

# **Autobiography**

**1939-1940**

**James McFarlane Spence**

**To the many friends, who, during the war,  
Have shown to me, such great kindness,  
And fellowship – and to “my greatest hero’s”  
My “Father and Mother”**

## **Preface**

This is not a fairy tale, neither am I Agatha Christie!. It is merely my insignificant experiences, since the beginning of this war, which now engulfs the whole of humanity.

To the more literary minded persons, no doubt, this feeble effort of mine would give many headaches, but as this is not intended for the eyes of these clever people, I go ahead writing just what I saw and experienced. Had I to rely on my memory, for all the events, during this first year of war, I should be in a very sorry state - for my memory is worse than that of a metaphorical hen!

However I kept a diary all thro' (not a wise thing to do when so near the enemy, but I remained within the military rule against this, by keeping the diary always 7 days behind, and entering items in a more or less personal manner!) and with references to this "wee bookie", I have compiled the following autobiography, (if such, this may be called!)

## Chapter I

In August, 1939, the “war clouds” dispersed by Mr. Chamberlain less than 12 months before, again appeared on the horizon, but this time they were much darker and denser. Continuing his protective policy Hitler marched into Poland.

Since the militia came into force in 1937, I had decided that sooner or later I would join the “territorials” The more terrier service I had in before I was called up by the militia, the less I should have to do, after completion of my six months as a conscript.

A few of my chums, already proud members of the TA kept urging me to join, and with this new crisis upon us, I made up my mind to join at once.

I joined what I thought was the same Artillery Battery as my chums, but lo’ and behold it was another unit altogether!

Being a radio mechanic (that was the only reason I got into the battery, who were already at full strength)

I was put in the “first line” whilst my confederates were in what was known as the “second line”.

There I was, shoved into a crowd of men, all strangers to me!.

I enlisted on the Tuesday before the war and three days later the Territorial Army was “called out” and until then I had never met one of my (now) “brother soldiers” before!

Incidentally, I happened to be in a house, close to the drill hall and heard the BBC announce the “calling up” and I immediately reported at the hall, before the news had reached there!

However, we were told to report at eight that night, and after many tearful goodbyes, I arrived there, complete with full kit, etc, not knowing what I felt like!. Imagine the surprise at home, when I was home about an hour later demanding my supper, and praising the army for such considerateness.

We were nearly three weeks, at home every night and for meals, but every day, we were “going away today, sure!!”. I had more goodbye kisses during that period than I can remember (not that I objected very much when the girls carried out this operation)

However, like most good things, this stay at home period came to an end, and we eventually left “Auld Reekie” for “Down South”.

Our destination was the Salisbury Plains, the home of the Royal Artillery and we were shoved into Fargo Camp (which for arctic weather conditions must hold the world record!)

And it's so lonely that even the sheep talk to you, and cast a pitying eye upon you! Here we were to undergo intensive training for some weeks – but the only thing I can remember of intensity was the aforementioned cold weather!

We were under canvas, and some fellows with three bits of tape on their jackets, would have us up at the unearthly hour of six in the morning, running around like “March hares” doing physical training! Then during the day all were instructed in their various jobs. At this time I was still a “specialist in radio” but the powers that be decided they did not require such a person and I was put in the signal section. I was only here about a week when I was shifted from there – owing to the incoming of “reservists” (ex-regular soldiers) to the battery, and they took over as experienced men. So I went onto a gun team.

Whilst in Fargo I found what the “Naffy” was and there I squandered my soldiers pay! The Salvation Army Canteen and the YMCA, do a great deal there, in the way of giving the lads in Khaki good food for a few coppers, and I became very friendly with the Adjutant at the SA meetings – who, with his wife, later on administered to the BEF in France!

When our guns came up to us from ordinance, we, of course had to fire them on the plains. We did so and recorded such good shooting, that within a fortnight we were in France!

I'll never forget that, my first time on the guns! I knew as much about a gun as I do about flying! Fortunately my duties consisted only of carrying charges. As soon as I had carried a charge for the gun, I got as far back as the “No 1” would allow me!! However after the first shot, which felt as if someone was dragging my clothes off me (!! ) I got used to it.

Ours were heavy guns and the shell fired weighed nearly as much as a bag of coal, and had a diameter like that of a tea plate! (not a nice thing to fall in your napper!)

## Chapter II

A week before the end of October, we left Fargo at dead of night, with an unknown destination before us – tho' everyone was certain that France was to "house" the 51<sup>st</sup> Heavy RA, soon!

We left Dover at dawn next morning and just about noon the ship docked in Dunkirk harbour. We were met by a shower of rain on embarking, then had a six hours wait, in the "luxurious coaches" of a French railway!

Little did we dream that in several months time, we would be fighting for existence in the self-same port of Dunkirk. Incidentally our regiment was the first of the BEF to disembark at this port, as all previous units had landed at ports further south. Thus we arrived in the country where our fathers had fought the same enemy, twenty odd years ago.

The journey in that "derelict lump of rolling stock" was like going thro' the cobbles of Musselburgh a horse and cart! Goodness knows how we went, but it took us nearly 12 hours to get to our destination – only 80 miles from Dunkirk. We found ourselves in a village square, with the church clock booming midnight. For the first night we were billeted in a building which we thought was a hotel, because of the name above the door "Hotel de Ville"! (However that is French for "Town Hall") Next morning we hopped off before parade to do some scouting, got some of our silver changed for French francs, this strange money was quite bewildering to us and I suppose we were cheated right and left!! I remember the first thing we bought was a half tin of some meat paste stuff (we were going to live in style!). After half an hours haggling with the good wife of the butcher, we made our purchase, but couldn't wait till mealtime to sample our "goods" so we scoffed them in the street! When parade time came it was "discovered" that some of the lads had "discovered" the "estaminets" – really miniature pubs, for everyone in that country drinks beer or wines – without exception!

