



British Army Cpl Geoff Steer 1/4th KOYLI

I was born in St Helens Elsecar in 1923. My father worked at Elsecar Colliery as a miner. Those were the days of getting bathed in front of the fire in a tin bath, no such thing as pit baths. In the early 1930s my father had an accident which caused complications. He died at the age of 38. We then moved house to Harley, back where my mother was born, to live with my aunt. My schooling days were spent at Barrow School, Wentworth, till leaving time when I was given a job at Wentworth Gardens. I stayed two years at the gardens, the pay was 10 shillings a week and then moved on to Newton Chambers Engineering Works.



Geoff with friend Frank Williams

September 3rd 1939, Sunday morning war was declared. How long would it last, some said 12 months, most people did not comment. They had been through the First World War. On that Sunday night the sirens went. Everybody was alerted and most people stayed up all night but afterwards we found out it was only a practice.

At work things changed. Mates went off to join up or were called up. Along with other workmates I was deferred till our two years were up in the Engineering Foundry. We did try to join but were sent back on two occasions. Coming home from work one night in the summer of 1940 on my pushbike, coming to the bottom of our street by the Clothiers Arms, about one hundred men were sat down on the pavement, without packs or rifles, some with just their khaki trousers on. They were absolutely shattered. These soldiers had escaped from Dunkirk. This was my first glimpse of war and the army brought to our doorstep. The soldiers were billeted in and around Elsecar, and next-door to us, so I had hours listening to their stories of the war in France. Eventually they were all recalled to their units and life settled down once again.

At work I moved from the Foundry to the Stove and Grate department making steam ovens and KH cookers for the army. The hours were long - 7 days a week and overtime every night. Meanwhile I joined the Home Guard, our LDV, while others joined the firewatchers either at work or at home. The training in the Home Guard stood me in good stead for later on in the army.

On arriving home from work I noticed an envelope on the mantelpiece marked OHMS. It said that if I signed the form enclosed, I would be deferred from the services until the end of hostilities, but I would have to go and work down the pit at Elsecar Colliery. Well, when my father passed away I made a promise to my mother that I would never go to work in the mines, so the decision was easy. I burnt the letter; hence the following letter to report to Cooper Art Gallery, Barnsley, for a medical



examination for the army, which I passed A1. I got my calling-up papers and had to report to Fulwood Barracks, Preston where we had 8 weeks training on the double all day. After 3 weeks I was made a Lance Corporal and had the experience of drilling my mates on the square. As I mentioned earlier the training of the Home Guard was paying off. After the 8 weeks I was posted to Caterham to the Coldstream Guards which was the Brigade of Guards which meant square bashing for twelve weeks prior to moving to Pirbright Battle School. The first two weeks we were not allowed out of camp until we could salute properly. It was while I was there I met RSM Britton with his pacing stick. I was on my way to the Camp Barbers crossing the parade ground when he yelled out. He asked me how long I had been at the camp. I told him two days. He said that while I was there I was to conduct myself as a Guardsman at all times. Then he marched me down to the Barbers at the correct pace. What an experience.

After 3 weeks it was found that I was half an inch too short, so I was posted to Berwick on Tweed to join the KOYLIs at Magdalene Field for 18 weeks infantry training. At Berwick I met up with comrades with whom I was later to land in France. My mate, number 2 on the Bren, was Frank Williams from Birmingham. Later he was best man at my wedding and I was best man at his. Sergeant Rawson was in charge of our platoon. For eighteen weeks he was just like a father to us. We came out on top in drilling and won the one mile obstacle battle course. I was chosen as the battalion two mile runner and relay team, We finished our training at Berwick and were posted to the Hamilton Racecourse to join the 1/4th KOYLI B Company. We were ordered to pack our kit and get ready to move off. When we arrived at our destination we were told to board the ship which was the Ben a Machrie and we sailed to Rothesay, Isle of Bute, which was a submarine base during the war. Every morning we went down to the beach to board landing craft which then took us to the Ben a Machrie ready to take us to the practice landing area at Blackpool Bay further up the Isle of Bute. Every day the Navy would stand off the beach about twenty yards so we were wet to start with. The training there was rough. It was landing craft exercises ready for D Day. Two weeks we were out there, wet through every day and the final week we had to do it at night with live ammo and live shells. Returning from the Isle of Bute to Hamilton we had a week's rest and then we were off again, this time to Lowestoft for more training; river crossing, fast route marches, digging in and sleeping in slit trenches, advancing under fire and on top of that, PT every day, so that everybody was fighting fit. It was now May, and things were buzzing.

On the 5th June 1944 we signed for 200 francs, then we knew where we were going. This we received in the transit camp. The marshalling area was behind a Polish fighter aerodrome in a wood, under canvas. We passed the time away playing cards or listening to the wireless. Some of the lads had their hair shaved off to ward off lice. Shaving the head was a good idea but after we had been in action a few weeks some of them got wounded and were flown home, so the first thing they had to buy was a flat cap.



