



British Army Major John Smale

I was born in 1916. My father was farming at the time near Maidenhead. I was an only child and I went to school at Haileybury College and I joined the Officer Cadet Corps there.

After school I went to Sandhurst. I was very friendly with a boy who had lived in Lancashire and on all the lectures we had we had to say our preferred regiment, the instructor would call and when it came to Smale, I always said "undecided", I was waiting to find a good regiment and this friend of mine said "why don't you go into the Lancashire Fusiliers with me"? And that's what I did.



Major John Smale

I joined in 1936 and I was put on what they called a 'NCOs cadre' to teach NCOs and young officers to be instructors and then I was posted to Colchester with the Lancashire Fusiliers. I was very lucky that a very nice group of young officers had started at the same time there with me and we used to play rugby a lot at weekends.

I was at Colchester when the war broke out. First of all, we went to a sort of holding area in the south of France and we set up a camp in an orchard. We had three different platoons, one from each battalion of the brigade. There was the Lancashire Reserve Platoon, with its own officer which was me, and there was an East Surrey regiment Platoon and the Ox and Bucks Platoon and luckily we all got on very well together.

We stayed there for a little bit and then we moved up to a coal mining area, and we moved up to a place on the German border, I think it was called Herent near Liège, and from there we moved up to Brussels.

My company was put in a line of houses overlooking a canal, and opposite the canal, there was a road leading up to the canal and we thought that the German tanks would come up that road. The local Belgian inhabitants were very anti-German too and they had turned a bus upside down to prevent the tanks had coming along. And anyway I thought I should make sure that there were no fifth columnists in the houses down the road so I went through the houses and they were alright. We got to one house, and the owner showed us round and he was very cooperative, but he said "I would rather you didn't go into that bedroom because my old grandmother is very ill in bed there and it won't do her any good to have strangers coming in". I wondered if it could be an excuse and so I went in and sure enough it was absolutely genuine and I felt awfully guilty about it.

We were in position and they decided to withdraw us. We marched back towards the Escaut Canal and occupied a farm building on a main road, directly opposite another



farm. The Germans came over, but fortunately they attacked the other farm first where another company were and so we were alright.

There were ploughed fields between us and the other farm and we saw somebody coming across and so we shouted at him. He had a white flag and we thought he was one of our chaps who had got away. So we called out to him, "Come on, you're alright, we won't shoot you". And he didn't answer, he just kept the white flag up. We kept on shouting "come on in you'll be alright" and he still didn't answer. So in the end we fired on the white flag and it went down so presumably we shot one of our own chaps. Then the Germans came over the Escaut Canal and they started to mortar our positions. They had sent a plane over so they knew exactly where we were. It was a very hot day and I left my jacket where I had been sitting and the jacket got riddled with shrapnel. So it was jolly lucky that I wasn't there!

Then we marched back. I had a batman called Charlesworth, who's quite a character, and he was marching behind me and we had come across a sort of off licence where there was a lot of French brandy, if we didn't take it the Germans would have done, so Charlesworth was walking behind me and every now and again he, he would have a swig of this brandy, then passed it to me and I would have a swig. We went on marching and we got a lift on a Royal Army Service Corps truck for a while, but they had to go elsewhere and so we had to continue on foot.

We were heading back towards the coast, to Dunkirk. We passed through a place where we had been stationed before and one of our lance corporals had married a local French girl there, the daughter of a café owner. He picked her up, put her in battle dress and she walked back with us dressed up as a man and she was evacuated with us.

When we approached Dunkirk, we didn't have long to wait. We dug in as a company on the dunes and a message came round saying all officers had to report to the divisional commander, a First World War General who was very well thought of. He was in a chalet on the dunes, and when we got there, it was clear he was having a nervous breakdown and all he could say was "wear a hat!" His assistant, a major, was a very sensible chap. He, he quickly stepped in and got him out of the way and put him in a back room. And then he took over and said, "we're in touch by wireless with Dover and they're hoping to send over a destroyer tonight. My only advice to you is to make your way down there"

And so I went back to the company, but there was such a mass of men, I couldn't find them so I was on my own. I had to walk all night, about seventeen miles to Dunkirk, and sure enough, a queue was just beginning to form, and I got in line and boarded and I found a tyre and I sat on it. A petty officer came round and said, "Sir, I've got orders to take your weapons off you because we think the Germans may have infiltrated, dressed up in battle dress, and so you must hand in your pistol". Well, when I joined the Army, we had to buy our uniform and pistol. It cost about seventeen pounds!