I'm glad to say that these estaminets made little profit off me – and the little they did was in the lemonade that they so, suprisingly served me with !!!

Our permanent billet in this village – oh the name of it was "Douvrain" – was in the former cinema hall. The windows had been painted out, and a real dismal place it was – lights had to be kept on all day. In the bitterly cold months we were there, there was a flu epidemic and I know of no-one in the whole battery who escaped!

The wonder is that we all survived, for there were many serious hospital cases and our billet was condemned time and time again by the MO (sorry-"doctor"). However the spirit of the chaps there, was

just as it always was! joking at the inconveniences and always cheery! – This doesn't count the early winter mornings where the cold water in which we washed in froze before our eyes !!!

About once a week we got a hot spray at the pithead baths of a nearby coal mine – what a luxury that was! (the spray, I mean!)

I think its about time I told you about the last three months of '39

Well, at Douvrain we were training – for we left England only six weeks after calling up and we had very little training during that time. So the daily routine was something after this manner.

6.30 am	Reveille & Roll Call
7.30 am	Breakfast
8.45	General Parade
9.00	Physical Training
10.00 hrs	Gunners – Laying (aiming) Signallers – mine laying Drivers – vehicle cleaning
10.45 hrs	(15 minutes) Break (coffee!!)
11.00 hrs	Gunners – gun drill Signallers – Buzzers and lamp reading Drivers – Gas Drill
13.00 hrs	Dinner
14.00 hrs	General Parade Gunners – Gun drill Signallers – Wireless Drivers – Lecture
16.30 hrs	TEA
21.30 hrs	Roll Call
22.00 hrs	Lights Out

That is a typical day in the 51<sup>st</sup> Heavy Reg. RA in Douvrain

After tea we were usually free, unless on guard – which came about once a week! There was little to do however – either go to bed or go out to one of the many cafes or estaminets and eat and drink!

The favourite way of the lads of spending an evening was, a huge plate of eggs and chips in a café, a glass of beer and early to bed. My evening consisted of answering the numerous letters I received, “oeufs et frites” (yes that’s egg and chips) and bed – without the beer!

A few of the less scrupulous personnel of the battery would go into the nearby industrial town of Lens, where for a number of francs they could procure the company of undesirable women – a thing which in continental countries is legal practice.

The Regiment ran a concert party, and gave at least one concert a week during the winter! Our “piece de resistance” (I was a bashful member of the party) was a pantomime given at the New Year – our own version of Jack and the Beanstalk!

In November the two sections of the battery left Douvrain and went “up forward” to prepare battle positions on the Belgian Border. This preparation consisted of digging in the special platform required for our gun, building a sand bag wall round the gun, - head high and camouflaging the whole show with camouflage netting – which looked like the rear of a bridal car, with coloured strips of canvas tied all over.

The staff of the battery of course, remained in Douvrain all the time, and when our job was completed we went back there. In the middle of November, we were inspected by HM the King, up on the Franco-Belgian Border. The King looked very pale and worried – a complete contrast to the Duke of Gloucester who “rolled along” behind nodding to everyone and blowing his cold hands. The King, stopped and spoke to us, lined along a desolate wheat field. “A man if ever there was one, is our King.” To the political party – is it the Socialists? – who are opposed to all Royal Families, I should like to suggest that they pack their bags and scam to one of these harum-scarum foreign countries, where the people have to be ruled by house-painters and maniacs!

If I have recalled the wrong political party, forgive me, for I know as much about politics as a child of 2 does of trigonometry!

We moved from Douvrain at the end of January and moved up to the town of Hauborden outside the city of Lille.

### Chapter III

We liked Haubourdin much better! For instance, it was bigger, more livelier and one could get a tram to the hills for a couple of francs. Also at H., I had quite a cushy job.

We got the use of a charging board at the local brewery and I looked after the charging of the wireless car accumulators and the batteries. Whilst we were, here, the left section were “confined” for about a fortnight due to a case of spinal meningitis, but no one was smitten and the afflicted individual made a marvellous recovery.

On the last day of February, I came home on my long awaited 10 days leave, but returned very fed-up (the army term is “browned-off”!)

Whilst we were in H., a British Army team met the French Army in a football game at Lille, and of course yours truly was there, “toute suite”! Imagine my surprise when, during the shouting I heard a familiar voice, and elbowing my way thro’ the crowd I met a chum of my school and Boys Brigade days!! The look of surprise on his face when he saw me, was funny! He was out in France with the RASC and we had a great time together. When we parted his last words were “take care of yourself now, son”! Today he is a prisoner of war in enemy territory and may be wounded!! Mentioning football I may say that “A” Battery had a fairly strong team and were undefeated by any brother BEF team (take a bow now boys!) But all this “mucking about”, doing no fighting at all, rather got on ones nerves, and we were all wishing for action.

Well, we were going to get our chance now, for on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1940 Germany invaded Belgium and the BEF, concentrated on the frontier, and “on their toes”, moved into Flanders to meet the enemy. A thing Britain should have done long before – but weren’t the French, in complete command of all the Allied Forces ?!?!?

## Chapter IV

On Monday 13<sup>th</sup> May 1940, the British Expeditionary Force – (second corps) – crossed the frontier into Belgium. Our regiment was composed of 4 batteries of RHA. We are “A” Battery and were equipped with 6 inch mobile field guns – a marvellous gun for it had the mobility, range and fired a fairly big shell. The other three batteries had 9.2” Howitzers – very heavy pieces of artillery and anything but mobile. So “A” battery left the Regiment and went off on our own.