Orders came to move out and we made our way to Newhaven Dock where we boarded our LCT. We spent four or five hours on board waiting for the tide, then we were away at about 11pm. The sea was a bit rough and lots were seasick below decks. To put it mildly it was a complete shambles. I spent most of the night up on deck talking to the sailors and eating tins of treacle pudding and rice pudding. Daylight came at last and what a sight. Ships as far as you could see, in front, each side, and bringing up the rear, each altering course every 3 minutes. Everybody was told to stand to on deck. Behind the door at the front, catwalks on the side of the ship were ready to be dropped in the sea for easy access and we were told to disembark as quickly as possible. The ship would then turn round and head back.

As we neared the beaches we could see buildings in ruins and the harbour wall was breached from recent bombing by the RAF. The place was Ver-sur-Mer, Gold Beach. By now the noise was deafening, mostly from the warships and our tanks, which were landing and exploding the waterproofing which covered them. Machine guns were cracking all the time and ricochets off the ship were like wasps buzzing round. The ship stopped, the beach was 50 yards away, the doors were opened and the catwalks were lowered. Out we went in about 8 feet of water, swimming a bit. I was fully clothed, with a full pack and a Bren gun resting on the pack with pouches full of ammo. We hit the beach and we moved on up the road. Our destination was a field at Coulombes, a small village where we could change our trousers, our dry trousers were round our necks. The whole battalion had their trousers down. Off we went towards Bronay which was in contact with the enemy. We approached Dudy St Marguerite towards the main railway line from Bayeux to Caen when Jerry opened up on us from outside Audrieu before we crossed the railway line, so we were held up for a while. Then the enemy withdrew and we dug in for the night, or as it turned out, for a couple of days, while the 25 pounders and the RAF softened up Cristot. June 16th D+10 we were briefed on the battle of Cristot. We formed up in a lane near a farm with banks either side of the lane. There were dead cows rotting and the stench was terrible. It was time for the barrage to start and for B Company to move off in line through the cornfield towards Cristot. The shells from our guns seemed to be touching our steel helmets before they hit the ground. We could now see the church, or what was left of it. On our left was a farmhouse and a few Jerrys were holed up in there. They kept sniping at us as we approached the building. The Sherman tanks had now caught us up. I tapped on the side of the tank with the Bren butt. Up popped the Commander. I told him we were having trouble with the farmhouse. He fired 4 HE into it and then drove the tank straight through the building. He commented that he hadn't seen anybody when he went through the front door and out of the back. The tanks never left us right into the village. Through the corn we came. My section was bang on the village. As soon as we were on the road a sniper winged two of our section. Cristot is only a small village, 3 farms, 40 houses and a church, but we paid a high price in terms of men lost. It just goes to show the infantryman has to take the brunt of all kinds of firepower and sometimes from his own side. Speaking for myself, I never got used to day after day of shelling, small arms fire, counter-attacks, night patrols,



daytime standing patrols, seeing your pals die and having to bury them. I would see another day dawn and wonder if it was my turn today.

Our next major action, on 25th June, D+19, was the 146 Brigade attack on Fontenay le Pesnil and Tessel Wood. D Company was in front and we followed behind. Someone shouted that there was a Tiger tank on the right. Once again we knocked on the tank, reported the Tiger, the Commander spotted it through binoculars, and he told us to lie down under cover. He fired 3 solid shot and 4 HE and the tank was burning all night. The co-operation of the tanks was first-class.

The battle raged on. Men were falling on each side. One of D Company was in front, walking by the side of the tanks when a mortar bomb dropped nearby. We hit the deck. We heard a scream and on getting to our feet saw a terrible sight - the lad had been hit by shrapnel through his ammo pouch where he kept his phosphorous grenades. They were all burning as these were smoke bombs. He died terribly in minutes. Times like that were very hard. We were told to dig in and consolidate our positions. Our platoon was entrenched in front of a right-angle hedgerow, which turned out to be a mistake.

The tanks stayed with us all night just in case of a counter-attack. The night was pretty quiet except for our night patrols having skirmishes with the Jerries. Imagine all the noise - being shelled, mortared, machine-gunned, covering ground as fast as you could, taking shelter, then digging a trench 6' x 2' x 6'. Then you had to stand to, waiting to see if the enemy would counter-attack. I haven't mentioned the mosquitos, in their thousands, biting you day and night. After a week we were issued with ointment to put on our hands and face.

We were standing in water so what sleep you got, it was while standing up. All the time there was an inevitable drain of casualties with new recruits taking their place. I was made up to Corporal while at Tessel Wood.