We got back to Dover and there were trains waiting for us. I expected that we were going to be booed by the population because we were a beaten Army, but they were very, very kind. It was a very long train, people were coming along with buff Red Cross forms saying, 'I am well, I am not well, I am wounded, I am in hospital', and we just crossed it out as, as appropriate. The Red Cross brought us cups of tea as well.

We got back and we had a lot of casualties, so when the battalion reformed on the south coast. A lot of young boys, aged about eighteen, joined us. After working with wonderful and efficient soldiers, all reservists with about five or six years regular service in India, and a full and true sense of service, I found it frustrating to find myself with these young boys learning elementary training on Bren guns.

A subaltern friend and I saw an invitation to volunteer for the Commandos and so off we went and I joined No 3 Commando. There was a lot more intensive training and then we did the Guernsey raid.

The Germans had only just occupied Guernsey and Churchill was afraid that the Germans would follow up and invade England. Our orders were simply to destroy as many installations and kill as many of the enemy as we could.



'C' Troop, No 3 Commando in Plymouth, 1940.

Three Guernsey officers in civilian clothes had been sent to spy out the land before the raid. We originally intended to land further up the coast and one of these officers was to be waiting for us at a pre-arranged place. The War Office hadn't given us much information about the Jedburgh peninsular, and we found we had a very steep climb up a cliff. On the way up there was a house and my troop commander, a RASC chap called de Crespney, thought it might be a married quarter, so at two o'clock in the morning, with blackened faces we banged on the door. A poor chap opened the door, he was absolutely horrified and scared stiff, of course, and I think he probably shouted or something so de Crespney locked him in the lavatory to get him out of the way.

We found the old British barracks, which was supposed to be occupied, but there were no soldiers there at all, so I was given the job of making a sort of road block stop point with a group of soldiers. We weren't there for very long because we had to be back by two o'clock.

Well, we got back to the rendezvous point but we were delayed because the Navy couldn't put in due to the rocks and the information about the tide was wrong so we had to swim out. I went into the sea fully clothed and I just managed to get to the Navy boat, a sort of lifeboat thing, and I started to sink. I sank twice and the third time I panicked. I thought, "Well, I won't come up this time". So I panicked and shouted, "For Christ's sake, get me out", and a naval officer jumped in fully clothed and pulled me out and saved my life.



It was a shambles. We put out in this boat to join the destroyer but we were overdue and the destroyer couldn't wait any longer because it was thought they would be caught in the open channel by enemy aircraft at sunrise and so they were just beginning to push off. Luckily Durnford-Slater had a compass and a pocket torch and the boat crew saw the light from the torch and that saved us otherwise we would have been left out in the boat.



Training at sea. Dartmouth, 1940.



Landing on Arran, Christmas 1940. A training exercise.

My next Commando action, the Lofoten Raid, was on a lovely sunny day. There was only one very brave chap who opened up on us as we went ashore and we split up into groups. The main objective was to destroy a factory there helping the German war effort with fish oil that they used in explosives. I didn't have a particular objective, just to walk around and see if there were any Germans hiding anywhere.

We had to look all over the place but there was no sign of the enemy so Lieutenant Wills found the post office and sent a telegram to Herr Hitler, Berlin, saying, "You said no-one would land in German territory unopposed, well here we are and where are you?"

We were told we weren't to bring back any woman, which was a silly thing really; the Norwegian civilians didn't want to leave the women in an occupied country. When we were loading the boats with the Norwegians who wanted to leave, a few women and girls approached and I said, "Sorry but you can't get in." We had been given strict orders. They went to the next boat and the chap there was much more sympathetic and he said, "Get in and hide yourselves under a blanket."



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The raid on the Lofoten islands.



The raid on the Lofoten islands.