The previous convoys moving into Belgium had all been machine-gunned and bombed and as we went further inland we saw evidence of this at the roadsides. We however, were unmolested altho’ time and time again, enemy planes passed overhead. I think our cunning camouflage paid a big part in this. Right into the heart of Belgium we travelled, to a place Deigham, beyond Brussels. On the way in we got quite a welcome but, an important point to note is that the people were not unanimous in their welcome and there were several “thumbs down”!! The fifth column already had a hold. We signallers travelled in open “buggies”- 15 ent motor trucks, with a floor space of 6 x 8. Into this truck we had about 20 miles of telephone wire, a reeling in contraption, a hamper of tools and spares, (many a time that self same hamper was nearly chucked off!!), half a dozen telephone sets, six men and all their kits! So you can imagine the squeeze! So much so that we let down the tailboard on its chains, and it was on this precarious position that we did all our “touring” in Belgium – sitting on the tailboard !!

At Deigham we slept the night in a dance hall and all next day and night we dug in our guns, while in the darkness, the fireworks at the Battle of Louvain, lit the sky for miles around. Our orders had been to proceed to Louvain, but our infantry had already been forced to retire to the town itself, where fierce hand to hand fighting was going on.

No sooner had we got our guns into position, than we got orders to take up a new position elsewhere. Such is the work of a mobile heavy battery like ours! In this place I was put on the Bren gun, as half the Bren gunners were on leave! So we moved back thro Brussels to our new position, just outside the city on the N.W. side. That night we slept by the roadside – my first slumber in the open air, on a Belgian pavement!! While Belgian infantry and cavalry marched up and down the line – a few inches from our sleepy heads! Next morning, we again started and dug in our guns and got our first bombing – but all the “eggs” fell wide!! I was on Bren duty at the time, but the blighter wouldn’t come low enough, to let us have a shot at him, and we had to content ourselves with watching the A.A. break up the enemy formation!

This was just outside King Leopold's Palace!! Had I just turned the Bren gun and let fly at the traitor, I wonder if there would have been any difference in the Belgian surrender! (excuse the ridiculous idea, but the thought just struck my feeble brain, when I heard how the adorable Leopold had given his country to Hitler)

Once more we got the order to move without firing a shot, yet!

I think I should explain the working of a Battery, before I go further. Our Battery is a 4 gun battery (the light artillery have 6,8 or more) To attend to each gun there is a sub section, thus A sub, B sub, C sub, D sub. A section is 2 subs:- there A&B constitute Right Section and C&D Left Section! So far for the gunners! Then signallers and B.C.A's (the surveyors who work out the degrees, angles, range etc) make up a section H.Q.1. The remaining section is H.Q.2 – drivers. And the two H.Q subs constitute “the battery staff”! So that when the battery goes into action, it goes as “a battery” or in two sections! So when we left Brussels and the “palace” the right section went on and the left section stayed behind. I was a right section signaller (OP). I don't know where we went or how, because I hadn't slept in a couple of days and fell asleep in the “buggie”.

Our infantry must have been holding them well, and advanced about 10 miles, for we got a days rest in an orchard. This rest consisted of sleeping and dodging bombs and machine gun “missiles”! Next day the battery was re-united at a place called Hierwig and once more, the guns went into position!

The waggon lines (where all our cars were parked) was in a long avenue of trees – marvellous natural camouflage! whilst we reposed in an orchard, till next day!! Here I must praise the RASC – the service corps, who supply rations and ammunition. Never once was the RASC wagon very late, in spite of the fact that we were never in the same spot twice. Most of the praise goes to Jones, an RASC dispatch rider (called in the army – Don R!) who was attached to us, as guide for the ration waggon and simply as convoy leader! We all owe our lives to this quite unassuming fellow.

At the Orchard, the RASC actually got mail up to us and mail off home!! As well as a fruit farm this was a poultry farm, so we got a good stock of eggs, chicken and even slit the throat of an innocent pig – but It was good bacon!!! Then at last came the word we were waiting –“Tomorrow we go into action – definitely”!!

It was early next morning when we arrived at the gun position and our signallers car – MI – began running our line out to the observation post (OP). In this case the OP was over 5 miles in front of our guns – just behind the infantry. It took us nearly four hours to get our line out – until late afternoon in fact, just when a Jerry battery and a British 60 pounder battery had a little duel. The only bother was that our OP

lay right in the path, and towards night time it got too hot and we were forced to move the OP about a mile to the right. At 8pm that night our battery went into action!! We must have been the heaviest artillery in the line, cos our guns drowned all others!

What a thrill it was for we fellows at the OP to hear our own shells going over – 100 lb of “certain death” within 100 yards radius of the burst!!

Thro’ glasses we watched them burst, flooding the sky with light. We were firing at a pre-arranged target (i.e. by use of maps) and I believe the target was a convoy moving along a main road.

Perhaps you will realise the accuracy of our artillery when I say that we fire at unseen objects. We “plot a point” on the map where our guns are, then a point for the target and in a few seconds, those very clever fellows, BCA’s give the range, angle etc and Bang! Away “ta ta”!!

In this case the OP reports the effect of the shots. About eleven that night we ceased fire, and a queer lull descended in the night air, and apart from occasional machine gun and rifle fire, from patrols, all was quiet. So much so that I went to bed in the OP, which was an evacuated farmhouse! My job was linesman!! A job reputed to be most dangerous – but I found it thrilling! The OP is in telephonic communication with the battery, and we lay the wire. But with so much shell fire, debris, etc the wire often gets broken and this is my job – to go out and repair the line! The line held in tact all that night, hence the reason I got my sleep! Next morning thro the glasses we got our first sight of the enemy artillery on the opposite slope. Our OP was on one slope, down in the valley the infantry were in action, and Jerries artillery on the other sloping side of the valley. All morning our guns “chucked over our gifts” for Adolf with great effect. One salvo of 4 shots wrecked a stretch of road and destroyed 18 tanks!!!!