Lots of things happened at Tessel, things which occurred more or less at the same time of day. When the grub came up, the motors would bring it on to the main Fontenay road, which had about 4 inches of dust on it. Jerry could see this and would start a barrage on to the road, but the jeep always managed to get through. Making my way through the hedge I looked at the Fontenay road and saw the grub wagon. Suddenly Jerry opened up with 88s. There was a terrific bang and clouds of dust. Part of the hedge fell on top of us because when I dived in there was already a lad in the bottom fast asleep. I lay still and heard the next salvo coming, but over they went towards the road. The lad under me was going berserk. When I did manage to get out he ran back down the hill. I never saw him again, reports said he was bomb happy. The OP from the end trench came hopping past me, half his boot toe missing and toes with shrapnel wounds. He said "Never mind me, see to the others". By digging in, in front of the hedgerow, the trees brought the shells down in the trenches. We at the back were OK, the mistake was digging in, in front of the cover instead of behind. The toll was 4 dead and 2 wounded.



Major Little came across and was very upset. He asked us if we could do the honours for the dead. I dug a new trench but now you could say we were in a graveyard, with crosses each side of us.

Another disaster in our lines came one night. It was warm and we had started sleeping on top by the side of the trench with a blanket over us, when an explosion, different to shelling, tore through our section. The blankets went with the blast. We hit the trench together. Looking up, the trees were on fire along with our blankets. More explosions came, one after another. We were praying it would stop. When it did we at once put the fires out and waited for daylight which was about an hour. Sgt Ball the platoon commander and Lt Trumper were both bleeding from the ears and were taken back to HQ for treatment. Everybody was awake but not moving out of the trenches. Nobody knew what had caused the explosions. I thought "Here we go again". I told my No 2 I was going to look round and would return. Someone from down the field shouted "Watch out for unexploded anti-tank mines". The field behind our trenches was absolute carnage. I found Paybooks, identification disks and other personal belongings. It turned out the Pioneer Corps were carrying boxes of mines, detonated, through our lines to open ground in front of us. The first man was level with the two inch mortar team who were, like us, sleeping on the top, when he tripped up and the blast blew the others following him off their feet. The date was June 29, 1944. Fourteen men died. I collected their remains and they were buried in one grave. That was another episode to try your nerves.

We were told we were moving from Tessel Wood, our job was done. Taking our last look at Tessel it was now very quiet; the new soldiers of the Recce Regiment were in our positions. We loaded on the lorries and off we went to have a short rest and a change of clothes.

The Battalion was called on again to fight and we moved to a village south of the Antwerp Turnout Canal. As we advanced towards Rijkevorsel it started to rain, but it wasn't cold. B Company advanced down the main street making for the church. One of the residents gave us a cup of rum each - it was just what the doctor ordered, we never felt the rain. Looking through a shop window to the church it was perfect, about 30 feet to run and into the cemetery. We decided who would go first and I would cover with the Bren, then follow. We all crossed safely and made our way through the graveyard to the road right of the church.

We then holed up across the street in one of the semis. The family were father, mother and son. They sheltered in the cellar. Upstairs we observed to the top of the road, there were Jerries everywhere but all seemed to be watching A Company over on our right. It was just like duck shooting for about an hour, then we were running out of ammo so I said I would go back to HQ, report and bring back ammo to the section.

Crossing the road to the churchyard I met the Platoon Sergeant by the Church, reported where we were and asked for ammo, which I got in bandoliers. I made my way back through the churchyard, climbed over the railings on to the road and that was when Jerry fired the machine gun. I was hit in the calf of the leg, the seams of my



trousers were clipped, I was very lucky to be alive. The shock of bullets threw me back over the fence into the graveyard. I was shaking from head to foot and numb all over. The wound was bad but I still had to take the ammo back to my section. The Sergeant said I had to go back to the Field Dressing Station but I said I had to deliver the ammo first. I had to cross the road again, but this time he was waiting with his finger on the trigger. Running across to the house he fired but was too late. I was under cover but there was no escape. It was now about lunchtime. We were still upstairs till finally they found where we were and then a real battle took place. There were five of us, four were wounded.

By about 2pm we were out of ammo so we smashed the rifles up, stripped the Bren, put the breach block up the chimney and then retired to the cellar with the civilians to await the outcome. After a while we heard voices. It was 3.30pm. We thought it was A Company but it was Jerry. We were searched and marched up the street. The Jerries we saw were nearly all pushing fifty. We were locked in a shed all night with a Jerry in attendance.

Next morning we were taken in two Jerry scout cars to Breda Hospital. There we had our wounds looked at by a surgeon. The verdict on my wound? The surgeon said one inch to the right and the bullet would have shattered the bone in two. On our way up to the first floor there were soldiers laid on stretchers all the way up the corridor. Germans, British, Canadians, Americans, all badly wounded and waiting for operations. We received no treatment at all. I still had the same field dressing on which I had put on the day before. On leaving the hospital on our way to German HQ we could see evidence of the hammering they had got by the damaged vehicles left by the roadside. We arrived at German HQ and were interrogated one at a time. All they got was name, rank and number. They were interested in the tank strength we had over the canal. That night I was taken by the Jerries to a private house and taken upstairs into a bedroom where there were three more prisoners, one British, one Italian and one Canadian. The Canadian's first name was Jim. He lived in Ontario and was a Rear-Gunner in the Canadian Air Force who was shot down during Operation Market Garden. We got to know each other pretty well, except for the Italian who could not speak a word of English. The sentries would tell you not to try and escape or we would be shot.

