kebir in the Canal Zone, across the Delta, and up into the Western Desert where here they had to be distributed among the units there.

There was a long wait when we arrived at this distribution centre in Tel El Kebir, and partly I imagine after the frustration of the endless waiting without any information or instruction, I decided to have a sleep in the sun. I woke up to discover that all the other vehicles had been off to the pumps to fill up - except me. And the whole column was about to move off! I rushed off to tank up, and rushed to the gates of this ordnance depot, and asked which way the column had gone. The idiot at the gate, intentionally or otherwise, pointed me evidently in the wrong direction. So I shot off at high speed, away from the column I was supposed to be part of! After driving some miles I realised I must be on the wrong track, so recovered my trail and set off in the other direction! It was quite a hectic day, roaring across the roads and through the villages of the Delta, trying to get some sort of information in Arabic, which at that time I knew not one word, as to where the rest may have gone.

By some miracle I caught up with the rest of the group somewhere west of Alexandria. We proceeded up the desert road and began to run into the most horrifying columns of trucks, vehicles, tank transporter, every sort of mobile equipment which was roaring eastwards. We didn't know of course that in fact Tobruk had fallen, Rommel had made his big push up to the Alamein line, and there was considerable doubt as to whether it would be possible to hold him there. So units were retreating towards Alexandria, helter-skelter, at times four columns abreast, two on the road and one on the sand at each side.

Meanwhile we were trying to proceed up the other way. Finally we handed over the jeeps, and were instructed to pick out any vehicle from a huge vehicle park, whether it was a vast Diamond T tank transporter or a staff car, and simply drive east.

It was a horrifying shambles, and a moment in the war which certainly we cannot have been very proud of. In the event Auckinleck managed to stem Rommel's advance, and of course the Alamein Line did mark the furthest east that the Germans ever came.

On another occasion we had to go out and help a company of Sudanese transport drivers who had come with their vehicles on railway flats all the way up from Khartoum to Cairo, and needed help in driving off the flats, down the ramps and onto terra firma.

One amusing thing we discovered was that the battery on every single one of these trucks was absolutely flat as a result of the driver having spent the whole journey up from Khartoum honking the horn at all peasants and other persons they passed on the way.

Joining the 8th Kings Royal Irish Hussars in the desert *[Tape 1. 30:27]*

Eventually a group of us were posted up to a tank reinforcement regiment located 30 or 40 miles up towards the Western Desert, and after some time bivouacking there I was contacted one day by Colonel Cutty Goulburn and invited, for the first and last time during my army career, rather than ordered, to join the 8th Kings Royal Irish Hussars.

This was a regular regiment as opposed to a territorial one, and largely composed of old sweats from the mounted days. The 8th Hussars, whose battle honours go way back to the Peninsula War, and the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, had been out in Egypt with horses up to and at the outbreak of the war, and were part of the original Wavell force of Desert Rats. They'd been through some fairly decimating operations like Sidi Resegh, Bir Hakeim and such like battles and were re-forming and drawing in a lot of reinforcements such as myself. In fact, during this re-forming period, a composite regiment had been formed, with 'A' Squadron 8th Hussars, and 'B', 'C' and 'D' Squadrons of the 4th Hussars.

'A' Squadron provided the forward screen for the regiment, and formed part of the 7th Armoured Division, commanded at that time by General Harding. Shortly after I joined them, the Squadron took up a task on the southern end of the Alamein Line in the region of Hemeimat down towards the Qattara Depression, and our job was to take up positions during the day on the escarpment, and hold down position overlooking a broad wadi that ran for some two miles across to rising ground on which the Germans and Italians were located.

At night we would move back and leaguer [*desert war term for tanks parking in defensive formations overnight*] some few miles behind the front line, giving way to the infantry, usually the Rifle Brigade, who came up and occupied the ground and did patrols during the night. Obviously tanks were no use at all for that sort of job at night-time.

Night in the desert had an extraordinary attraction. It's quite hard to explain. The desert itself was so vast, clean, sometimes awesome. At night of course it had its own peculiar feel: jet dark sky, with bright stars, and pleasantly cool.

The companionship and camaraderie between the troops in the desert was something quite unique, I think. There were no women of course. And every man helped the next one. Life was simple. Rations were simple. There was always a slight spice of danger which made one dependent on one another. One lived with the other members of one's tank crew. The tank was one's home. And one returned to leaguer at night, and all the vehicles formed up in a square, outward-looking. And you slept beside the tank trucks, ready to move at a moment's notice if a surprise attack should arise during the night.

Morale was maintained by every man, from the officers right through taking 20 minutes at a listening post where you set off at an angle from the four corners of the leaguer and marched out 200 paces and there stood stock still, listening. And the eeriness of the desert at night really burnt into one's bones. One seemed to imagine people crawling through the darkness at one, and the 20 minutes seemed an eternity!

By day the heat was considerable. The tanks used to get very hot. People would say you could fry an egg on the hull of a tank at midday. You certainly couldn't bear your hand upon it. But it was a dry heat. Clothing was minimal. Life was simple. The main unpleasantness was probably the flies, which swarmed in myriads of millions, breeding no doubt on the corpse-strewn minefields that scattered the desert. In fact they really were impossible to cope with: large flies, small flies, sticky flies, sand flies.... If you brewed a mug of tea it was impossible to drink the stuff without drinking two or three drowned flies at the same time, even if you kept your hand firmly over the top.

Desert sores were another minor inconvenience. If you scratched your hand or your elbow or your knee it turned into a poisonous wound and wouldn't heal. This could be something to do with the diet probably.

But in general, life was exceedingly enjoyable. There always seemed to be enough of the unexpected and possibly hazardous to prevent it becoming boring. At one point we had a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery with 25-pound field guns working with us, and they would retire to a leaguer as darkness began to fall, as we did. On this occasion, one of these guns being towed by a heavy quad vehicle bogged down in some soft sand, and my squadron leader ordered me to fix a tow rope on them and tow them out. Eventually I had to tow them the whole way back to their leaguer by which time it was dark, and I had to then set off across the blank, black desert to discover, somewhere in the unknown, my own leaguer.

This proved an almost impossible task. I constantly stopped and listened and peered into the darkness, trying to follow various bearings and stars. Finally at one point when we'd stopped and switched off to listen, I was walking around and I thought I could see vehicles looming up in the distance. So I walked towards them to try and find out if they were German or British. Soon to my relief I began to hear words in English, or at least Scottish. So I went forward and discovered they were the Scots Greys with whom I was not at all popular, for on this night of all nights a German attack had been expected, and one tank roaming about in the stillness of the night must have sounded at least like an armoured division on the move. It was a most unwelcome intrusion. However, they were able to set me on course, returning to my own regiment, who again were fairly apprehensive as we approached, and the welcome we got was fairly mixed.

Navigation in the desert was a particular art, one that I never mastered very well. Upon it depended whether one made contact with one's second échelon of transport, who were bringing up rations, ammunition and petrol. If one didn't succeed in meeting them at the right map reference after dark, one went without food or fuel for the next day.



The Battle of Alamein (23 October – 11 November 1942)

[Tape 1. 39:55]

The Battle of El Alamein began at 22.35 hours on the **23rd October 1942**. This was the moment when the gigantic artillery barrage broke out, marking the onset of the battle. All through the day the gunner, wireless operator and driver in my tank were all working hard on last minute checks, and I as the tank commander had to get map references and names of different lines of arrival and departure, and the code names of minefields etc. china-graphed onto our map.

At one point a printed leaflet with a message from the GOC [*General Officer Commanding*] was brought round, saying the “the eyes of the world are upon us”, and that no man was to fall into enemy hands so long as he had a weapon and his life.

Later on the crew's rum ration came round, and then as dusk began to fall we got the signal to form up in line ahead. I quote now from a diary that I kept later, when in hospital, and in which I recorded what I could remember of this particular phase.