By now, a 25 pounder battery of ours came into action directly in front of our OP and for hours played merry dickens with Jerry, until a Nazi reconnaissance plane got him spotted and directed enemy artillery on him! Out of that 8 gun battery only one undamaged gun, six gunners and the colonel got away alive! This only two hundred yards in front of us, with the result that our OP, the farm house began to look like a shambles, then the roof “gave up the ghost” and things got uncomfortably hot. The young officer in charge of the OP, nick-named “Archie” was the coolest bloke I’ve ever seen yet! And I don’t think I’ve ever laughed heartier than in that wrecked farmhouse, at the appropriate wisecracks everyone was making! One of the lads (Sam, a cockney with army service in India etc) was more worried about some eggs he had managed to scrounge than his skin!!

However things were getting rather warm now, and we reported to this effect back to the battery. Just then the “Old man” (Major) arrived at the OP and seeing how things were, gave the order to pack up.

Just as we were going to have our tea too!! However “orders (unfortunately) is orders” – so we got together all our gear, and phoned for the cars to come and pick us up (the cars couldn’t be left at the OP beside us as they would have given our position away, so they were in a wood, about a mile down the road). However as the cars tried to get up to the OP they were shelled, and the leading car blown right off the road and the driver badly injured. The other car couldn’t get past, of course owing to the state of the road and the driver went to attend to his injured brother-driver, and by a stroke of luck, an RAMC unit was nearby and they took charge of the injured man. This unfortunate chap – rather a pal of mine – who hails from Leith – is still missing and is the only one of our battery who didn’t come back

*Bob McConnell – died of wounds that day*

All this happening though, was unbeknown to we blokes who were awaiting the arrival of the cars, to remove as speedily from the OP. We waited about an hour, during which the infantry began to fall back, behind our OP, with the result that we now had nothing between ourselves and Jerry!

Then the officer, decided that it was high time that we got out of it – cars or no cars, so we had to carry all our belongings which consisted of blankets, coats, 2 telephone sets, radio set, 2 accumulators, 2 miles wire, dishes etc!! There were only five of us, including the officer, ”Archie”, so we grabbed as much as we could and started out! I was landed with the wireless set and accumulators – no little weight – so we got a couple of poles and laid the stuff on and carried it in stretcher fashion! My partner at the other end of the poles was “Sam” a London Cockney, and he had managed to find about a dozen eggs which he shoved in a tin and stuck it up on top of the contraption we were carrying!! Of course this comical procession was at once spotted by Jerry who gave us a dose of “machine gun toast” We dropped where we were, flat on our faces and wireless etc went up in the air and down with a crash! When the “salvo” subsided, I peeped-up at Sam, who was in the same attitude as I was (!) and there he was, clutching his tin of eggs!! With a smile he lisped (in true cockney language) “Coo, lumme, Jimmie ‘e nearly did for me eggs that time!!” Thus we made our way along the shell-cratered road, and time and again “fortune” smiled on us, and let us live. At least, Sam said it was fortune – I know different!

We at last reached the wood and the remaining undamaged car and all piled in, dumped ourselves down, weary and tired – but the jokes were still as numerous as ever!

On the way back to the battery, Jerry opened up with some heavy guns and the shells screamed over our heads, Evidently, a Jerry reconnaissance plane which had been up all day, had got our battery spotted at last, and his artillery let our guns have it, in return. And when we arrived back at the battery, one gun was out of action and they were having a hot time of it.

However we had no time to think of taking cover, we dumped off all surplus gear and men, and three of us went up the line again, reeling in our wire. This is a slow job! There is a winding gear in the car, but we could only “reel-in” at about 3 mile an hour, with the result that we got in five miles of wire, when we came upon our own infantry, who would let us go no further, so we turned round and beat it! Half way down the road we passed a creamery which had received a direct hit, so down pops Sam and into the building to emerge with a huge slab of butter – about 50 lbs!!! Off we went again, with shells dropping behind us all the way.

Arrived back at the guns, which were being dug out, I found that my chum, Matt, had been badly wounded by a shell burst. We had no doctor with our battery – only a regimental MO who was with RHQ and we didn’t know where they were! – still in Haubaurdin at that time I believe!! We got Matt into our car, with some difficulty and took him down to our waggon lines, about three miles behind the battery – where we had rested the day previously. He was half conscious and I joked with him to make him forget the pain of his wounds as the car jostled over the rough ground. At the “waggon lines” we handed him over to the ambulance man (an officer’s servant) who bound up his shattered arm. I don’t know what happened then to Matt – he must have been taken to a “clearing station”; for he eventually arrived back in Blighty, six days after – with his wounds still desiring proper attention.

The guns were meanwhile having a hard job, getting out of position – the damaged gun had its tyre and rim completely blown off, and the scammell tractor which pulls the gun also had a wheel off but we managed to get the gun out and away! A great achievement! The tractor, with 2 of its six wheels off, pulling a gun (10 tons) with one wheel. – causing a deep rut all along the road! Another scammell was ditched, and full of ammunition, couldn’t get out! So the ammo had to be transferred and two other scammells pulled their “ditched companion” out – knocking down a wall and two trees, while doing the job!! But these were mere details with H.E. shells popping around! So the convoy took up its position and away we went to another sector, our work here, having been completed! We travelled all night – where? – I don’t know, because I slept all the time and next day, the bedraggled convoy limped into “suicide wood” near Pachendale!