I can't remember taking any Prisoners of War or Quislings but when we were back on the ship, I remember one German prisoner. They didn't have a cell for him, I'm sad to say, so they put him in a big bathroom. I was the orderly officer and I checked on him from time to time, he also had a sentry on the door, and when I came round he was very polite and held no animosity towards me at all. He knew I was just doing my job.

We got back and it was a bit of an anti climax because it was back to training. My chaps were saying, "Look we've been in action, we know we're good soldiers, we have done what we were asked to do and we don't need any more training." I went to Durnford-Slater with an article that had been in the paper about Newfoundland lumberjacks working in Scotland at Balmoral. I asked if we could go down and join them to keep my men occupied. He said, "Yes, by all means, if they're prepared to take you then good luck to you." So we went up there. Durnford-Slater took the view that if you weren't doing anything, you might as well be on leave.



Major Smale and his men working as lumberjacks before training for Dieppe.



Major Smale and his men working as lumberjacks before training for Dieppe.



Soon, we were training for the Dieppe raid but I caught measles so I was put into a local cottage hospital for three weeks. The Americans had just joined the war and I could see some from the hospital. I remember watching them training very hard, running up a hillside and zigzagging about. I was very impressed, they were very keen.



Cpl Gerard, left.

I just recovered in time for the raid. Of course, we didn't know what or where it was, there was no particular or specific training. A day or two before we left we were shown a cloth model of the countryside and they pointed to the exact landing areas and what the terrain looked like. A group of us were coming back in the same train compartment and one chap shouted out, "I know where we are going, it's Dieppe!" Durnford-Slater was absolutely furious with him and said, "If I let you come on the raid, you'll come with your Sergeant in charge, you won't be in charge of a boat. You will not lead any men." The story went that he was so disappointed, he walked off the end of the ship and died during the raid.

They told us the main raid would be done by the Canadians on Dieppe itself and there would be British Commandos in support on either side. The Canadians were all volunteers and I felt they weren't very well trained, really. They were very loyal and had enlisted specially to come over. About a thousand of these Canadians were to attack the main town of Dieppe and they suffered terrible casualties there. No 3 Commando was on the left flank, where I was, and No 4, commanded by Lord Lovatt, was on the right.

We had been told by Durnford-Slater that we should land at all costs that was impressed on us very hard. Our main convoy ran into a German convoy of ships of some sort and although they were dispersed, one of our naval officers went round and got shot up quite a bit. Another naval officer went round, he was very good, he got any boats that could still sail, or were movable, he got them away. We were heading for the outskirts to a place called Berneval which was a small village. I was standing up in front with the coxswain and a naval and out of the mist a German armed trawler appeared and opened fire on us and they tried to ram us. Luckily, as they came towards us one of my corporals, a chap called Gerard, was lying on the floor (We were all lying on the floor because of this German ship) and he managed to put on the brake and so they misjudged where to fire. We slowed up and they just missed us. They shot right past us.

We were about ten miles out from the beach. I saw the trawler coming back and it was going to hit us so we had to abandon ship. I thought I'd have a jolly good try at



swimming the ten miles to the shore, and I was luckily in the calmer current, there was another current which was a very rough current and nobody could survive in that.

I got my boots off straightaway because of my experience in Guernsey, I knew my boots would pull me down so I got them off straightaway and we jumped overboard. Gerard had not taken his boots off and I said to him, "Have you got your boots off, Gerard"? He said, "No, I can't them off because the laces have shrunk", and I held him up as long as I could and then eventually, after several hours holding his head above the water, I found he had died in my arms. It was a terrible experience.

As I was being washed down the slow current, I ran into a chap. He appeared out of the mist and I said, "Hello, good morning who are you?" Then he said he said, "I am an American pilot. I came over to England to fight with the 'Eagle Frogs'", he had just been shot down. Later on, I ran into a rubber boat with three or four Germans who must have been had been shot down and I thought, "I shall wave to them to see if they will let join them", but they, quite rightly, thought that if I came aboard I would upset the boat and I think I would have done the same in their position. They pushed off in the other direction and wouldn't help me, of course.

It was cold but I was very, very fit at the time. I think it was probably because I was so fit that I was alright.