“After darkness had fallen, and when we were making our way out to the gap that had been raised by the Sappers in our first minefield, code-named ‘Nuts’, a gigantic artillery barrage crashed out. Ceaseless flashes kept the sky lit up, and one heard a constant service of shells go whining over our heads. We seemed to have entered a deafening, reverberating bedlam. I lost all sense of direction. Gunflashes seemed to be behind, in front, and either side. But my main preoccupation was straining my eyes for the shape of the tank in front, for the troop officer was setting a spanking

pace, seemingly unaware of the blinding cloud of dust that his tank and every subsequent tank threw up in the eyes of those behind.

“One dare not pull out to the side, as the minefield lanes were very narrow. In the middle of the gap in the ‘May’ minefield a carrier had been hit and blazed merrily. The column stopped. I snatched an hour’s shallow sleep, lying close to the engine doors at the back of the tank, for the nights were now extremely chilly.

“The next minefield was the firsts of the two German ones, code-named ‘January’ and ‘February’. The Infantry and Sappers had done their job well, under the covering barrage of the 25-pounders, and we rumbled through ‘January’ safely. We were now beginning to pass knocked-out vehicles and the bodies of casualties. Soon we came up to the ‘February’ minefield, and anti-tank guns were firing.

“I told Sherry [Sherwood] my driver to close down his flap, and as night-driving through the slit-visor is almost impossible, I had to guide him as best I could on the intercom. A vehicle had been hit out ahead and was blazing furiously, and in its light one could see here and there the wounded, dead and dying. It also showed us up, and an 88-millimetre [*German anti-tank*] gun somewhere out there to the right in the minefield, was slamming away at our slow-moving column, nicely silhouetted, until the Sergeant Major’s tank, which was in front of the navigator, got a direct hit and the line halted.

“A moment or two later the second tank was knocked out. And one of the two thin-skins that came with us, a petrol truck, had its engine blown away. Soon a third tank was knocked out and providentially we got the order to turn about in the narrow space of a gap and come out again.

“By the time we got back behind some wadis into the no-man’s-land between the British and German minefields, it was daylight, and we had a welcome brew-up. But all had not gone according to plan. And we were not where we’d hoped to be by daylight.

“On the afternoon of the **24th October**, the order came to form up again, as we were going in to mop up the guns that had blocked our advance the night before. ‘If you can hear me driver, rev up!’ ‘Claud, is that rag out of the 37?’ ‘OK, tell Smithy to go over onto the intercom, and I’ll take over the A-set. Let’s have the Tommy gun up here.’ I wedge myself firmly into the turret, and unbuckle a bag of hand grenades on my right side. Binoculars and goggles hang round my neck, revolved loaded, holster unfastened. Two microphones in hand and the rustling mush of the earphones in my ears.

“Suddenly the mush cuts out. ‘Edward Nuts advance in subunit column. One front protection. Over.’ Then into the intercom mic: ‘Advance, Sherry, right of these slit trenches.’ And on the A-mic I answer Control in my turn, ‘1B OK. Off.’ With a roar like 10 Bentleys we jerk away, up out of the wadi, off towards Jerry’s positions. Soon the air seemed to be filled with the squealing swish of shells. I grabbed my tin hat and told Sherwood the driver to drop his flap. For some very lengthy minutes we continue ahead to get the number and positions of the guns. Then over the air the order comes to take up hull-down positions [*protective positions behind a ridge so only turret visible*], while the 25-pounders of the artillery further back try to dislodge the opposition.

“Meanwhile the 88mm and the 105mm shells keep swishing over to explode with their peculiar crashing, crunching grunt, flinging jagged half-pound splinters singing by one’s head or into the bedding rolls and steel water cans on the outside of the tank. Along with the high-explosive shells are the AP, armour-piercing ones. These are high-velocity, and will take a two-mile hop from a ricochet if they hit the ground. Major Jeff Harbord, squadron leader, got one of these, which smashed his wireless operator’s shoulder and took the gunner’s leg off at the thigh, and set the tank ablaze. Corporal Scrugham, his driver, fought like mad to get these men out, but the heat was intense, and his arms were burnt to the bone, and he had to give up. He was later awarded a Military Medal for bravery for this.

“Whenever a gun got a bead on us, I would have Sherwood the driver shunt us back and up on the right stick or on the left a few yards, just in time to see the plonk on the spot where we had been. Eventually, when we’d lost 15 tanks we got orders to come out, and we reversed from one position of partial cover to another. The tension was off for the time being.

“The crew were largely blind to all that’s going on during a battle, and they depend on the tank commander for information. One operator told me that they had a great sense of relief when, after hearing a crash outside the tank and looked up, they saw the tank commander’s head was still there. We were to meet these 88mm guns on quite a number of occasions. When being shelled, one looks at death and sees it swoop on one’s friends, and the first near-miss brings with it the strong temptation to lose nerve and to bolster one’s toppling equanimity with a panic prayer that it will be a quick end or a blank until one finds oneself in the peace and quiet of a hospital.

“Such were the moments of temptation. The unforgettable thing was the way in which all fear and tension totally disappeared as one took a grip of oneself and handed back one’s life to God. I often read Psalm 91: *He was my refuge and my fortress*. The awareness of this was much more confidence-giving than the armour-plating around me. I found myself relaxing immediately, and able to carry on coolly and more or less efficiently to a surprising extent. It surprised my crew too I think.

“After the initial failure to break through on the south, the main bulk of the 7th Armoured Division withdrew. But a vast scheme of dummies, a jammed gramophone and amplifier making the roar and clatter of tanks and other devices were employed in deceiving the enemy into thinking the big attack was coming again in the south. One night we had to move back, out of the range of their guns, and start the engines of our tanks at intervals every 20 minutes, revving up for three minutes at a time, just for sound effects. One morning three wild ducks flew over us and they were subjected to a barrage that a Stuka [*German dive bomber*] would hardly have survived. Tracer ball, armour-piercing, everything went up, but nobody hit a duck for their evening brew-up.

In pursuit of Rommel’s retreating forces

“On **November 3rd** we made off northwards, leading the 4th Light Armoured Brigade. The line had been breached near the sea and we had a special pursuit role now to pass through the gap and then loop round inland and return to the coast road with the objective of cutting off Rommel’s retreating forces. That night we saw the blue of the Mediterranean once again, and close-leaguered by the road a few miles east of El Alamein.

“Before light on **November 4th** our wild chase after Rommel’s columns had begun, and it was not to end until the last tank of the 8th Hussars in working order was handed over to the Horse Artillery for use as an observation post, somewhere just east of El Agela.

“As we moved off into line ahead, each roaring black shape lurching up onto the coast road, I was glad of the experience of work in the dark during the time we were on patrols in the south, for it needs concentration all the time not to lose touch with the tank in front, in the gloom and the churned-up sand. Of course there are no lights. Whereas there’s the equal danger of crashing into the tank in front if one forges along too close.

“After a few miles we turned south-west, leaving the road and heading for the boomerang track and for a time we got left behind as we had to stop and cut out, with giant wire cutters borrowed from some gunners, a tangle of barbed wire and telephone wire which had got well jammed into the driving sprocket bogies and tracks on one side.

“However the column had stopped for a quick brew-up a mile or two on, and we caught up with them again all right. We passed through the areas which had seen the heaviest fighting on the first days of the battle, where the Aussies and Kiwis and the 51st Highland Division had managed to work their way through the minefields, and open up lanes for the tanks to come up and engage Rommel’s Panzers. Mark 3s and 4s were still blazing with a dull red flare and dense diesel smoke like tramp steamers dotted here and there in an ocean of scrub and sand. Newly-abandoned gun positions with 88 mm guns and bigger calibre also were on all sides, and kit of every sort scattered in confusion, and the still unsearched dead lying contorted and impersonal in one’s path. One had a strange sense of all the poems and histories of battle and wars having come to life around one.

“The 8th Hussars Squadron was filling a reconnaissance role for the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, a role they continued to play until they’d only one tank left in running order. Troop by troop we were sent out to recce dead ground or to investigate unidentified vehicles and moving objects away on the skyline. Often we ran into the enemy’s rearguard covering positions and got shelled. Usually we’d turn inland and outflank them. Once or twice we stopped and waited for the 25-pounders behind to shift them out of our way.