## Chapter V

In Suicide Wood, we rested. This name was given to the wood in the Great War of 14-18, but it was a haven of rest for us. We hid and camouflaged our lorries and by that time it was evening.

That tea, and fried eggs which formed our evening meal, is the best thing I've tasted yet – we had had nothing but hard biscuits and stale water for three days – little did we know that many more days would pass before we got another cooked meal!! Coming out of action the previous day we had picked up a sergeant and five gunners – the remnants of a field battery who had been wiped out, and they remained with us for a few days.

Well, after tea there was only one thing we wanted – BED!! However, before I could think of that luxury, I had to go and fix up the officer's radio for them – a thing I did any time we stopped for any length of time! How cheering it was to hear our home stations, inviting us to listen to “tea time melodies!”!!

Eventually I got to bed, but in the wood the insects were something terrible, so Jock and I went right into the middle of a cornfield and made our bed there! It wasn't too soft a bed as furrows are inclined to make a dent in ones back, but it was luxurious to us! Next morning, the owner of the field moaned about the young shoots of corn, we had killed (about six feet square in a field of many acres!!) I replied in my best Scotch-French accent that, in a few more hours he'd have no fields at all, if his fellow Belgians kept coming “down the line” instead of up!! Also that we carried very nice British rifles and were simply “itching” to try them out!!! He made off with a cloud of dust at his heels!!! That was something that always puzzled us!!!

Everytime we moved up hundreds of Belgian soldiers always passed going the other way! The refugees and the “running away” Belgians were a great help to Jerry by hindering the BEF on all fronts.

Next day we were on the move again and went into action again. This time the battery position was outside Menin – a famous place in the last war. The strange thing about this action is that we were firing in the opposite direction to previous actions, You will remember that Jerry broke thro the French lines at Luxemburg and pushed right on through Arras to the coast thus cutting off the BEF in Belgium!

This is why we had to swing round and defend our rear. And when we went into action at Menein, the guns were in Belgium, firing over the border into France!!- and our OP was in France! What a job we had, running out that OP line! We had to run right through the town which was still occupied by civilians, so we had to tie up our wire every few feet, also put it up high for sabotage and Fifth column work had plenty of scope there! Ten mile of wire we run out to that OP and I think I created quite a unique record!!

I was in Belgium 6 times, and France five times in about 4 hours!! All that night we sat in the OP watching enemy movements, thro the glasses! Things were fairly quite all night and I passed the time cracking jokes with the telephonist on the “exchange”!!

Next morning things began to hum, and Menin began to get battered with Jerry Heavy Artillery and the casualties were mostly civilian. In this “front” we were attached to the Belgian Army and got orders from them! However, when our signallers ran out a telephone line to the Belgian HQ, they had done a bunk! So we communicated with our infantry and they gave us targets and orders. In the shelling of Menin our line to the OP got damaged and blown up, in several places, and when we went into the ruined city to repair the damage we saw our first civilian casualties. In a line along the pavement, the dead were all laid out – mostly women and little children!

This is war! And in war, the innocents are usually those who suffer most.

A soldier of a Highland Infantry Regiment, who had stopped to aid the injured, grit his teeth and snarled, “let me get back up to that line – I’ve got something to settle with these square-heads!” With that he and his pals got back on their lorry and full speed up the line they went, thirsting for vengeance!

When we got back to our OP again, the order had come thro to pack up and come back to the battery, as any more firing we would do, would be “predicted”!! That is to say that by use of maps, we could lay on our target! Of course a predicted shot can only be carried out on a fixture, such as a road, bridge, railway, etc! In this case our target was an important bridge, and the guns were laid on this bridge and, the signal to open fire and shell it, was a rocket from our infantry! However, what concerned us at the moment was getting back from the OP along the shelled “Menin Road”. We had to, of course, reel in our wire and by the time we got half of it in things were “decidedly unhealthy” so we “cut it adrift” and “got going”. but to our dismay on entering Menein we found that the R.E.’s had blown up the bridge across the canal in the centre of town and there was no other means of crossing! “Well, this is a fine state of affairs!!” says our slightly annoyed officer, Archie, as he studied the map, looking for a way to escape!! And on the other side, a stupid wee Belgian anti-tank gun had a shot at us, evidently thinking us the Jerry advanced columns, in the dusk!!

Nothing else for it but to make a shot at getting to Robaix (about 10 miles along the canal” and see if we can beat Jerry to it – unless that bridge has been blown up too!! So off we went, driving like mad along that road! On our left, the blazing city of Menin suddenly made me remember that it was “Bonfire Day” – 24<sup>th</sup> May!!!! This road was deserted and the only thing we overtook was a motorcycle machine gun column, which had drawn up for a spell at the roadside. WE couldn’t see them very well in the half

darkness and it was only after we were well passed that it had dawned on us that they had been wearing grey uniform and square helmets!!

Yes! I'm afraid it was a Nazi unit, we had passed! Then we saw the funny side of it , and nearly fell off our "very comfortable" seat on the tailboard. We eventually got back to the battery, just as they received the order to retire – also the SOS signal to shell the "pre-arranged bridge" So all three guns fired then came out of action and away! Later we learned that we completely destroyed the bridge, with these three shots!

Once more we were on the move, under cover of darkness- once more I fell asleep on my tailboard perch!! At dawn the next morning, we stepped in the grounds of a "Chateau" in La Fache. There we lay for a whole day, before moving to a place Edgeworth just north of Lille!!

