



Dunkirk

The Centre is honoured to have care of Ted Stonard's memoir regarding life in the Royal Artillery during the retreat to Dunkirk, [service in the North African campaign](#), and, following fierce fighting and capture at Gazala, his experiences as a POW. The Centre also holds Bombardier Stonard's photographs and a tape-recorded interview. Here we are pleased to feature extracts from Ted's recollections of service in the BEF in 1939/40:

On joining the 72nd Field Regiment RA as a reinforcement in 1939, I felt as though I had been transported to another world. Unable to understand the spoken word, just as they probably did not understand my accent, treated with suspicion, I came in for more than my fair share of guards, fire pickets and fatigues. It was not a very happy time. It took the BEF and Dunkirk to be accepted as a worthy member of the Regiment and having acquired and mastered a 'Geordie' vocabulary, I was ordained as a 'Temporary Geordie'. No man, in my opinion, could have had a greater accolade bestowed upon him!



Ted Stonard 1939, while at the 7th Field Training Regt.

In January 1940, Ted and E troop of 286th Battery, having landed in France, were transported to Voutre:

The men were billeted in ancient barns, on straw-lined floors and at night the rats would run through the barns. The Sergeants found a disused chicken house and made it into a Sergeants' Mess! Living was very basic and primitive; the officers were billeted in the farmhouses. The men wondered if it could get any worse than this – it did later on! Early one February morning the Regiment moved off when the whole 50th Division was moved nearer to the Belgian frontier. The routine continued as before; endless fatigues, the digging of latrines and training and what spare time the men had was spent in buying eggs and potatoes from the farmers, who quickly set up 'shop' wherever troops were billeted.

The Regiment had been allocated a defensive position between Lille and Roubaix, a series of gun emplacements along the Belgian frontier. The Regiment dug and revetted these gunpits and trenches, the infantry doing the same a few miles in front of the artillery. The winter in France had been particularly cold and wet, most of the troops had received parcels of knitted socks and balaclava helmets. These were most welcome. Apart from the weather and the restrictions of the Army, conditions on the whole were not too uncomfortable; the men were fitter and getting hardened to an outdoor life. Some of the medically unfit had been sent home. Men who had left



skilled and reserved occupations were also sent home, but with the approach of spring, a rude and terrifying awakening was rapidly approaching.

Early during the morning of 10 May, heavy AA fire was heard and seen in the direction of the Belgian frontier, it seemed much heavier than usual. Rumour began to circulate. The order was given to 'prepare to move' and immediately the Regiment became a hive of activity; guns and vehicles were made ready and formed up on the road. Orders had been received to advance into Belgium. The 50th Division was destined to spend most of the next two or three weeks 'swanning' backwards and forwards getting hopelessly enmeshed with the tens of thousands of refugees who blocked most of the route along which the BEF was ordered. The elaborate defensive positions that they had laboriously dug were never occupied. On reaching the frontier, the Regiment drove straight into Belgium, the inhabitants lined the roadside, waving and cheering. Bottles of wine were continuously being passed into the Gun Quads.

For the first week we moved around from one position to another without firing a shot. Distances of only a few miles would take hours and the roads became choked with the milling masses of refugees with their many means of transport. The sound of gunfire in the distance was heard, particularly at night when the sky was illuminated by the flash of gunfire. During the day German aircraft dominated the sky, flying in large formations. Women and children, the old and the infirm made the majority of the refugees from the start. Later they were joined by French and Belgian deserters, or men trying to find their unit. It was pitiful to see women carrying their children, pushing a few belongings in prams or carts, the strain showing upon their faces.

The most saddening part which the British were forced to do was to try and keep the road clear for the military convoys. Military Police cleared a passage by pushing the people, along with their transport, aside, their ears deaf to the pleadings and curses of the refugees. Frequently German aircraft flew over the congested roads, machine gunning.

Ted's troop was part of Frankforce, detailed to launch a counter-attack at Arras, with French forces. The attack had the effect of encouraging German High Command to over-estimate the strength of the BEF. Two week later:

Towards the evening the Troop pulled back several miles and came into action; it was here that everybody was informed of the seriousness of the situation. The Troop was to fire off their remaining ammunition and destroy the guns and vehicles. After everything had been destroyed they were to march towards the coast where it was hoped that the BEF would be evacuated. Orders were given for all surplus personnel to retire to the rear, leaving the Sergeant and one Gunner to destroy the gun. E Sub's Sgt Jack Thompson called for a volunteer to stay with him. Ignoring the old saying of not volunteering for anything, I agreed to help him destroy the gun, giving as my excuse that having spent the greater part of the last six months polishing and cleaning the gun, I was entitled to the dubious 'honour' of blowing it up!



All personal equipment was abandoned and the three remaining lorries joined the mass of vehicles all going in the same direction. There were no refugees now, only the BEF in one long mass of vehicles slowly moving along the road. A few miles out of Poperinghe the Batteries dismounted from their lorries and as they marched along the road the ditches along the side were filled with equipment: books, papers, smashed wireless sets and blankets. The BEF marched in a disciplined order, carrying what equipment and weapons they could. Some of the officers and NCOs carried rifles which they had found discarded, some carried two! As the Troop approached nearer to Dunkirk, clouds of smoke and the incessant bombing could be seen and heard. Passing through the outer perimeter of the first defence line where British infantry were dug in, we exchanged banter and insults in the typical British manner and threaded our way through barbed wire and road blocks. After about an hour the order was given to go back. Apparently with so many thousands of men blocking the road, it was becoming impossible for the town of Dunkirk to take any more. All marching troops were directed to La Panne, a summer resort about two miles away. A beach café flew the Red Cross flag. Outside, lying on stretchers, were some fifty or more wounded. Some of the men were groaning, but most had been sedated and were swathed in bloodstained bandages, quietly waiting their turn to be carried into the café.