“It was a great sight to see the whole desert, from horizon to horizon, one mass of armoured fighting vehicles as we swept across the broad stony wadis south of Frika (?). These days we often had no time to brew up a mug of chai, and we lived on the biscuits and bully that we could eat on the move. Whenever we stopped, the petrol wagon borrowed from the RAF came round and we topped up. We were unshaven and yellow-faced from the churned-up sand. This was a glorious freedom. They were sunny days, and every shred of bullshit was forgotten and everything was allowed that made for our fighting fitness. Three hours of sleep, less 20 minutes on guard, seemed plenty.

“In the early hours of one morning, after we’d moved out of leaguer and the daylight was beginning to come, we found ourselves passing by a unit of German transport trucks. They were all asleep! And it was most amusing firing the odd smoke shell into the back of these trucks, and seeing all these sleepy and surprised Germans come springing out from the backs of the trucks. We left them to be taken prisoner by the KRR (*KRRC Rifle Corps*) who were following behind in trucks.

“Sometimes we passed Bedouins, with their low, dark tents and herds of as many as 30 camels. They looked on placidly, looking exactly as Joseph’s brethren must have looked I suppose, as we searched their tents for German prisoners. There was a burnt-out Stuka [*German dive bomber*] lying near one of these encampments. Guns were firing and as the tanks roared by we waved a ‘Saida’ at these camel men and they seemed to look at us and to be thinking, “So this is what civilisation is.....?”

“At one point our troop was detailed to go off on a bearing and round up some enemy units which had been spotted. Away we went, and it was not long before we saw three groups of men in vehicles. Each of our tanks went for one group. As we bore down on a knot of men and their vehicles they put up their hands and Claud my gunner, taking no chances, put a burst of Browning [*machine gun*] fire over their heads. I think he was inclined to mow them all down, as a matter of fact. I grabbed my Tommy gun, but in fact there was no resistance.

“We searched them - 12 Germans and one Italian. Took their papers and Lugers [*pistols*] off them, and then got them all to pile onto the outside of the tank, leaving two to bring back the tracked vehicle and the cookhouse trailer which they had with them. These Germans were seemingly only 17 or 18 years of age and were obviously incredulous at our treatment of them. I think they expected us to machine-gun the whole lot of them. They were apprehensively anxious to know if we were Americans and if the tank was American. The Italian anyway seemed thoroughly contented. For him the war was ‘finito’.

“**November 6th to 7th** were days of nightmare battle with the elements: rain and bog this time. Cloudbursts lasting an hour or so soaked us, and the wind drove the rain so that it stung the face. Greatcoats were saturated in a short time. The wireless sets got wet and failed. And the desert rapidly became a quicksand. Tracks sank in and the tank bellied. We dug and slogged knee-deep, and the tank became mud-plastered inside and out. Tow-ropes were in constant use. The wheeled vehicles all got stuck even more than the tanks, particularly the three-tonners. And I must have towed about 30 of these out onto harder ground that day.

“The night of **November 6th** was one of the most unpleasant I’ve ever had. Leaguered in thick mud, our clothing was shocking, there was a lot of water in the tank, and the turret leaked all the time. All night through we sat, cramped and icy cold in the black, oily interior. A good lacing of rum and some tea just before darkness was one welcome thing.

“The weather had cleared when we arrived at the seaward track. And now we began to see the effects of the RAF’s bombing all along the roadside. When we reached the coast road and turned west we speeded up, as the road surface itself seemed to have been hit very rarely by bombs, and we were able to bowl along, sometimes at 40 miles per hour.

“At Sidi Barani Jerry was making a stand, so we took off inland and had some exciting times that day dodging the 88mms which seemed to be just behind the cover of each new rise that we reached. That morning we got a direct hit from an AP shell, that had only struck the ack-ack [*anti-aircraft*] gun-mounting and put it out of action. Another six inches or so and it would have had my head off. Soon after we had to wait for the 25-pounders behind to shell some 88mm guns that were holding us up and we were able to get down in a wadi and have a hasty brew-up, using a still-burning Italian lorry to boil our water on.

“The chase to Sollum and up Halfaya Pass and then on to the final blow-up just short of Dherna was a terrific and exhilarating time. We were working along the coast road and advancing at a good pace all day, marking minefields and searching huts and dug-outs near the road.

As darkness began to fall we were approaching within a few miles of the Halfaya Escarpment behind Sollum, and reports came through there were still some retreating enemy columns at the foot of the hill. So we charged ahead through the darkness along the track at the side of the road and on the road. At one point I only just managed to haul back from crashing into a long and deep concrete sunken tank trap that had been run out each side of the road. But it was like some massive great mechanised Quorn or Pytchley Hunt, clattering along through the dark, and the fact that we got the Italians’ intercom wavelength all over ours gave one a tremendous feeling in the dark that we were right on their tail, and they certainly sounded panicky enough!

“In fact they just beat us up the hill [*Tape 1 ends*] [*Tape 2. 00:00*] And when two of our tanks in the gloom ran over Teller [*anti-tank*] mines lightly-covered in sand it was deemed time to stop and leave it for the night.

“Next morning at first light our troop went into the village of Sallum, a nice little white seaside hamlet in the distance which proved to be deserted and pretty dirty on closer inspection. In fact, I believe we’re recorded in the war history as having captured Sallum on this occasion, though it wasn’t a difficult process.

“Then we re-formed at the foot of Halfaya Pass because we discovered the Sollum hill had been mined half way up and was impassable, and began the ascent up this narrow, craggy hillside track which zigzagged up about two or three hundred feet up onto the higher levels, which was quite a difficult thing to navigate with tanks. One had to direct the driver, on the Intercom, at every yard practically. Sitting in the tank and looking down, it looked as if the chasm below was practically underneath one’s off-side track. The driver of course could see nothing but a patch of sky above him at that angle, so one had to keep telling him which stick to pull in order to get round these loops and zigzag bends.

“On each side were these piles of Teller mines that the Sappers had managed to lift, and altogether we were fairly relieved when we got to the top. It was a marvellous view looking back away down the coast road across Sidi Barani as far as sight would reach.

“On from here, past Fort Capuzzo, with its shattered pillars telling the to-and-fro tale of earlier battles in this area. We left Bardia and Tobruk behind for others to clear and carried on inland in pursuit of the retreating German columns.

“We passed through the famous ‘Knightsbridge minefield. It’s possible even that my tank was the first vehicle of the 8th Army to get west of this at that particular moment, because I happened to find a place where there were tracks that had passed through the minefield safely and out the other side, and by following them closely we found ourselves west of the minefield and were able to bring the whole of our following column and squadrons through behind us.

“Eventually we dropped back over the escarpment at Gizala past the aerodrome at Tamimi, and onto the coast road again, west of Tobruk. And as we came down we could see columns of German MT [*military transport?*] in the distance, scurrying away to the west.

“The roadside here was littered with abandoned vehicles. One lorry with an 88mm in tow, which had been set on fire, blazed merrily, and the petrol tank at any moment we were passing could blow up. Everywhere there was rather tempting loot lying around: tool boxes and clothing, tinned food, all over the place. Trucks hewed over on their side with all their contents splayed out. All sorts of Nazi insignia and bits of cutlery with swastikas on it. It was very tempting to stop when one saw a pair of binoculars or an accordion by the side of the road. But in fact we were chasing breathlessly onwards, and couldn’t afford to stop.

“And everywhere we had to watch out for the mines that the Germans were leaving behind, all round the road, on it and beside it. Sergeant-Major Kirkham was heading the column as navigator, and trying to watch over every rise in the ground that we didn’t run unexpectedly on a German position. And my job, coming behind him, was to spot and mark the mines – any mines that I thought had been left on the road. I must have stopped and marked two or three dozen of these with Jerry tin hats or bottles or anything else that lay near so that the following tanks didn’t go over them.

“In one place the tarmaced area of the road was completely covered with sand, and it was impossible to see what might have been buried in it. And suddenly we saw two or three Bedouins coming up, and with many *mush quoises* and other expressive signs they pointed me out half a dozen spots in the loose roadside sand where they had watched in the distance the enemy putting down mines. So I was duly able to mark them and rewarded them with a few packets of army-issue V-cigarettes, which they seemed to be very delighted with.