The next day when it was dark we were loaded into a horsedrawn cart with two guards and travelled all night over the River Waal. The bridge was still intact. Our destination was finally Amsterdam Railway Station where we met up with the 1st Airborne Division prisoners from Arnhem, hundreds of them, that's when we knew things weren't going too well.

We were loaded into cattle trucks, 68 in each truck, with straw on the floor and an empty 5 gallon drum for a toilet. There was no room to lie flat. The doors were locked and we were away. The door was never opened. The toilet drum had been emptied down the side of the door many times, the stench was awful. One more day, five in all, it seemed like a month. One lad had his 21st birthday that day and we still had the



strength to sing 'Happy Birthday'. What I haven't mentioned is that for five days we had had no food or water. We arrived at Limburg station. The guards dismounted and unlocked the doors. We were told to get out and fall in, in fives. We didn't climb out, we fell out, our legs let us down. All this time Jim, the Canadian, and the Italian were still with us, so we kept together. As we marched up to the camp, at the gate, about fifty Jerries were counting us as we entered the camp. It was good to be in the fresh air again. We had progressed about fifty yards in the camp when the Jerries started running and shouting. They came past me and Jim and knocked the Italian out of the ranks. About a minute after, a short burst of machine-gun fire and he was dead.

The camp at Limburg was nothing more than a field. There were two buildings, one at the gatehouse for the German guards and the other for the Red Cross. Our first job was to register our name and rank with Geneva Conventions 1864 1949. Now the Germans had to account for us if we went missing. We who had arrived last had to go in a large marquee to sleep. There were no beds, just the grass to lie on. I might add it had been raining for two days and outside it was a foot deep in sludge and nearly as bad in the marquee. Nobody had any shaving tackle so we did look rough and I had not had a wash since Holland. In the camp in their own pens were Russians, Indians, Polish and Allied soldiers.

We queued for a wash and then went looking for food. There was soup to be had near the guardroom if you had something to put it in. We found what we wanted out of the dustbins, a tin can. Next day Jim and I went along to the Indian camp and I swapped my wrist-watch for two British parcels which I shared with Jim. We stayed in this camp for about a week then about one hundred of us were put on a train. After travelling all day and night, sometimes very slowly, we arrived at Stalag IV B. Stalag IV B was situated between Leipzig and Dresden. We were told there were about four thousand prisoners here but it was a well-organised camp with about one hundred to a hut. Compared with what we had had to put up with since being taken prisoner this was like being in a hotel. We got Red Cross parcels every week while we were in IV B. There were concerts and plays put on in different huts every night. These were first class as some of them were professional actors back in Civvy Street. There were fireplaces in the huts with ovens so you could cook something out of your parcel or warm it up. Football was played in the camp. Each hut was named after a team in England. Our hut team was Arsenal. The POWs who had been there some time had made a replica of the FA Cup out of tins and silver paper. It was perfect in every detail. We arrived about a week before Cup Final day. It was a great spectacle with a band playing before the match and at the interval we took our form out of the hut with our names on to reserve our place. The teams were Wolves and Chelsea. Wolves ran out the winners. Even the Jerries cheered, while they were patrolling outside the wire.

Every morning after roll-call we would gather in the recreation part of the hut. Then an officer would come in and guards would be put on the doors to watch out for the Jerries, while he read the news from the day before, from BBC Radio. One day we were asked if we wanted to go out to work. About twenty five of us said yes, what work was it? They told us it was a jam factory. Well, that sounded OK, so we said yes.



The next day, getting our few belongings together, we said goodbye to our mates in the hut and we were marched out of camp. We boarded the train and off we went, once again a very slow journey. This was on a Friday, a day I shall never forget. It was dark when the train slowed down and stopped. We were having a bit of shut eye when the Jerries started shouting for us to get out of the train. When we opened the door we were out in the country. No station. They told us it had been bombed. Out we got and fell in, ready to move off, which we did, across the fields for about three miles till we came to some brick buildings with barbed wire around. We had arrived at our new destination. We asked if it was the jam factory, but they said no, it was a coal mine.

We had arrived at the Marionschaft, our new prison camp. The mine where we were to work was four miles away so the Americans told us. There were 125 American POWs in all, with an additional 25 British. My thoughts were that I had joined the army to escape the mine at home, and here I was going to work down in one for the Germans, as slave labour. The workforce included about 50 civilians, along with SS Officers as bosses to make sure we got our work out every day.