## Chapter VI

So here we were, back on the Franco-Belgian border once more! where the BEF had lain for nearly nine months, idle. Now, we were anything but idle for we were encircled by the enemy!! I think we knew that, several days before but it never bothered us in the slightest. It was while we were digging in our guns at this, (which was to be our last) position that we were all paraded and told that the “old man” had something to say to us.

Personally I was prepared to be told that we were definitely up against it and that we would have to make a stand!

The Major began by giving us an idea how things were, -(everyone at home, by this time knew that the BEF were cornered) but we didn't!

So, by the Belgian and French lines being broken, the BEF had to fall back to prevent themselves being cut off. Time and again this was the case and never once did the Nazis break through the British Lines, or even push them back!!

The story is told of a Highland Regiment in the front line, who for some official reason, never had the chance of using their bayonets, so when the officer in charge, went off for a few minutes, the sergeants in charge took a chance and gave the order to charge! This bayonet charge began an action which pushed the enemy back twelve miles! Once more however we had to come back again for we had no flank support - like Blackpool pier, away out on our own!!

To get back to the “old mans” speech!! – The order had come from England, that the personnel of the BEF must at all costs be saved, and as a result we were going back to England within the next 24 hours! Well, I don't know what we all thought, but there was a queer stillness. An hour ago, we had been bemoaning our luck and wishing with all our might that we were back in Blighty! But now that we were going home in such circumstances we were anything but overjoyed! However, the Major had pleaded with CRA to let us fire off all our remaining ammunition at Jerry, before we destroyed our guns and equipment!

That was the bitterest pill of all – destroying everything. Here, in this position we dumped everything superfluous – all small cars and bikes; the signallers got the job of “breakers up”, for in this case we had no OP, nor telephone communications and whilst the gunners were slinging a terrific barrage at the Jerry lines, we were going round with sledge hammers, smashing car engines, wireless sets (nearly broke my

heart! I myself destroyed about £200 of signalling gear) telephone etc and emptying our rifles into the tyre etc. All this time our shells were whining over our heads, and the damage must have been tremendous – I should have loved to see it!! However, Jerry must have suffered terribly for he sent out a squadron of big black bombers to silence the battery! Our ammunition was expended, the guns and tractors were destroyed and the whole battery piled into 4 big covered lorries. We just got out when out came the bombers and simply blasted the position that we had just left. If we had been twenty minutes later in leaving, it might have been a different story I had to tell – if any!

So concentrated were they on bombing the position, that our convoy of 4 lorries managed to slip away unseen along the tree-bordered “boulevard”!!

This was the afternoon of Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May, and had everything gone according to the original plan of evacuation we would have been home next day. We travelled all that afternoon towards the coast with frequent sudden stops and yells of “Take Cover” as Nazi planes dive-bombed and machine gunned the roads. We stopped that night at the roadside and in the morning, we found this certain road was like a “graveyard of cars” !! Here, some unit had dumped and set fire to all their gear (this unit, had been beside us at Fargo, Salisbury Plains last October). But the lads “found” something more interesting !! – a wrecked Belgian cart, full of bottles of Champagne !!! Did they get stuck into it !! Rather humorous to see a fellow sitting on the roadside with a “chunk” of corned beef between two “dog biscuits” and drinking one of the most expensive of wines!!!

One fellow in general had “a good time” for when the convoy moved off again (I had a wash – what a luxury!) there were 5 cars!! This slightly inebriated bloke had picked up an abandoned truck and was going to take it home with him! He protested most strongly when ordered out and back into one of the Battery cars! Certainly, it was a much better car – a brand new 1940 2 ton Commer – but we got “our kill” at Peter – the inebriated one! However, as we travelled on – we were making for Ostende – this bloke became a real nuisance especially when he got hold of a Bren gun and swung it about dangerously – so we promptly “clouted” him and sat on top of him !! Suddenly, the convoy stopped and a terrific explosion rocked the lorries. We had just been about to cross a bridge when it was blown up! We didn’t know it at the time but that must have been the last act of the Belgian army before they “ceased fire”. So we had to turn around back the way we had come – on the way I saw 2 Nazi bombers cop “direct hits” from Ack/Ack guns, and fly into pieces! Did we cheer!! Passing thro a town, a big building crashed a few feet behind our last lorry, after being hit by a high explosive bomb! The luck of the 51<sup>st</sup> still held!!

A few miles further on – about “Nieuport” we were stopped, whilst the Major went to see some of the “high heid yins”. When he came back we were divided into two parties of about 50 in each. We were told that the Belgians had packed up and that we (-where was our luck now!!-) were to hold the “Yser” canal till our infantry could be brought up. You see, this was the Belgian sector and our infantry were on our