“On the road on a level with the Gulf of Balbao, that is about a day’s running before Derna, as we were making good speed and had just passed the fresh track-marks of some Mark 4s, we spotted a large circular patch of sand in the middle of the road, and it looked so obviously a mine that I decided simply to wave and point at it, and press on regardless. It seemed almost impossible to me that either tank track could go over this thing in the centre. However, the second in command, Harari, contrived to run his tank over this mine and it blew them off the road. It put them out of action, and he then insisted on taking over my tank and left me with his crew beside the road with the advance finished as far as we were concerned.

“Incidentally, two days after they left us, the ‘A’ Squadron leader Jeff Harbord was killed by German fire, and finally, at the entry of Benghazi there were only three 8th Hussar tanks left. Mine was in fact the first into Benghazi, though unfortunately I wasn’t with it.

“When I parted from my tank, we had been running at a good distance ahead of the main body of the army coming up behind, and now we sat with Harari’s crew by the roadside and saw nothing coming up from the east for about two days. Our only visitors were a couple of long-bearded Kiwis in a jeep loaded up with all sorts of food (German, Italian and British), petrol, and everything else. They came swanning along, evidently fighting their own war entirely independently. They told us they hadn’t seen their own unit for about a month and didn’t wish to. They offered us anything we needed and pushed off merrily in chase of the Germans.

“In fact we found a fairly new French truck that had been run off the road, all the electric wiring cut, the carburettor removed and buried in the sand, and by prodding cautiously around and hoping we didn’t step on a mine, I succeeded in finding the carburettor. So we cleaned that out and refitted it. A blown-out petrol lorry was with us, so we had plenty of petrol to fill it up with. We reconnected the wires to the battery and got the thing on the road. We then proceeded to equip this truck with furniture from a mobile Italian officer’s mess, and food, petrol tins, and all sorts of things we could find in the area around, and proceeded to make our way in a leisurely manner down the coast road eastwards, towards the oncoming army.

“As soon as vehicles began to appear of course we realised that we were in an enemy vehicle heading towards them! We found some paint somewhere and succeeded in plastering a great red, white and blue RAF roundel on the front of the truck in the hope that this would mean something to our people as they came along.

“In fact we had a marvellous week or so entirely on our own, swanning around, spending the night on the beach, and apart from the discomfort of mosquitos in some places, it was really a most pleasant interlude as the war passed on behind us. Eventually we were directed towards our regimental headquarters, which were back in the Tobruk area, and had reluctantly to give up the vehicle and our life of leisure.

Shipped from Tobruk to Cairo, then Palestine and Cyprus *[Tape 2 10:31]*

“It was at this time that I found I had a violent and fierce sore throat, and was put in the regimental ambulance and finally removed to a casualty clearing station at Tobruk, where General Freyberg came and peered at me and all the others waiting there. We were offloaded onto the first ship to come into Tobruk since its relief, a hospital ship, and on this we were conveyed back to Alexandria, and from there by hospital train to Cairo, and thence to the army hospital at Helmia, Cairo.

“One of the doctors at this hospital was Lance Montgomery, an old friend, and also Captain Richard Doll, who later became the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. The fact was I had diptheria. A lot of people contracted this in the desert, presumed carried by the flies that buzzed around the desert sores on one’s hands and knees. And after some weeks I was shipped off again by hospital train across the Canal into Palestine and spent more weeks at the 23rd Scottish Hospital at Sarafand [near Jaffa / Tel Aviv].

“And so this ended an unusual and rather memorable episode of one’s life. It took me a long time, pondering in hospital and gradually catching up with the news of the world to realise it had been a very significant moment in history in fact. And probably the first moment that it began to dawn on me one that this was so was one night in the desert when, after dark, I heard a radio switched on somewhere, and I realised that some of the Signallers had a No. 19-wireless set at the back of a truck which was picking up the BBC.

“So I joined them and listened eagerly to what was coming over, and to our absolute incredulity we heard reports of a colossal victory and battle in the desert, and that bells were chiming on the church towers all over Britain, and that Churchill had ordered aircraft to go up and spell out in smoke the names of the regiments that had taken part in this famous victory! One could hardly

credit it! The incredible confusion and shambles and to-ing and fro-ing and activity of the last 10 days had really amounted to an event that would go down in history!”

Convalescence in Palestine, and Training in Cyprus, Palestine and Cairo *[Tape 2. 14:15]*

The ward I was in at Sarafand was a big one of 60 beds, and a cheerful place. The nurses were good fun, and most of the patients were getting better, although we had every ailment and disease there. Some were bad. One night a man died in the next bed to me, suffering I think from meningitis.

We used to send the walking patients out into the orange plantation outside with our pillowcases, to bring in sacks of large Jaffa oranges which were there for the taking, as there was no export of these fruits during the war.

Eventually I was posted off to the convalescent centre at Nathanya, on the Mediterranean coast, for a week or two. And then down to Port Said, where I had to wait at the transit camp there for the boat that plied between Port Said and Cyprus. Finally I rejoined the 8th Hussars who were located at a village called Condaire [?], on the road between Nicosia and Farmagusta. They were there with armoured cars doing a training period in more or less European conditions (with mountains, roads, trees and things), preparatory to returning to the Second Front that was opening in Europe shortly. After some weeks there I was posted to Cairo and thence to the Middle East OCTU [Officer Cadet Training Unit] at Acre, again in Palestine.

“This was the most fearful sweat, because by this time it was summer 1943, and I had six months there of extremely rigorous training. The Middle East theatre of war had to produce its own officers from this point onwards, and most of the cadets were Sergeant-Majors, Sergeants and old sweats generally who’d survived the desert campaigns and many were very desperate to get commissions before the war ended. The staff were equally determined to put us all through a very drastic process of sifting out.

Eventually this all ended, but not before I’d had the opportunity to go round Palestine a little bit, visit Jerusalem, and get the feel, the sullen feel, of the underlying (but suspended for the duration of the war) bitterness that existed between the Arab Palestinians and the population of Jews who had already begun to arrive and settle when war broke out.

Back in Abbassieh Garrison outside Cairo for the final Armoured Corps training of the OCTU, we were one day informed that the number of tank officers required was now less than previously anticipated, war having moved up into Europe where tanks were less crucial than in desert warfare. We were all invited to go off to the Infantry Depot and put in a few more weeks learning how to be Infantry officers.

This I felt was not the right plan for me. I felt physically unfit to be an Infantry officer, especially after the intensive OCTU period preceded by the long spell in hospital. By chance, a few days before, I’d heard about the existence of the Army Education Corps from my friend Robin Mowat. I decided to apply to be transferred to this.

Army Education Officer 1943-5 *[Tape 2. 19:13]*

The officer who saw me expressed no hope that such a transfer could be obtained, but said he was willing to investigate. And after only a few days I found myself commissioned and posted to be the Education Officer for the Royal Armoured Corps School at the Abbassieh Garrison.

The following year was spent in this job, which was extremely interesting. There were many others that I knew here in the Garrison: Harry Roke, Matt Manson and others. And there was a useful job to be done, in training regimental education officers – I had 80 of these – in how to give lectures and arrange discussions particularly on questions to do with current affairs, the course of the war, and more especially the post-war problems, and the sort of rehabilitation that was already being thought of as important for the troops before they returned home and became demobilised. I soon discovered that most of the other officers and sergeants in the Army Education Corps – in the Middle East anyway – were people with some sort of teaching experience, and many had a Marxist orientation, which was partly as a result of having run up against one or two of these in the Education Department at General Headquarters.

At the beginning of 1944 I was posted to Cyprus as Education Officer for the troops in Cyprus. And here again I had a most enjoyable nine months in what was almost a sinecure from a military point of view, as there were very few troops there by this time. But it was vastly enjoyable, and involved a good deal of touring this fascinating island and getting to know the people there.