We were told by the interpreter that we would have the weekend to rest and on Monday we would have to start work on the day shift. Three shifts were in operation. The twenty-five British POWs were all in the same building. Each building had a large cast iron stove which burned coal night and day, so one thing was we were warm and by working at the pit we had plenty of coal. The weekend came and went. All we did was to walk round the camp which took about five minutes flat and there was nothing to see for your effort. Monday



Geoff with his mother

morning we were roused by the guards at 3.30am. We washed our hands and face and we were taken to a small building. It had two set pots in and a table - that was the kitchen. The fire was lit under one and the liquid was boiling. We found out it was coffee, made from acorns, without milk or sugar. We had no pots, so we went round the back to the dustbins and found tin cans, washed them out under the tap and then were given the coffee, which tasted vile. That was breakfast over. We took the cans back into the camp to use again later. We fell in and two guards escorted us out of the camp with the warning that if we tried to escape we would be shot.

It was still dark when we arrived at the pit-head. The civilian miners were arriving by pedal cycle and on foot. We were told by the interpreter where we were working and told we would be collected by the miners at the pit bottom. We made our way to the shaft and looking around you could see apprehension on all the lads' faces. Most of them had never seen a pit never mind go down in the pit cage. At least I had been brought up in the mining area. Twenty of us were herded in the cage, the gate slammed shut and off we went down. Half-way down we thought we were coming



back up. Some of the lads vomited but no-one took any notice. The cage reached the bottom, about 150 metres, I was told it was not deep according to our standards. Our miners were waiting for us, to take us to our work faces.

I was given a shovel (number 10) and a pick, along with a sledgehammer. Our lamps by the way were hand lamps. Only the civilian miners were allowed cap lamps. My first reaction was how warm it was down there, and how light the coal was. No wonder it was a number ten shovel. I was taken to a small coal face which had only been worked about a fortnight, so it was only about twenty feet from the main way. I was shown a coal tub, and where to empty it. The first thing I did was to strip down to my underpants. Then I inspected the face to see how hard it was, because we had to drill by hand about six holes for the shotfirer to blow the coal down. I was very lucky. First strike with the pick, the coal was soft and down it came. The tub was filled three times and emptied. Your quota was six tubs per nine hour shift. The penalty for not getting your quota out was another nine hours down the pit, till you did.

So the first day was over. As we made our way to the pit bottom it was getting colder and our sweaty clothes didn't make it any better. We had to wait while the civilians went up to the surface first, so by the time it was our turn we were frozen stiff. We tramped back the four miles to the camp and arrived at about 4.30 in the afternoon, to be told our meal would be ready at 7 o'clock. Meal, ha ha! Grabbing our tin cans we formed up outside the small building with the two set pots in it and a German served us with soup out of one and German coffee out of the other. If you got a piece of meat in the soup you had done well. While waiting in the line for the soup I saw a whole leg of a horse hanging up on the wall still with the hoof and horseshoe, covered in flies.

Later that week we received our first Red Cross parcel. We got one Red Cross parcel a week. If it hadn't been for them we would not have survived. Winter came with a vengeance, by the beginning of December the snow was a yard thick and frozen solid. The guards who patrolled round the camp were all over sixty-five. One especially, named Karl, he had two Army overcoats on, a fur hat with ear-muffs and his rifle was slung over his shoulder. His hands, with gloves on, were in his pockets, his feet were in large wicker baskets filled with straw, so he could not walk round, he had to shuffle round the camp.

With us not getting good food, if we got a knock in the mine the coal dust turned the wound septic and ulcers used to form on our legs and arms. One lad had two on each leg as big as cricket balls and had to be taken to the doctor on a sledge. When he returned, the doctor had lanced them and put drains in them without anaesthetic. He was allowed one day off.

Christmas came. We had three days off. Christmas day we were given a treat by the Captain, he let us walk round the camp outside the wire and wished us a Merry Christmas, then back inside. After Christmas the weather got worse, snowing and freezing fog, but we still had to go to work. My socks were worn out so I cut a piece of my blanket off to make two foot-rags to go to work in, then take them off to work. We went about a fortnight without parcels through the weather being bad and one day,



coming in from work, we were told somebody had been stealing from us while we were working. A trap was set and the culprit was caught. It turned out to be one of our men - British. The Committee found him guilty of the worse crime in the Army, stealing another man's rations. It was worse in a POW camp.

He was handed over to the Captain of the camp, who gave him seven days in the cooler. The cooler as we called it was a small brick building, 6 feet by 6 feet and 7 feet high with a steel door and an opening one foot square with bars and no glass. There was a wooden bed and an earth floor. He was allowed his overcoat and one blanket, nothing else, not even shaving tackle. He had one slice of dry bread and a pint of water a day. His toilet was a five gallon drum and if he wanted to see out, he stood on the bed. After the first day he started shouting to be let out. The Jerries told him if he continued shouting he would stay in another week. The guards told us he used to scream at night with the cold but at last his sentence was over and two of the lads were told by the guards to come and collect him. We watched from the windows, so did all the camp. The guard opened the door but the lads had to carry him out, back to the living quarters where it was warm and sat him by the stove. His face, fingers and toes all had frost bite, his eyes were bloodshot and he stank like a sewer. The first job was to get his clothes off. We got him under the shower and while some of the lads sponged him down we washed his clothes and hung them up round the stove. You could dry anything in under an hour round it. After a few weeks he recovered enough to return to work but he was never the same man after that.