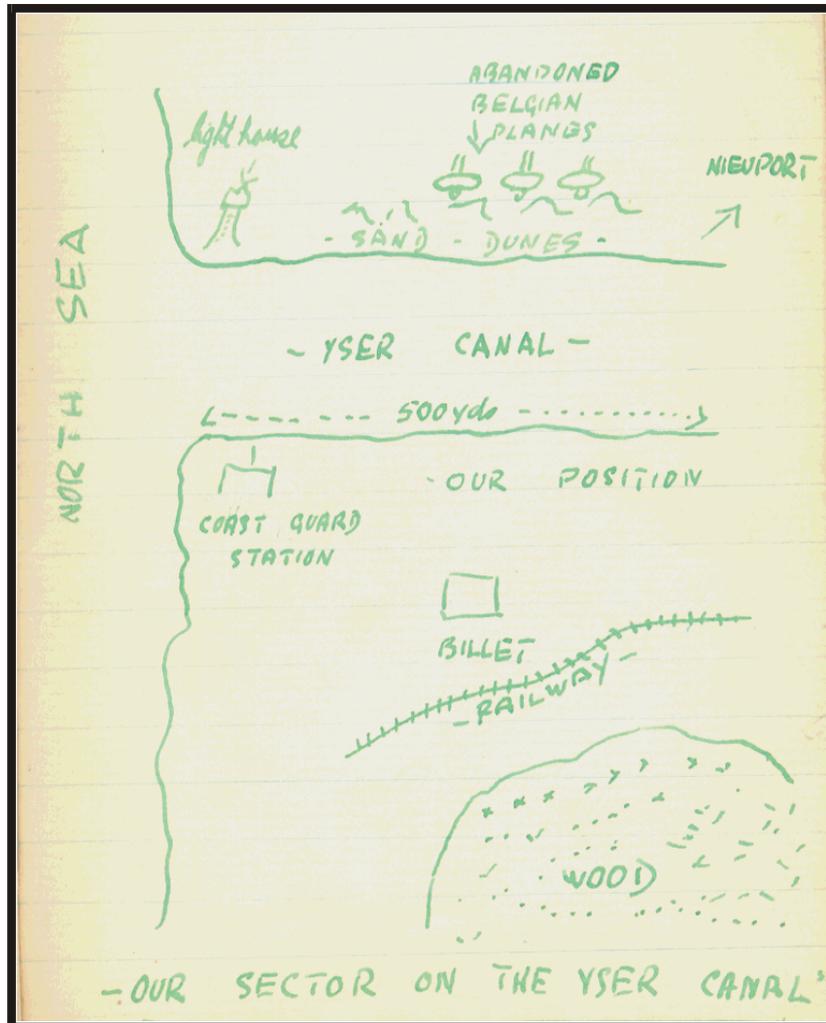
own and the broken French sectors!! So we, the Artillery, were to become Infantry !! (and the job of an infantryman did NOT appeal to me).

This was 2pm on Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> and the other party took first shift from 2-10pm. The remainder of the Battery went to a billet (about half a mile from the canal – previously the residence of the Italian ambassador in Belgium!) The reason that only 2 parties of 50 went on duty was that we only had 50 rifles!! At 10 that night the second party relieved the other and I was an infantryman now!! It was pitch dark of course, and the officer on duty told us that we were only a reserve line and we had to keep a lookout for rubber boats trying to cross! So we just strolled about, keeping our eye on the canal – during the first half hour, one imagined that every ripple was a Nazi rubber boat and many of the more nervous blazed away at nothing. Not a thing happened – and at six in the morning we were relieved by the first party. Before relieved however, I cleaned up my rifle, which was so choked with sand, that I had to fire a round to clean it. That was the first time I'd ever fired a rifle!!

We had breakfast and got a few hours sleep to be awakened about 11am by dropping shells and “mortars” One hit the house and we thought was “all up” with us! At noon we had dinner then at two, we went out to relieve the other party who were having a lively time of it, Real infantry stuff this!! crawling up to relieve the other blokes! However, the shelling had died down a little now and we took the other lads places. They had dug holes for themselves and Jock and I squeezed ourselves into “our hole”!! The relieving infantry were due at 5pm so we were only to be on the canal until then.

However about 4 o'clock, they started shelling again And did they give us it!! The Jerry heavy artillery shelled the town at the back of us, and their “trench mortars” peppered the whole canal bank! How we all escaped without an injury, can only be put down to one thing – Providence! During the bombardment, the infantry, East Lancers, who were our relief lost about half of their men and when 5 o'clock came, no relief was forthcoming.

That afternoon, of digging ones head into the sand, did not appeal to either Jock or I! I don't mind bombs – you can see them coming! – But shells – no thanks! We got that, we could tell as soon as we heard the gunfire, whether it would be near us, or not! If we heard the shell whistling, it was OK and would go beyond, but if we didn't hear that whistle, it was time to do our “ostrich act” !! During a lull in the barrage, we would extricate ourselves then nearly choke laughing at each other! Just at the back of four, we saw two cars, on the opposite side of the canal! I must explain that the sector our battery was where the canal (YSER) met the sea, and we were spaced at intervals for a distance of 500 yards.



When the “tea time barrage” died down, some of the lads got out of their holes: to stretch themselves, immediately came the staccato from the other side – machine guns! Well, here they were! The Nazi hordes had moved up during the artillery barrage! They had met with no opposition of course, and when they came to the canal bank, they must have got quite a shock when our Bren gunners gave them “what for” and they made themselves very scarce behind the sand dunes!! Every time they showed themselves we tried our hand at sniping – and with quite good results. I was beginning to enjoy myself then, but darkness suddenly fell.

Now for it, thought Jock and I – they'll try to cross now! Then the dusk was suddenly "chased away" as from the other side a sheet of flame shot up. The Jerries had set fire to some abandoned Belgian planes, and the whole district was lit up. Under course of the smoke we saw several Jerries pull up a field gun, but a burst from the Bren gun settled them and the gun was dropped and the survivors "scrammed" and left it!! This cross-fire went on all evening and occasionally we heard guttural German orders roared out. By this time, their infantry had been greatly re-enforced with mechanised units, etc. and by 10 o'clock there must have been a few thousand on the opposite bank!! – and on our side, 50 of us!! Had they known I wonder what would have happened !!! Well. 10.30pm came and no sign of our relieving infantry yet! Then behind us a 4.5 howitzer battery which had come up, opened fire and blasted the enemy lines. Of course, Jerries artillery replied and away we went at it again!, what a great sight a bursting shrapnel shell is – at a distance!!