Captain Conner, Education Officer in Cyprus

In the autumn of 1944 application for my early release was made in England on compassionate grounds in connection with the death of Clarence Milray, whose affairs I was in some way involved with, and to my immense surprise I suddenly received, in my office in Nicosia, a telegram ordering me to get myself to Cairo and prepare for immediate reposting to Britain.

It must have been early in 1945 when I flew into a fogbound Britain. We travelled from Cairo in four Liberator planes which were still fully-equipped with their armaments, and we had to sit in the empty bomb bays as these huge great birds flew slowly, and at a great, perishingly cold height. We stopped overnight at Bari in Italy. I remember seeing starving children there rushing out and licking up flour that fell off a truck as it rattled over the cobbles. And finally we arrived in the dark over some military airport in Northamptonshire with of course none of the modern-age safe landing procedures. We missed crashing into one of the other Liberators by literally inches as we circled round in the dark in the blind.

Thereafter followed a short period as Education Officer in North East District, stationed in Blackburn in Lancashire, before demobilisation.

Reflections on wartime experiences [Tape 2. 23:55]

I suppose when one looks back on the five years of the war, one tended to think of the tremendously exhilarating and fulfilling and satisfying aspects of it all, rather more than the extremely unpleasant sometimes horrifying aspects of it.

But I think most of those who came back from the war did feel that it had been a period of their life that they looked at as a special period, one they would not have missed. Certainly in my case, the fact that I'd discovered and got from MRA a sense of having a great purpose for one's life, and being helped to find the ways and means whereby one can co-operate with that purpose and, however much one fails, can have a continuing sense of following a thread through life – all this I think greatly enhanced one's experiences in the army.

The mass of people who used to attend, for example, the 8th Army Reunions at the Albert Hall in the years immediately after the war I think is evidence that the ordinary man really looked back on those days as a time of greatness. One certainly had all the time, and at certain times intensely, the feeling of being involved in an essential, united, worthwhile aim and purpose. One felt one was undergoing sacrifices and absences from one's family and home and so on for a real and meaningful end.

One certainly experienced a unity of purpose and a fellowships and a comradeship with the most unlikely people who one was constantly being thrown together with that is tremendously absent in the course of normal civilian life, and somehow I think is being sought after by the gangs who gather at football matches and shout and howl for some team, and try to form some sort of corporate identity, some sort of rather localised purpose and aim and ideal to follow.

[Incidentally, at these big reunions at the Albert Hall that Monty used to organise soon after the war for all the 8th Army people, he used to love to get some famous figure to make a speech. On this occasion I went with Ronald Plumstead and Robin Evans, and he had Ernest Bevin as a main guest. He'd been a big figure in the War Cabinet of course, and was now Foreign Minister, a former Trade Union leader and rather a pompous figure to be truthful. So he began his great speech recalling the glories of the war, and asked a rhetorical question, "What was it that brought us through those dark days?" – or something of the sort. And in the pause after this question, a little voice in the audience pipes up, "Eggs and bread!!".

Well of course the whole house collapsed in a great roar of laughter, and poor old Ernest Bevin didn't know what had happened or what he'd said, and silence couldn't be restored for some time. And of course every British troop knew the cry "Eggs and bread!" from every journey they'd ever made on a troop train or truck convoy round the Middle East, because the little *walads* would all come running up with their rather nice Egyptian flatbread and tiny hen's eggs, which you'd give them a piastre or two for. So this was rather amusing.]

Wartime friendships

The great regret of course is the failure to return of so many of the best of the youth of the country. And when one thinks of one's own personal friends like Tom Shillington and Geoff Currell and so on, and wonders what they might not have given the country, and the world even, had they come back. And there were so many tens and hundreds of thousands of them. All of that is probably the worst aspect of the whole thing as one looks back. And yet of course it's inevitably bound up in the concept of being ready and willing to sacrifice everything for a great aim and a great purpose - and for what I suppose most people believe was God's call to them at that particular moment of history.



Comrades in arms, Cairo 1941. Troopers in the Royal Armoured Corps.
Left to right: Tom Shillington aged 27, Derek Skey, William Conner aged 26

The Oxford Group/Moral Re-Armament network

Now before winding up this chronicle of wartime, which is getting rather long-winded, I want to finish by saying what a tremendous strength and zest and tingle it added to life to go into the army in the war with the knowledge of belonging to an ideological force of men and women, many of whom were joining their forces all over the world during this great conflict. They were committed

to a way of life based on the moral standards of Moral Re-Armament, and to striving to find some time every day before reveille, where possible, to be quiet, to maintain a life of the spirit and of perspective.

And many had adventured and shown great ingenuity in working it out under all sorts of extraordinary circumstances. And finally committed to the producing of a new world: a basis for a completely new civilisation when the war was over.

One had to create one's own team in every unit one got moved to, and of course there was tremendous ingenuity employed in linking up wherever possible with fellow committed friends, wherever one could find them. With wartime security, nobody could say where their units were, and it was always a struggle to make these links.

Not long after my arrival in the barracks at Abbassieh in Cairo, I was located by Geoffrey Currell, who'd seen my name on some list of arrivals when he was down at the HQ, and came and sought me out. And this was a tremendous boost, and we stuck together for the weeks that followed.

Then there were the Orams, Roy and Dulcie. He was a Colonel in the RAMC, and he would entertain us at his flat in Gezira, where there also lived various senior officers, and Jasper Masklin was one of the household, one of the famous conjuring family. In fact Jasper was the Camouflage Officer of the 8th Army.

And then in Cairo there was the flat of Garnet Lloyd, an English manager of Robert Hughes, a subsidiary of Mappin and Webbs, which existed at that time in Cairo. And he was an MRA man, and used his flat as a rallying point for all troops back on leave from the desert. Without this flat I don't know how we'd have all managed. I stayed there at times. Peter Marsh, with the RAF, was there at one time. Jimmy Irving came in from the desert with the 9th Lancers. Ronald Plumstead showed up one great day.

And then there were the South Africans in big numbers. Ennis Miller and May Hart with the women's services. She was PA to General Theram (?) at the time. And there was George Daneel, Ray Silberbar [spelling?] of course.

And over in Alexandria: Frank Abbott came in from the RAF station at Abukir. And there were several more homes there, notably those of the Burkhardts and Helen Dumreicher, where one always stood a chance of managing to cross with someone or other who was passing through or was back on leave. Anthony Barnes was at that time head of Barclays Bank in Egypt, and I remember he invited me to lunch one day at his very nice home there. And then there were people such as Derek Skey, Lance Montgomery, Jim Gardener, Jamie Miller, so many that came usually on their way from Italy or Malta or India.

Then there were the ones who've already been mentioned in the earlier story, such as Robin Mowat, who was Education Officer for the Cairo area at one time. And after that he was constantly passing through Cairo on his way to various postings in Benghazi and Beirut.

Matt Manson came out from Britain and was a gunnery instructor at the Abbassieh Gunnery School. So he and Harry Rooke, who was assistant-chaplain to the Garrison, and I formed a basic team there in Abbassieh when I came back as an Education Officer.



Dr Steve Lester and William on leave at the Burkhardt's country house in the Delta

Then back again to Alexandria, Steve Lester was at an army hospital just outside Alex and we had many interesting exploits together, including a memorable holiday together out on the Burkhardts' country estate in the Delta, where we rode, and raced, donkeys.

And at one time we had Dennis Foss in with his ship in the Alex docks, and after turning Steve's unit upside down he was discharged to me down in Cairo, where he created havoc in his unusual white naval uniform. He turned up at 1am in the mess I was in, woke up the intoxicated Commanding Officer who he discovered somewhere, and got a bed from him! He then tried to wake him up at six in the morning to share his practise of morning quiet times, which caused a great sensation.

And then David Phillimore was much in the area, in and out. He used to fly transport planes all along North Africa and out to the eastern areas (Iraq and so on). I remember one day when he came in. He was a Sergeant-Pilot at the time. He came into my office looking a bit gloomy and said he was on a charge for damage of property to the extent of £27,000, having crashed his plane on a flight down from El Uddin(?). He'd taken off too early and didn't see a wire fencing around the airstrip.

