

LIFE IN THE ARMY: BACK TO GERMANY AND ITALY

After my retraining course for ex-prisoners of war at Dunbar, I was posted to Hannover, where I saw at first-hand the vast devastation caused by the Allied bombing campaign. Much of the town, including the station, was completely flattened with 5 feet high walls fronting piles of rubble - all that remained of flats 5 or 6 stories high. Black crosses on the rubble indicated that no attempt had been made to look for survivors in what may have been cellars. The remnants of habitable buildings were commandeered by the British military. Refugees and displaced persons [mostly escaping from the Russians] occupied 'ghettos' in the less shattered buildings, where old scores were often settled and the Regiment had the unpleasant task of dealing with the executions for the many murders.

It was an extremely cold winter and on one occasion we had to turn out at night to start up all the vehicles and run them to a safe temperature, as it was forecast that the anti-freeze would be unable to protect the engines! Refugees and Germans resorted to chopping down trees and stumps for fuel for cooking and heating - they had a tough time of it. The standard currency was English, American and French cigarettes - the Reichmark was worthless as a currency. For 400 cigarettes an enclosed wooden body would be put on a jeep. It was a world of black markets; for those who remember the film 'The Third Man' there were many Harry Limes. Our military duties were to carry out patrols; by day to arrest Germans wearing any part of their uniforms, by night to enforce a curfew, arresting any Germans on the street after dark. We also carried out searches of the ghettos if arms caches were suspected. The provision of a security guard at a large factory at Missburg which had been producing alcohol for rocket motors, led sadly to the death of some of the soldiers who had decided to try it out.

Facilities for the British were very different. The NAAFI ran an excellent officers club, and there was theatre at the Herrenhaus, a grand building in parkland. We even enjoyed the company of eight of the leading Sadlers Wells ladies, who stayed in our mess for two nights when the ballet performed there - it was memorable! The officers exercised horses from the local stable on the racecourse and the soldiers made use of the football stadium and the motor cycle track. It was also possible to travel to both Berlin and Hamburg.

After Germany's unconditional surrender the Control Commission for Germany [CCG), a civilian government, was set up in the British sector. The Army was starting to reduce in size and 12th Bn KRRC received notice of disbanding. I intended to become a regular so I was transferred to 8th Armoured Brigade Headquarter, also in Hannover, to be PA to the Commander. The HQ staff of 8 lived in luxury in a large house with 18 servants!

When Brigade Headquarter was disbanded I was appointed to be staff captain in the Military Secretary's department on Montgomery's Headquarters at Bad Oeynhausen, where I became involved in end of war confidential reports and the issuing of final war medals. A suitcase of medals from the grateful Dutch was brought in to our office one day by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands to be issued to deserving British soldiers! While I was there the Military Secretary suggested that if I wanted a regular commission I should get back to regular soldiering as soon as possible and arranged for me to be posted to 1st Bn KRRC in Italy. Through the influence of the Department a fascinating train journey followed, via Brussels to Paris, through France to the Simplon tunnel and so to Milan. My arrival coincided with that of the new Commanding Officer who gave me a lift to the Regiment's headquarters at Bologna.

BACK TO ITALY

Italy on my return was a very different experience from fighting at Anzio: I enjoyed Verona without tourists, skiing on leave at Cortona, weekends at the Danielli in Venice for 3 shillings and sixpence a night when we moved base to Vicenza where we lived in a beautiful villa. A memorable time. Providing a guard for the royal residences at a time when the Italians were deciding the future of the king [who had sided with Mussolini] meant that the Regiment's HQ was based at Naples, with a company in Rome. Consequently we heard the San Carlo opera at night [trams were stopped by the Italians to avoid spoiling the music] and got to swim and sail in the Mediterranean. We were also able to visit Capri without tourists - very different from the present. Our base in Naples was on the northern promontory with a magnificent view of the bay and Vesuvius. A return of the dysentery I had suffered from in prison necessitated a brief stay in the Military Hospital, which earned me a week's leave at Amalfi.

Our duties were mainly guarding supply dumps from skilled thieves, but, sadly, we were unable to guard against the temptation for some of our own soldiers on duty in the safe holding stocks of British currency for the use of returning servicemen: it was eventually discovered that small parcels of notes had been packaged and posted home!

The deposition of the king by referendum meant the end of our duties in the south and the Regiment moved north to Gradisca near Trieste, where we patrolled the Morgan Line, a post war frontier between Italy and Yugoslavia. It was bitterly cold at night and dangerous with the tense situation between the Allies and Tito. However there were compensations in the restaurants in Trieste and Venice, and a glass of Soave costing 2 pence with dinner in the mess!

Towards summer my company was moved down to Mestre just outside Venice, where we were involved in guarding the War Crimes Trials and also a vast petrol dump at the port. It was at Mestre that I heard that I had passed the selection board and been granted a regular commission in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. That chapter of my life had come to an end.

RSCD