The tide was out and a long queue of at least several thousand men lined the water's edge. Far out in the sea were ships of every description, too large to get any nearer. Rowing boats were ferrying men out to the ships. At first sight one gave in to despair and could not imagine how anyone could possibly escape. By now everyone realised how desperate the situation was, but amongst all this disarray one could recognise order and organisation. A Major, immaculately dressed in his Service dress was giving orders and the long queues of men were responding to his discipline.

The beach, which was flat and sandy, was about 400 feet in depth when the tide was out, reduced to half that distance when the tide was in. It was getting late in the evening. The boats were still taking men off the beaches but many were returning to the sand dunes and settling down for the night. Members of the Battery managed to find a place amongst the dunes. Others were digging themselves deep slit trenches. Soldiers of several nationalities were continuously pouring into the area. There were shouts in French and English of men trying to locate their units or friends. No fires or smoking was allowed but many ignored this and smoked. Dozens of cigarette ends were glowing in the darkness; only after a lone aircraft dropped bombs at random were the cigarettes extinguished!

At first light the enemy aircraft resumed their activity. Every time the sound of a bomb descending was heard, everybody threw themselves flat. Quite often the bombs landed amongst them; there was a continuous shout for 'Stretcher Bearers'. Along with three members of the Battery, I decided to walk along the beach and try to get on to a boat. Reaching the outskirts of Dunkirk a sailor directed us towards the docks where we saw a long queue being formed. We shuffled our way along a wooden pier at the end of which was a destroyer. On reaching the destroyer we were grabbed and practically thrown aboard the boat. At that moment Stukas appeared overhead and began their



vertical dive. The anti-aircraft guns on the destroyer opened fire; the noise was deafening. The shriek of a bomb was heard above all this noise, followed immediately by an enormous explosion. The ship seemed to rise up out of the water and assumed a heavy list against the pier. I was flung against the pier. Gathering my senses, I climbed back, still clutching my rifle! The several hundred men who were stretched along the pier were now joined by the crew and the soldiers from the stricken destroyer.

Walking back along the foreshore, dozens of small boats of every description, fishing smacks, pleasure motorboats, yachts, were ferrying troops to the larger ships about a mile out. Many of these had an RN rating or PO in charge who, in the finest tradition of the Senior Service, ferried the 'Pongos' out to the ships with cheerful and humorous efficiency. Our Battery Commander Major J Lyall, negotiated with the Captain of a Dutch Coaster to take the Battery off, so long as we unloaded the ship of its supplies by evening. Major Lyall immediately set about organising the men into a 'chain' starting on the beach and stretching out to the ship. He stayed in the water many hours. Later in the afternoon the tide started to rise. The water was now rising to shoulder height for those alongside the ship. The Captain announced that he was prepared to receive the men and depart. After climbing aboard, boots squelching with water, many minus battledress blouse and with sodden trousers, those with rifles were directed to the stern and joined a number of men, some with Bren guns, firing at the aircraft which were now bombing the ships in-shore. The bombs were dropping amongst the small boats; several were hit or overturned by the explosions. The sea was full of struggling men; among them were small boats of every description still picking up the survivors. The ship went full astern and gradually moved away from the beach, winding its way amongst the abandoned wrecks. Aboard, on the closely-packed decks, the survivors took stock, looking around seeking friends and members of their Regiments. Many, not having slept for days, fell asleep.

Most of 286th Battery returned home through Margate. After disembarking, and emptying rifle magazines, they were directed to the railway station. Every time the train stopped, fruit and cigarettes were showered upon the troops. Late in the afternoon the train pulled into Matlock where the Battery marched through the town, bedraggled, dirty and in various stages of undress, to be billeted in a school.



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

The images of Capt Barter and the retreat to Dunkirk were kindly donated by Gill and Kirsty Lloyd, his daughter and granddaughter. Capt Barter also served later in the North African campaign, Sicily and Italy, and the Centre is delighted to have care of a collection of [personal letters](#), his memoir and personal artefacts.



Leslie Barter far right and his brother James second left, in France 1939/40.



The village of Neurieuil, Arras road. Leslie Barter was in action here for three days. Refugees were leaving during the fighting. German troops were approx 3 miles away.



British, French and Belgian soldiers retreating to the coast and Dunkirk, from Belgium, Wednesday morning 29 May 1940. Many fell into action again, including ourselves, before reaching the coast. L Barter.



Dunkirk beach, Friday 31 May 1940. British and French troops waiting and watching. L Barter.



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Dunkirk beach, Friday 31 May 1940.
A/A shells bursting top right corner.
British troops still waiting. L Barter.



Another section of Dunkirk beach, Friday 31
May 1940. British troops watching and
hoping. British destroyer waiting for chance
to either come alongside mole or send boats
to beach edge. L Barter.



Part of residential quarter of Dunkirk from
beach, Friday 31 May 1940.



Part of my Battery being towed out to
British ships minus all equipment except
steel helmets, Friday 31 May 1940. L
Barter.