Others in and out of Cairo included Blanche Barrett and Grace Sewell, nursing sisters at various hospitals nearby. Rosemary Crawley appeared with the Wrens. And there were so many more who I've just forgotten for the moment to record.

All this kept one in touch, as did the constant flow of letters from the UK. Stephen Foot in particular used to keep in touch with all us service people. And this sort of linking process was going on all the

time, in Italy and right across Asia, and the American forces, and of course Europe. And it meant that, come the end of the war, there emerged from the occupying forces men and women trained in Moral Re-Armament who by this time had got to know something about the country in which they'd been operating, and were able to link up with the local inhabitants, and those who'd had contact with the work before the war, and could immediately get going on a post-war reconstruction programme.

It's interesting that in Cairo during this time those I've been mentioning were all of the generation of Burgess and Maclean, Philby and all these others who were in the 1930s at Oxford and Cambridge, looking for some way of changing the world and turning to communism. In Cairo there was an intelligence office dealing with what was going on in the Eastern Balkan countries and supplying Whitehall and the government with their information, particularly about Yugoslavia. Those in charge of that office, dealing with Yugoslavia were at that time Basil Davidson, a long-committed Marxist, and as his second in command James Klugmann, who'd become a communist at Cambridge and was later to become one of the Daily Worker and prominent in the post-war work of British communism. [Wikipedia note: *With the defection of [Vasili Mitrokhin](#), KGB archivist, in 1992 it was revealed that Klugmann was a [KGB](#) agent, under the codename MER, who was instrumental in recruiting the [Cambridge Five](#). He'd been at school and college with Donald Maclean, both joining the Communist Party while at Cambridge in 1933]*

Those two men saw to it, by manipulating the information that came through from Yugoslavia, that Churchill was forced to make the decision to support Tito rather than the other partisan group headed by Mihailovic, a right-wing royalist. Tito was a communist internationalist. But already in the early 1940s these two men with their commitment to a world ideology were thinking in terms of who was going to be in charge of Yugoslavia when the war was over. And that was their main concern in passing on information to Churchill upon which of course he acted, and the whole history of Yugoslavia was affected by these men.

And so the history books will record I suppose in the future the part played by the men and women who came from the universities in the pre-war period mostly, and affected things in the world during the immediate post-war years.

Of the many friends from one's schooldays, Cambridge, the time in the army itself, who never came back after the war, I think the three that I shall most look forward to meeting in some future life are Geoffrey Currell, Mike Sitwell and Tom Shillington.

They were three men who one felt were somehow ready to go on to something new. They were men of quite simple, basic faith. They'd had a simplicity and directness about what they believed and had experience in the life of the spirit, and were little cluttered with what people thought of them. And somehow they were men who just seemed ready to go.

Geoffrey had been one of the Oxford Group at Cambridge, and when he went down had drifted somewhat from his commitment. When the war came and he entered the army, he soon applied for a commission, and not being a particularly 'soldierly' character, and it being early in the course of the war, he got turned down. So by the time he'd been posted to Egypt he'd decided to live out the war in as near a civilian capacity as could be managed, and had got a job as a Lance-Corporal at the HQ in Cairo in charge of records and casualty details and so on of his regiment, the Royal Sussex, who were up in the desert at that time.

So when our paths crossed again in Cairo, and Geoff remade his decision to take on the fight for a new world, his old spark and zest returned, and before long (incidentally, having burnt a huge pile of pornographic magazines that he'd purveyed around the barracks), before long he had the thought to apply to go back to his unit and he joined them in the desert. After three weeks he was ordered back to base to do an officer's course because of his obvious leadership qualities, and later as a 2nd Lieutenant he was awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous bravery. And it was not long after that that he wrote to me enclosing a copy of a letter he'd sent to his widowed mother back in England, in which he told her that he'd had the clear feeling that he was going to be killed and that this was very much part of God's plan for his life, and she should not in any way mourn this. Well, it was a most amazing letter of which I still have a copy, in which he put a tremendous lot of deep and constructive thought for his mother and sister. In fact he was killed, behind the Anzio Beach landing in Italy, leading his men to the extracting of some Americans who'd got into trouble in Dellermat(?).

Tom Shillington had been at Trinity College Dublin. We'd worked together at Hays Mews for a year or two, joined up the same day as I did. He eventually landed up in a different regiment of the Armoured Corps, the Royal Tank Regiment, and was killed aged 28 on 4th November, 12 days into the Battle of Alamein. A sergeant I later met, who had actually buried him beside his tank, said that as tank commander, Tom had been trying to get his driver out of his driving seat after he'd been wounded. And Tom himself had been fatally hit while doing this.

Mike Sitwell was another friend, ex-Oxford, and we'd known each other well in the Hays Mews days. He went into the Gunners and was last seen taking off on a landing barge as it arrived up the beach on D-Day in Normandy. Whether he reached the shore or not isn't known. He was a casualty of the first day of the invasion.

Family members

Well here we are at the end of these rather rambling recollections of wartime. It would be interesting to have something of the same sort from Richard, Erica and Arthur, so we'd have a record of we four Connors who have survived the time of change in the world, and gone on well into our 70s as of now!

Erica spent the war in India and Burma and became for the duration part of the life of the British Raj.

Richard was appointed an instructor at Quetta Staff College and then saw active service in Burma and South East Asia, as CSO (Chief Signal Officer) of the 'Fighting Cock' (or 23rd Indian) Division. He came to the Middle East on a short visit, but I think I must have been in hospital in Palestine at the time. Richard was clearly a good officer and filled various commands after the war, and was the Military Attaché in Afghanistan. Possibly he may not have been ready to apply the sort of rigour and bloody-mindedness seemingly needed for the reaching of the highest commands.

Arthur, I suspect, and I were not very good soldiers! Though this didn't detract from the enjoyment of life in the army. I think I had the Oxbridge arrogance that doesn't believe detail and preparation are really important. It was much more convenient to believe that improvisation, and hopefully innate ability, to rise to the occasion should one come along, was really the essence of things.

This led especially at the OCTU to my nearly getting Returned To Unit more than once. As when on one occasion sleep overcame me during a sergeant's painstaking efforts to teach us the names and functions of obscure parts of a Browning gun. This sort of amateurism was nearly my undoing on one or two occasions, as when I told some captured Germans to get up on my tank in order to drive them back to a track where they could walk East, forgetting that I'd left some hand grenades on top of the turret. Fortunately my gunner, who was an old sweat, spotted this, and removed them. Otherwise our situations might have been pretty rapidly reversed at that point.



Bill and Arthur Conner in Cairo

Arthur I suspect at times treated the army with less than full ceremony. One day when all the troops were on high alert in England at the beginning of the War, everyone was confined to barracks nationwide because of an invasion scare. But Arthur was that day evening seen gliding through the Underground crowds at Piccadilly Circus, en route no doubt to the Palm Beach night club in Frith Street which he managed and had a part in until finally it was bombed.

In 1943 Arthur and I met in Cairo. He came over on leave from Algeria, where he'd been in the 1st Army advance into North Africa with the Reconnaissance Corps.

Anyway, I hope my reminiscing may prompt them to add more to the family archives.

APPENDIX [TAPE 3]

Concluding thoughts

As one looks back on life, unmistakable evidence of an underlying plan can be seen, usually unrecognised at the time. Often one has made inadequate or selfish decisions, but nevertheless an over-arching purpose, far bigger than oneself, seems to have prevailed.

When I landed at Port Tewfik at the southern end of the Suez Canal on 4th June 1942, I was part of a hoard of sweaty soldiery, pouring cattle-like off the *Mauritania* after weeks of blacked-out forging through the Atlantic and round the Cape (as the Mediterranean was closed to allied shipping).

I stood, stunned by the oven-like heat, and blinked at the exotic scenes and sounds and smells, and the desperate poverty, the barren desert and the lush villages. And I wondered about what horrendous thing lay ahead. The very last thing I had in my mind was the reason why we were there, namely the urgent need to deny Hitler's war machine the oilfields of the Middle East. For whoever held these would ultimately win the war.