January 13, my birthday came and went and we noticed the guards were a little bit more friendly and started telling us what was going on at the front. At the end of February we returned back from the mine after the dayshift, had our pig swill again, but this time there seemed to be a lot of activity across at the German HQ, wagons being loaded with guns, ammo and stores etc. Looking out after dark we noticed there were no guards going round the camp but plenty of activity still over at HQ. We knew next morning what had happened, we were about to go on the march. At midday we had our belongings in whatever we could carry them and were formed up in the camp ready for the off. Our destination was unknown. Looking at the weather and the way we were dressed, if it was a long journey a lot of the lads would not make it very far. Just before we set off an American gave me a waterproof jump jacket. I never asked his name but it served me well on the six hundred mile march.

Walking to work four miles there and four back, working hard at the mine and at the Marionschaft on Sundays had, I suppose, toughened us up but could we stand the cold? On top of all that I forgot to explain that all the time we were at the mining camp we were all walking with body lice. I can remember washing a vest and leaving it out on the line all night, bringing it in stiff as a board and drying it round the stove. After an hour on my body it was again full of lice. The body lice were like woodlice, only smaller and they pierced your skin for blood. We used to watch them go red on the backs of our hands as they sucked our blood. We moved out just after midday, the opposite way from the mine and towards the village. Some of the people were out in the street looking at us sadly and sympathetically but no-one said anything.



So our journey had started. We travelled slowly all day till about five in the afternoon when we were herded into a barn. It belonged to a farmer who was told to prepare some stew for us. His wife, family and farmhands were all helping out. We got our soup at eleven and ate it in the dark. The Captain and his officers slept in the farmhouse with the farmer and his wife. We were awakened by the guards at about eight, we had a wash in the cattle troughs in the yard and pumped water from the well to drink. Meantime the farmer's wife brought out a large clothes basket full of stale brown bread and it was all eaten in less than fifteen minutes.

Looking at some of the guards, they looked worse than some of us. Four of them were over seventy years and looked fed up. We finally arrived at another farm where this time things had been organised. Soup had been cooked under a shed on mobile cookers by the Germans who had gone with the Captain in front of us in a lorry. Looking back, we estimated we walked about thirty miles a day, sometimes a little less.

Day after day we tramped on through villages where civilians tried to give us food as we marched past. They were hit by the guards' rifles for their troubles. Some of the bread we managed to catch or pick up off the road. After about a week some of the lads had dysentery very bad and were forever dropping out by the side of the road. Two of the guards would stay with them while we kept going. Some managed to catch up but one day we heard a shot ring out about a mile back. We knew now we were up against it and it would be survival of the fittest. We started to look for those who fell out and three of us who were fit would stay with them and more or less carry them back to the column and help them to recover themselves. One day we arrived at the town of Marionbad and marched through it. We could smell the bread and see sweet shops and a butcher's shop, something we had not seen for months. Plan was the next town we approached. We passed through and stopped at a large farm with a river running through the bottom of the land. Up at the main road the villagers came to bring us loaves of bread and large lumps of cheese which they threw down to us. The river at the bottom came in handy for washing, bathing and paddling. A lad and I paddled with our boots around our necks. The guards were walking among us but were getting fed up. I told this lad with me to make our way to the bridge under the road slowly. We had escaped you might say.

We carried on to the village and a door opened. A man poked his head out and beckoned for us to come in. Inside the house was a lot more people who asked us who we were. When we said English they shook us by the hand and for a while they thought they had been liberated. When we explained we were POWs on the march they were worried who was going to liberate them as we explained three nations were closing the circle round the Germans.

We were told to sit down at the table and they all got together and before long a meal was prepared for us, potatoes, lamb chops and cabbage and lovely sweet coffee with fruitcake. The smell of the food was even better than the actual meal. We ate slowly but left nothing. About fifty people must have come to the house just to have a look at



us. We were asked to stay in the village and they would hide us from the Germans. This was a decision we both had to make. I had seen this happen at Rijkevorsel in Holland with the people who were hiding with us when the Germans took us prisoner. If we had stayed with the people in the village and we were found by the Germans then they could be shot and us too.

We said our goodbyes to them all and they filled a bag full of bread and fruitcake for us to take back with us. Taking our boots off, we entered the river on the other side and paddled under the bridge back to the camp. As we came out of the bridge the guard spotted us and screamed at us. As we came out of the water he got his boot in our backsides. My friend got the butt of the rifle at the back of the head which broke the skin. We had got off lightly. All in all our little escapade was successful. Believe it or not about twenty POWs escaped in about one hour using the same method. We set off out of Plan up the hills and winding roads going higher all the time till after three hours we had a rest by the side of the road.

Darkness came, and with it the cold, but on we marched. About midnight we arrived at a farm with three large barns and did not want telling to get bedded in. We packed in close together to keep warm in the straw and were soon fast asleep without food.