By the time I got washed into Dieppe harbour itself, another of these German armed trawlers appeared and they put a boat down to pick me up. I thought, "They are going to knock me over the head and kill me", but they were very good and they brought me to their mother ship, which was another of these armed trawlers with a little place where the officer did his navigation from. I sat on a kind of rope there and the officer waved to me and said, "Come up and see me", I didn't realise how tired I was and when I started to climb the ladder and I just collapsed and passed out completely. The German Navy was very good, they took me ashore and I was put in a temporary German hospital which they had put up for casualties of the raid.

I found this Dieppe hospital was over-crowded when I woke up the following morning. The hospital produced a pair of battle dress trousers, I suppose the previous owner no longer needed them and I think I dried my shirt; they must have provided boots and socks but I don't remember this.

We were cared for by French nurses and I asked one if she could help me to escape. She looked rather frightened and said it would be better to wait until I got to an established camp where they would have the necessary facilities. This let her off the hook but I had every intention to try to escape, we had been instructed to make an attempt as soon as possible after capture before the German anti-escape organisation could be organised. Some lorry-loads of POWs were being sent to Rouen, about 10 miles away, and I joined hem the day after capture. Having got to Rouen they did not know where to drop us off, but finally decided on the Police Station. The Police did not welcome us and so we were moved to an area of grass outside the hospital. I



enquired about being admitted to the hospital but was told I should need to have an anti-tetanus injection in my stomach so I decided against it.

Later that day we were moved on foot to the railway station and I remember seeing an elderly French couple waving to us and giving the “V” sign from their window. They tried to hide their action from the Germans but I caught their eye as I passed. I tried to collapse on the ground, hoping to get separated from the marching column, but got kicked to my feet. We were eventually loaded into cattle trucks and moved off.

The other POWs were Canadians, I don't remember any other British at this time, and I asked if any of them had any escaping kit (we had files and small compasses sewn into our battledress). But no-one seemed to have anything.

Our destination was an established camp on the outskirts of Paris. It was called Verneuil. We arrived there in the morning and spent most of the day sitting in an open field outside the camp. I remember water in pails being brought but I don't recall having any food. Later in the afternoon we were admitted to the camp after being searched. Despite telling me otherwise, some people had large and heavy army compasses and they tried to bury them outside the search hut. The Germans must have found these with little trouble afterwards. We were then billeted in the Nissen huts which had bunk beds. I think food must have been provided, but don't remember anything, except the French Red Cross sent in some tins of sardines, only “for French Canadians”. The Senior French Canadian Officer refused to accept them on these terms saying that they should be for all Canadians and insisted that his officers shared them with all the POWs (including, of course, the British). The only British prisoners were from No 3 and No 4 Commando plus a Royal Navy Officer and 2 Royal Marines. While we were eating these sardines, the Canadian Brigadier returned from an interview with the Germans to find that no sardines had been kept for him. The ration had worked out as only one sardine per man. The Brigadier, of course, asked for his sardine and was told that I had eaten it! This was a complete cover up as they had forgotten to include him while they were sharing out and I was British, so they thought was not under his orders. He believed his men and later who later, when we were in Germany, he said to me one day: “It was you who ate my sardine at Verneuil, wasn't it?”

I chummed up with a British Royal Marine called Houghton and we planned to try and get through the wire that night. When the time came to leave the hut, it was raining hard and I decided not to go (my injured arm was starting to give me a lot of trouble) however Houghton went out, but later he returned as he thought that the wire was electrified.

The following morning we were looking across at the soldiers' huts – we had been separated from the soldiers on capture – and some Lancashire Fusiliers who had joined the Commando with me and had served in the same Battalion at Dunkirk spotted me and shouted “Up the twentieth!” This was the Regimental shout we gave at football matches etc as the Regiment had been known as the *XXth of foot* before county names were given to infantry regiments.



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Later that day one of the Canadians returned from the doctors' surgery and told me that there was another Smale there (he must have been sleeping in another hut.) I went over and found my cousin Ken Smale, who was a Marine. He had been serving with the Royal Marine Commando and had landed on the main beach at Dieppe.