As it turned out, the Battle of Alamein some months later ended that threat, as Rommel began his long retreat to Tunis. I was a tank commander in No. 1 Troop, 'A' Squadron, 8th Kings Royal Irish Hussars, which spearheaded the 4th Armoured Brigade of the 7th Armoured Division.

When the Squadron had been reduced to four tanks, being the junior tank commander, I had to give up my tank near Derna in Libya, and some time later was evacuated with diphtheria from Tobruk in a hospital ship, the first vessel out of Tobruk after its long siege had been relieved. Our destination then was the 23rd Scottish Hospital in Sarafand, Palestine.

The 8th Hussars went home to the UK to reform for Normandy, and I spent the next two years in the Middle East. Little did I know that these years in the Middle East were to lead to a return in 1955 to Cairo, to prepare for *The Vanishing Island* and the MRA force that moved with this show round the capitals of the world during that year.

And to the continuing involvement with the people and leaders and events in the Middle East which has continued for me up to this day.

The Battle of Alamein and the months that followed were an experience that was both unforgettable and exhilarating, and one that clarified for me what thereafter would be my life's commitment.

Post Script re other Desert War accounts

I think I must have read most of the books written about the war in the desert, including one or two written by Germans. Most are written by generals, war correspondents, military historians, and other pundits. The only two that I remember which gave a more worm's-eye view of the whole experience were *Desert Episodes* by George Greenfield, published right after the war by Macmillan, and *Diary of a Desert Rat* by R L Crimp, published by Leo Cooper and Pan Books. Both of these authors were infantry men.

I think for the best account of what war was like in the tanks out there I've discovered quite recently. It comes in the novel *Moon Tiger* by Penelope Lively, which won the 1987 Booker Prize, and is in fact not a piece of her writing at all, but scraps of a diary which she'd been sent fairly recently I believe by the sister of a former boyfriend of hers who was a subaltern in the tanks during the war, when Lively was a journalist there in Cairo. She publishes at the end of her novel one or two pages of his diary, and this is how it goes:

[Note from JMC transcribing this: Penelope Lively in fact wrote Tom Southern's diary herself from her scrupulous research at the Imperial War Museum and reading tank crew accounts. Lively did indeed live in Egypt during the war, but was still a young child at the time, and the book was researched and written in the 1980s. So the journalist in Moon Tiger is Claudia, the fictional protagonist of the book, not Lively herself.]

Moon Tiger by Penelope Lively

Abridged version of Tom Southern's diary in the penultimate chapter:

This written God-knows-where on a day in 1942. At an hour's notice to move off. So time to draw breath, have a brew-up. Fitter cursing over new tanks. Two delivered last night. Grants, which we haven't had, half the equipment missing, guns still swimming in oil. Not my headache though - our troops came through yesterday unscathed. Can't put down yesterday as it happened, what we did, who we met, who did what to whom - so let me try to record what it was like...

The blackness of moving out of leaguer before dawn. Sandstorm too, so howling blackness full of sound and smell - rest of the squadron roaring away out there, interminable whistle and crackle of one's headphones, fuel stink. Then grey light turning to pink, orange. Moment of uplift when you see everyone else, long shapes of the Crusaders riding ridges, going 15-20 mph. Sense of the whole place being on the move, more of us than there really are. Last call up from the CO, then hours of wireless silence during advance. Hours? Or minutes? Time is not time any more, in any proper sense. Becomes simply the hands on one's watch, the CO's voice - 'Report to me in figures five minutes - we move off at figures 0500 hours - fire in figures three minutes'. You don't remember further back than half an hour. You don't anticipate except in your stomach.

Fear. Worst always before battle, not during. The fear of fear. Of being paralysed with it when the time comes, not being able to function, doing something bloody silly. In action it becomes something else. Keys you up. Saw my own hands shaking yesterday, once, looked down and saw them as someone else's, juddering on the edge of the turret, but my head quite clear, voice coming out normal or thereabouts, telling driver this, operator that, reporting our position, reporting tanks spotted at seven thousand yards, recording, assessing, predicting all as though some other self takes over....

Sunset now. So we leaguer here, get some sleep pray God, we had damn all last night, everyone doing repairs till all hours, racket like an assembly line, and explosions every few minutes from enemy ammunitions dump going up in the next wadi. Lay looking at stars and thinking. No, not thinking. You don't think., just fetch out some images, and have a look at them. Other times, other places. Other people. C. Always C.

A week on. I think. During which not a moment for this - either going flat out, or in the thick of it, or too exhausted to do anything but collapse till the next move. Even if it were expedient I couldn't say now what came before what..... Looking down to see that my loader is hit, blood pouring from his neck but he doesn't seem to realise is still loading still shouting something and I have to reach out and touch him to get his attention. Dust in the turret so thick we can't see each other's faces, I can't see the map unless I hold it inches from my nose. Sick flop in the belly when one of my own troop brews up, that awful belch of orange then thick black smoke, and watching to see if anyone bales out and no one does, not one. Different sick feeling when what I thought was an enemy derelict comes to life and starts firing. Flare of exhilaration when enemy reported retreating, we are to pursue - sitting up on the turret squinting through field-glasses searching for tell-tale dust on the horizon I feel nothing but primitive lust for chase, no fear, that bone-cracking exhaustion gone, just this instinct like a pack of hounds. And later, am ashamed and amazed.

Burying the crew of a Crusader from C squadron. They dropped behind with engine trouble during an attack and later we found the tank shot up and burnt out, all dead, the driver and commander still inside, a bloody mess fuming with fuel that we took out as best we could, in pieces, the gunner and operator lying near in the sand, shot when they'd tried to bale out, hardly a scratch on them, just stiff on the sand in that absolute unreachable silence of the dead.

Battle noise that reverberates in the head long after it has ceased – noise to which one responds like an automaton, not identifying but blowing with it, one jump ahead, seeing in the mind's eye the field-guns and rifles, accounting for a burst of high-velocity fire, assessing range and distance. And the voices always in one's ears, the disembodied to and fro of the squadron as though we roamed the sand like tormented spirits, calling to one another in a mad private language – 'Hello, Fish One, Rover calling. . . OK off to you . . . All stations Fish . . . Advance on a bearing of figures ten degrees . . . Move now . . . Can you confirm . . . ' -and sometimes the pitch changes, the tempo becomes frenetic, the voices shriek and wail against each other in the tight box of one's head – 'Fish Three where the hell are you . . . bloody well get off the air when I'm talking . . . Fish Three, blast you, where are you? . . . Hello Rover, I am hit, repeat, I am hit and withdrawing.' It is as though one existed on different planes: that of sight – the confusing treacherous spread of the desert, smoking and flaming, flinging up tracer and Very lights, vehicles crawling hither and thither like ants, and that of sound – which comes from everywhere, above, around, beyond, within - the whine of aircraft, the bangs, clatter, screech and the voices which seem to come not from what one sees but to be detached, a commentary, a ghost chorus.

I've just seen a gazelle. Usually we shoot them when we get the chance – they make a fine change from bully beef and tinned bacon – but I couldn't bring myself to this time, It hadn't seen me, just stood there flicking its tail, ears pricked, sand-coloured but somehow brilliant in the rock and scrub, in the deadness of the place, rusty petrol tins and barbed wire and a burnt-out lorry near and in the middle of it this scrap of life. And then it scented me and went bounding off.

Sleeping after being in action. Either a black pit of extinction or one skates around just below the level of consciousness, having wild manic dreams, surrealistic dreams in which crazy things go on that you never question. Apt reflection of what we're in the middle of, come to think of it – preposterous world of sand and explosions that becomes the only one you've ever known and therefore banal, mundane, normal.