We had lost track of how long we had been on the road but we all smelt to high heaven. The dysentery was worse, some had scabies, and some could not keep any food down. The next day I think was the worst while on the march. The guards awakened us and it was noon before we moved off. It was teeming with rain and I wondered how many of the lads would die today. Some now were only shuffling along, not walking. One man fell out in front of me, at the side of the road, to pass his motion. The first guard passed him as he got up from crouching down. The second guard kicked him before he could get his trousers up and he fell in the ditch full of water at the side of the road. He never moved again. We protested but were told to move on or we would get the same treatment as he did.

After about an hour we came to a small village where a number of people were gathered with food for us. But also waiting for our column were those I had heard about but never seen before, women SS Corps, all of them hand-picked, equipped with jack boots, full-length overcoats, steel helmets and sub-machine guns slung across their chests. Our hearts sank into our boots. They speeded the column up and turned and fired at the villagers with the food, who scattered to the four winds. Increasing the movement of the column took its toll on the lads. More fell out by the side of the road and lay down crying. As we left the village behind we heard shots. On we marched. How many lads we lost that day I don't think anyone knew. Down the road about half a mile we could see another column which we found out later was waiting for us at some crossroads. When we reached them we were told to fall out for a while, which we did. Looking at the other column they had more officers and NCOs than we did and looked more organised than we were. In fact we saw they had Red Cross bags with bandages and medicine. They had a look at some of our worst lads but there was one thing they hadn't got and that was a magic wand. While we were busy talking to



our new pals the women SS had left unseen and we never saw them again. Roughly we were now altogether about 800 to 1000 men.

The column moved off but after about two miles we all stopped at a sawmill with large buildings for storing timber. The soup was ready for us this time. After we had eaten we went to find a spot in the sheds. There was a small stream close by and we all took the opportunity of stripping off and having a wash down. When we were dressed we felt a lot better but the body lice were eating us alive. The officers came round to see how we were and we felt we weren't on our own like we did when we started out on the march, we had somebody who cared.

We were told we only had fifteen miles to do that day and we would spend a few days at our next destination. That sounded great. Coming back to the guards, they were now 125 strong with the other column guards. Climbing up into the mountains, the snow was about a foot thick in places, but it was soft and thawing steadily. One of the guards who walked at the side of us got chatting and he said the war was nearly over. He was ready for going home. Who wasn't? I asked him the date and he said 9 May. I muttered aloud "Happy Birthday Mother". At that point we topped the rise and looked down into the valley. What a wonderful sight, the sun shining, the green grass, the daffodils and crocuses out in full bloom, blossom on the trees, the river running full, it was grand to be able to see it and smell it. We reached a small town by late afternoon. Passing the school, the children waved to us and we made our way up through the town to a large farm with a wall round it, where we were all herded in and the gate shut and guards posted.

The first thing we did was to dig a latrine in the farmyard and then we lit fires to toast a bit of bread or roast a few potatoes which we found in the barn. They tasted great. One of our pals had some tea leaves left from his parcels so we boiled a tin on the fire full of water and our pal put some leaves in. It smelt lovely. Somebody had gone to try and get some milk. There was a shout from one of the guards as we were sat round the fire. He pointed the rifle at us and we moved from the fire. He fired at the tin of boiling water and when he hit it, he laughed. He was about eighteen years old and we had had trouble all along the march with him. He was responsible for the deaths of a number of our comrades. Later, three were using the latrine and he fired at them. One of them fell in the trench trying to get away quickly. The guard once again laughed. The soup pans were brought under a shed and the officers were told we had to cook our own food. The officer detailed six men as cooks and everybody gave a hand with the potatoes and turnips. The meat was a sheep and everything went into the pot except the wool.

We were all bedded down for the night. It was a lovely evening, warm and clear. We had had our soup and bread and were trying to doze off when about six men came climbing over us. I knew by their dress they were not our lads. In fact they were the Resistance. They had got in the farm to get volunteers from us to take over the guards. I went along with some more of the lads with the Resistance, who had guns. How many volunteers there were nobody knows but one by one every guard was taken



The Second World War Experience Centre
Reproduction of an article from the Centre's website
<http://www.war-experience.org/collections/land/alliedbrit/steer/default.asp>

prisoner, including the Captain and his wife and along with the officers. By 9 o'clock in the morning they were all housed in the school-house, guarded by us.

The officer in charge was from New Zealand and his headquarters was just up from the school. I was made his runner. Taking a message down to the school-house from him, I stopped to talk with the lads, some were on guard outside the school on the road. They were keeping their eyes peeled on the roads in the distance, with binoculars, when suddenly they spotted a lorry about four miles away, coming our way. Off I went to fetch the officer and his staff. By the time we had returned, the lorry had arrived. It was a Russian Patrol miles out of their way. Fifteen Russian soldiers had taken the rifles off our lads and wanted to shoot the Germans there and then, but our officer explained what we had gone through and we would try them when we were relieved by our own troops. The Russians were satisfied, shook our hands and drove off through the town.