After a few days we were moved by train to Germany and during this period my left arm started swelling due to blood poisoning caused by the blue coloured strap on my life jacket cutting into my arm. I was kept in the camp hospital, staffed by both British / Canadian & German doctors until being sent, with a few other men, to a proper POW hospital at a place called Freising. Another of 3 Commando, Geoff Osmond, who was wounded in the arm also came and we had four German soldiers as escort.

We had to change trains at Munich and there was a few hours wait. Geoff Osmond and I sat on a bench seat on the station and watched the crowds. A middle aged woman came and sat on the same bench with us; after she left we noticed she had left a cigarette package on the bench so Geoff, being a smoker, opened it up and we found she had written a note and left it inside the package. It was in English and said something like, "Sorry to see you here".

Freising hospital had been a nunnery and nuns still acted as nurses. It was clean and well run, but appeared to be short of materials. There were paper bandages and two meals only a day – a brunch at 11.30 and main meal at 5.30. We were in a large ward with a couple of other Allied prisoners including a religious non-combatant captured in Norway, a Rhodesian pilot and a few Poles. The Poles refused to speak to the Germans except on medical matters. The hospital had not been known to the Red Cross until our arrival and Red Cross medical parcels which included ovaltine, brandy etc as well as normal medical supplies were sent for us. We had to sign for these parcels and these signatures were sent to the Red Cross in Geneva, the first news that we had been captured.

A German surgeon lanced my arm and released the poison and I returned to the main camp OFLAG VII B at Eichstatt after about 3 weeks.



Major Smale with fellow prisoners at Eichstatt



Major Smale with fellow prisoners at Eichstatt



As we returned to the camp we were interviewed by a British security officer to see if we had noticed any Army camps or Anti-Aircraft Guns while travelling by train. Any such information would be sent back to the War Office in code with POWs letters.

Soon, the handcuffing started. We were put into one barrack block together but we found we could get out of by knocking a nail down the hasps. After a time the Germans realised we were taking the cuffs off as they came in at 9pm to unlock them only to find some prisoners had already got into bed and put their cuffs back on. Then they tried putting a German soldier in each room in the evening.

During the winter of 1943/44 I took part in building a tunnel. We called them 'Tom', 'Dick' and 'Harry', and ours was 'Tom'. I think the RAF's was 'Dick' but I'm not sure. You could volunteer to help on the escape attempts, though most people spent their time working for qualifications – learning to be estate agents and solicitors and things like that. I worked on the tunnel.

It was just like a rabbit warren and the entrance was very small, you had to drop down. It was hidden behind the lavatory, and one chap was given the job of putting the dust back all around the seat of the lavatory. Some prisoners, Canadian engineers, had experience of mining and they made all the plans and worked out how far we could go.

We worked in shifts. When it was your shift you went down and you removed the toilet and there was a sheer drop of about ten or fifteen feet. We kept some dirty old 'long johns' and vests and you had to put on the vest and the 'long johns', and then you went down the tunnel and crawled along, it was a hell of a job. You would dig until you needed a break and then you would rest in one of the lay bys.

We used bed boards to secure the tunnel and so everyone slept on very few bed boards, but a lot of people didn't take much interest in the escape attempts. They were busy training to be solicitors and things. They got correspondence courses sent out to them.

I remember on one occasion some chaps got out, they had passes which had been sent out from England by MI9, I think it was called, the escaping organisation which helped them, and, and they showed these on a train and the ticket examiner was a prewar policeman and not necessarily a Nazi, and he said, he said, "In the circumstances it's such a good pass that I would have not have recognised it, but it's been signed by a man who was handed over on January the first, but if it hadn't been for that I would have let you through".

I lived in the room which opposite the room where the camp security officer would send codes back to the War Office through the Red Cross.

As the Allies approached Germany, the British authorities sent codes telling us we were going to be moved and sure enough, the Germans moved us back to a place called Moosburg, a big central camp. They marched us out, along a road and the



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Americans came over shot us up. They shot and wounded about twelve people right at the last minute and one of them was a professional violinist and he had lost his arm. It was a terrible thing to happen.

John eventually arrived at Moosburg to find the German guards had fled leaving the prisoners to guard themselves until they were liberated. After the War John stayed in the Army till 1958 and he became a *Citizen d'Honneur* of the village of Berneval