The moments that rear up, when one stops, the pictures that stay in one's head. My gunner squatting in the sand over a fry up in a respite between actions.... Staring into the heat-shimmer unable to make out line of vehicles on a ridge, what are they? Tanks or lorries? Enemy or not?.....Italians scrambling out of a gun-emplacment, being herded together by an Aussie infantryman with cigarette glued to his lip.....the blue-green Italian uniforms looking suddenly alien, foreign, intrusive against the khaki....the Padre setting up the Sunday service in the back of a ten-ton lorry.....Looking down into a weapon-pit with what seems to be a heap of torn clothing in the bottom and it is not clothes but a corpse, resolving itself suddenly into twisted limbs and flung-back head with open eyes crusted in dust, and again that remote silence of the dead, almost a superiority, as though they knew something you don't.....Walking off to some rocks for a shit and finding oneself eye to eye with a little snake, coiled up as still as a stone, just its tongue flicking, beady black eyes.....

Air attack on enemy anti-tank guns dug in at the neck of a shallow valley, blocking us for hours, CO's voice on the headphones saying 'Friends up above, thank God, at last', and then the bombs showering down like white skittles. And before that.....a hideous time when what I thought were rocks turn into a line of Mark III's, hull-down a couple of hundred yard off and I have seconds in which to decide whether to get into reverse bloody quick and withdraw or find the range and take them on, have they seen me yet? And then they solve the problem for me by opening fire, the first shells whistling past thank God and I report my position to command, bawl at my gunner to fire, all at the same moment it seems and stuttering with the effort to keep panic out of my voice.....

Two weeks later. Nothing doing for days now – pitched from frenzy to boredom, apathy – the capricious way of this campaign. Rumours that we will advance, withdraw, be sent on leave, sit here for months. So we sit – dispersed untidy city of vehicles and tents and dug-outs. Shanty-towns of petrol tins spring up. People lay out a cricket pitch. Supplies are brought up. We repair kit, equipment, ourselves. Pass round tattered magazines. Write letters.....

Orders to move off before dawn again – objective enemy tanks in large numbers reported twenty miles east.... Settled down for a few hours' sleep and was seized by something I've not known before – sudden paralysing awareness of where I am, of what is happening, that I may die, so savage that I lay there rigid, as though in shock, but the mind screaming, howling. Fear, yes, but something more than that – something atavistic, primitive, the instinct to run. I told myself to snap out of it, take a grip on things. I tried breathing deeply, counting to a hundred, going over the codes for the day yet again. No bloody good. All that I can think of is that the morning is riding at me full tilt and I am pinned down with no escape and shit-scared as I've never been before and I don't know why. So I try something else. Tell myself I am not really here. That I am moving through the place, this time, must do so, cannot avoid it, but soon I shall come through and out beyond into another part of the story. Thought of the gazelle I saw, flicking its tail carefree amid heaps of rusty metal, that I envied for a moment; but the gazelle has no story, that is the difference. Pinned down and shit-scared, I have a story, which makes me a man, and therefore set apart.

So I make myself move backwards and forwards, lying there huddled in the sleeping bag on the cold sand – backwards to other places, to childhood, to a time I climbed a Welsh mountain, walked the streets of New York, was happy, not happy, was by the sea in Cornwall long ago or on a bed in Luxor with C. last month. Forwards into obscurity but an obscurity lit by dreams which is another word for hope. I make myself dream, push away the night and the desert and the black shapes all round me, push past the morning and tomorrow and next week and make pictures, dreams. I dream of green fields. I dream of cities I dream of C. And at last the primitive paralysing thing loosens its grip and I even sleep, to be shaken awake by my driver, 0500 hours. I am tense but sane.

And then the rest. Advanced all morning, patrols reporting enemy position and direction then contact lost, much swanning around looking for them.....then my headphones jammed with excited orders, they are spotted again at 7000 yards. Relieve to find I am still sane, functioning OK, almost calm. Switch over to talk to the crew. We have a new gunner Jennings. He is fresh from the Delta – his first time in action, which I hadn't realised until the night before, a stocky lad from Aylesbury, barely into his twenties I imagine. Hadn't had much time to get to know him, he seemed efficient enough, a bit silent I thought but we were all too busy in the usual flap of last-minute checks to do much about him. And now I realised there was something wrong – first I couldn't get an answer out of him at all, then he didn't make sense, went on muttering things I couldn't catch. I said, 'Jennings, are you OK?' – but the CO's voice was coming over now on the other set and I had to switch off and the next fifteen minutes or so were chaos – orders and counter-orders, our B squadron in action against a bunch of German Mark IIIs, we were told to move up and give support, then had to wheel round to take on another lot they hadn't spotted. I told Jennings to get the range and be ready to open fire, and all I could get from him was a whimpering noise, terrible, like a tormented animal. And then words – the same thing over and over again: 'Please get me out of here. Please get me out of here. Please get me out of here.' I tried talking to him calmly and steadily, not bawling him out, telling him to take his time, steady up, just do the things he'd been taught to do. But no I could see the enemy tanks, coming on fast, and a couple of shots slammed past us and seconds later my sergeant's tank was hit and brewed up at once. We couldn't carry on like this, a sitting duck, so I pulled back both remaining tanks to a hull-down position in a dip behind us and tried once again to persuade Jennings to get a grip on himself. But it was hopeless. All the time he was moaning and whimpering – out of his mind clearly poor little blighter.

God knows why we weren't hit. The Mark IIIs kept on firing. There was nothing I could do – short of throwing Jennings out of the tank and taking over the gun myself. But then the commander was

saying there was another of them coming up and we were to pull back for the time being until he could bring up support from our friends to the east.....I reported that my gunner was a casualty and asked for the MO, the CO saying angrily, 'What the hell's up with you – you weren't hit?'

I got Jennings out of the tank....he sat slumped with his head in his hands.....I tried talking to him, told him not to worry, he'd be all right presently, things like that, but I don't think he took anything in.....we hung around fidgeting and presently the MO's truck came bustling up and the doctor jumped down and took one look at Jennings and said 'OK old chap, come on then.' And as soon as he'd taken Jennings off the rest of the crew began joking, exaggerated, feverish, like I've seen men do after a near miss, and I felt myself as though I'd shaken something off, something unlucky, contaminating – I didn't want to think about him, his face, his voice.

Our squadron had lost three tanks that day. The crew had baled out of one and the gunner transferred to mine. The next day was unmitigated hell – to and fro action from dawn till late in the afternoon. By the end of it I was functioning like an automaton, beyond feeling or caring, but then when we leaguered we were told the scale of enemy losses and that we'd pushed them right back from their positions and exhilaration took over, and we sat around congratulating ourselves in a sudden tide of confidence and bonhomie. No one mentioned Jennings again except the CO who said, 'Chap of yours cracked up I gather – bad show,' in an embarrassed sort of way. And I remembered that men were shot for cowardice on the Somme. Now it was just a bad show, which seemed like progress of a kind.

I have put this down – Jennings, my own duel between mind and matter – because one day I am going to want to think about it. This is as it was, raw and untreated. At some point I shall want to make sense of it – if there is sense to be made.....

That was last week. The story continues; I am still in it. Stagnation again, sitting around, waiting for supplies and reinforcements – rumours that there will be a big push at any moment. Time to think again – a kind of thinking that is on two different planes, one taken up with here and now, with the tank, the men, the equipment, the CO, with what this man has said and that one has done, with the way a brother officer eats with his mouth open (and how in the middle of all this one can be irritated by someone's table manners, God only knows). And the other – the other level of thought – so far removed that it is as though one were two people; I think of how once I was brash enough to believe I could dictate to life instead of which it has turned on me with its fangs bared. I think of all the things I haven't done and all the things I intend to do still. I think of C., who features in most of these. I read a tattered copy of *Dombey and Son* hunched in a bivouac in the shade of the tank, crawling with flies, and am lost, transported, for hours on end, beyond all this anaesthetised – ah the miracle of words, of narrative. I make idle, childish lists, to amuse myself: the Greek gods, English wild flowers, American presidents, French novelists.

P.m. – same day. My tank has an oil-seal gone. I'm told I can take it back and get a replacement from Field Workshop. A welcome break.

Here the diary ends. Below the last entry Jennifer Southern has written, in now faded ink, 'My brother was killed in an enemy air attack while undertaking this task.'

[End of Moon Tiger extract].

[End of WLMC tape transcription. Recordings made c.1990]