I could not wait for the Americans to come. Making my way back to the HQ at the top of the town, all the officers were out, looking up the road, which after about 200 yards bent to the right and disappeared over the hill. Trees lined the road, but the thing was we could hear a tank, but whose tank, theirs or ours? All the lads were stood together looking and praying it was ours, when finally it rounded the corner. I saw the star, it was a Sherman tank. The tank pulled up near the town green followed by a lorry with food on board. The officer of the tank looked round and said to our CO, "Bloody hell, these men are dying on their feet, get the grub out". Boxes and boxes were brought out. There was everything you could want and cigarettes, we had a birthday, but for some it was terrible, they ate sugar and butter just as it was and drank beer till their stomachs swelled up, then they were ill. More help arrived to cope with this situation including doctors for the worst cases. The American tank commander called our officers and asked how many prisoners, German he meant. We told him 125. Twenty five in all were picked out of the prisoners, including Trigger-happy and our officer plus the guard who kicked our lad in the water-filled ditch.

They were lined up under a bank, asked if they wanted a blindfold, the officer gave us the tommy guns and automatics, shouted aim and fire, it was all over, they were dead. By now three ton lorries were arriving and loading the lads on them, the sick first, and off they went. After about an hour we arrived at an airfield. The buildings would house about one thousand personnel so we knew we should be comfortable for the night. As we disembarked from the lorries the Yanks gave us tomato juice in half gallon tins, it was smashing. We all found rooms easy. It was lovely to sleep in a bed with blankets. We were awakened next day by the sound of planes coming in to land. They were Dakotas, about fifty of them. Then there was an announcement over the tannoy to go to the dining hall for breakfast and then down to the control tower to get in the planes ready for the next journey. About twenty got in a Dakota and we were off, touching down at Reims in France where we spent the night under canvas. It was now June but we could not sleep, we were too excited. The lorries came to take us back to the airfield at Reims. Lancaster bombers were waiting there to fly us home. I was busy talking to the wireless operator and did not know we had landed at



Portsmouth. Leaving the plane and saying thanks to the crew for bringing us home, we were told to go through a large marquee where there were nurses with what looked like large fire extinguishers full of white powder, which they blew down our trousers and down our shirts back and front to help kill the lice we had brought back with us. After the white powder we were led in small parties to a large hangar where long tables were laid out with everything you could mention and a band played on a makeshift stage. After the meal we reported to the bottom of the room, gave our name, rank and number and when we walked outside a NCO put us in a lorry, about ten of us and off we went, not a very long journey, arriving at a camp in a wood not far from the airfield, we could hear the planes.



Geoff and friend Sid Bedford, courtesy of the Barnsley Chronicle.

At the camp we filed in one by one to see the MO who gave us a slip of paper with LICE on. Down we went to a large ablution unit and there we were told by the NCO to take all our clothes off and leave them outside. This we did then we proceeded into the shower room where we shaved all our hairs off, stood under some blue fluid then got washed with carbolic soap till we were pink. The NCO inspected every one of us before we moved into the next room to get our new clothes. We felt like new men. The announcement over the tannoy said that tea was ready in the dining hall after we had settled in. The meal was first class and an officer made an announcement that we were allowed out of the camp if we wanted, or there was a cinema on the camp and breakfast would be at 8 o'clock. We would be on our way home before 12 o'clock.

It was time to leave for the station. I arrived back at Elsecar in the evening, about 5 o'clock. It was warm and the kit-bag was getting heavy as I dropped off the bus. Turning the bottom of the street I looked up and nearly ran back. There were flags and bunting across the street and in big letters it said 'Welcome Home Geoff'. Only a couple of people were coming down the street and one said "Is it him"? And the other said "No, too thin". Turning down the passage, on the wall at the bottom was 'Welcome Home Geoff' in coloured lights. I knocked on the door, my mother came and broke down. My weight was six stone. My first day home was very eventful. People came to say they were glad I had made it home safe. I was given ten weeks leave on double rations which helped me go from six stones to nearly thirteen stones. My papers to return came together with a rail ticket for Beaconsfield near Slough. After three weeks the postings came. I was to return to Alnwick, Northumberland, to the castle. The training was light and there were a lot of young men who had just joined up. Then I found I was on CO orders at 9 o'clock. About 14 were present, ten were defaulters and three were there for not behaving themselves. I was marched in



The Second World War Experience Centre
Reproduction of an article from the Centre's website
<http://www.war-experience.org/collections/land/alliedbrit/steer/default.asp>

with my beret still on, saluted the CO and then he told me I had been given a C in C Certificate for bravery, signed by Monty, which I still have today. We had a celebration that night in Alnwick.

The time had come to get demobbed. It was just before Christmas. I went and got my old job back in the foundry and believe it or not I started work on New Year's Day 1946.

These extracts have been selected from Geoff's memoir 'Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire'. Geoff still lives in Yorkshire and has kindly donated the jacket he wore on the march to the Second World War Experience Centre.