Since we came on at two in the afternoon, we hadn't seen any of our own lads at all, but about eleven, someone crawled along to us and said that we were just waiting for the order to retire as the relieving infantry had arrived and were digging in, a few hundred yards behind us!

Half an hour later, one of our officers crawled along to us and told us to follow him at 10 yard intervals! Everyone else was away, and he was just giving a last look round, when he remembered us, who were the last men on the left flank. Off we went, "Sandy" (the officer!) Jock, then myself – throwing ourselves flat every time a shell came our way! Later it dawned on me that I must have been the last of our lot to leave that canal bank! One comical moment in the retire "crawl" was when a big Nazi bomber passed overhead, the officer – who evidently had a good few "glasses" – fell flat and whispered "Now, keep quite or they'll hear you"!! And we could hardly hear each other speaking for the roar of the engine, and bursting shells and bombs!! We eventually got to the house where we were billeted – or rather the part of it that was left!! – Grabbed a mouthful of bread and cold tea and joined the rest of the Battery, already piled into the lorries – or rather the three that were left!

We sat in these lorries for over an hour whilst shells dropped nearby and tore through the bodywork etc. It still beats me how we sustained not one casualty there!! If it were made public, why we remained for a whole hour, exposed, unnecessarily, to the shell fire, someone would get it "hot", but its better forgotten now!

At last we moved off, leaving the East Lancs, who by this time had already suffered heavy casualties by the self-same shellfire as we had been mercifully delivered from! We moved along the shell and bomb-cratered road, thro the town of La Panne, which was a blazing inferno, and stopped in a small wood,

about a mile or so from the sea, and on the other side of La Panne. We were told to get a few hours sleep so “down to it” we got!

In the morning, we found we had encamped for the night in a Belgian ammunition dump – or I believe it was French! Here, we destroyed any remaining equipment and vehicle we had! And marched down to the beach! Halfway down however we were stopped and sent back again, till tea time, and we just flopped down again on the ground, and slept! At about 5pm, we were aroused and down to the beach, this time. We just got on to the beach when about 30 seconds later, 3 Nazi bombers roared down. It was then that I got perhaps the greatest thrill of my nineteen years – and those Nazi planes got the shock of a lifetime!! For from the beach, up went a terrific barrage, of AA, Bren guns, Lewis guns and rifle fire. The sky was filled with “death”, and red tracers. You’ve no idea the joy it was to watch that barrage!! I’ll never forget as long as I live. Two of the planes, when they saw what awaited them about turned and beat it. The third wasn’t so lucky and he ran right into it, carried on out to sea where he crashed!

By this time there must have been several thousand of the BEF on the beach and as twilight drew near, dark grey shapes of destroyers steamed up and “heave to” about three quarters of a mile out – this was the nearest they could come, owing to the shallow waters. These destroyers dropped little pinaces and small rowing boats, rafts and even rubber canoes, were got from somewhere and the job of getting aboard the ships, was begun. The presence of destroyers drew attention of course of the Nazi “Luftwaffe” who continued their relentless bombing and machine gunning! A flight of Hurricanes appeared – the first British fighting aircraft we had seen, since the invasion of the Netherlands!!

Perhaps you wonder at the criticism meted out to the RAF by the BEF – there was the reason:- we had NO aerial support whatsoever. However I think they “atoned” at “Dunkirk”!! This flight of Hurricanes, simply cleaned the sky!!, but no sooner they were gone than the Nazis sneaked back again. About midnight it came my turn to get into a boat, and seven of us piled into a rowboat of about 15 feet. What a job we had getting the thing into deep enough water, pushing against the breakers! I was up to the armpits before we got going properly. Once outside the surf, going was not so bad, and we reached a destroyed about 20 minutes after leaving the beach.

When we got there, two men had to go back again with the boat, but as there was no one else keen on going back, I volunteered and myself and another fellow signaller took the boat back. The fellows who had been the most boastful and loud mouthed whilst we were in no danger, now showed up in their true colours and as soon as we reached the destroyer they were on board in a flash. It didn’t matter to them that there were still thousands of men waiting to be saved. We went back twice for “passengers” and were nearing the ship for the third time when a Nazi plane, roared over the water, guns roaring. Everyone, of course dropped to the floor of the boat, till the danger died away! When everyone struggled up to their

feet again the boat rocked wildly, and next minute I was in the water. Fortunately we were only a few yards from the destroyer and I struck out madly for this before my greatcoat got waterlogged and impeded my un-artistic swimming! I pulled myself up the rope ladder, and at the top, I was pulled aboard by the eager hands of the Navy and I heard the voice of the petty officer calmly, count me as I boarded! I believe I was the twelve hundredth odds on board!!

I managed to get a corner on deck and lay down, then to my joy I heard the voices of some of my pals, amongst whom was Jock – lying on the warm decks like some Lord Muck!! However, it was rather uncomfortable in my wringing wet clothes, and I remembered that I had a pair of dry trousers in my haversack which I had given to one of the occupants of my first boat load to look after for me! Miraculously enough, I found him and experienced the joy of a dry pair of trousers!! My wet pair I hung on the taffrail, but I never cast eyes on them again! I wrung out my coat, lay down with it on top of me, and gave thanks!

Leaving La Panne, we went down to Dunkirk (tho called “the evacuation of Dunkirk”, it was only the early troops to leave who left from there, then as the harbour got shelled and bombed to bits the evacuation was continued from the beeches at La Panne, a much more difficult and hazardous job!!) I saw a film of “Dunkirk” last week, and it was only then that I saw what a miraculous escape we really had. At the time, we didn’t think it very much. I guess we just “rose to the occasion” as it were! We picked up Lord Gort, just off Dunkirk, which was like a giant furnace and headed for home.

We ran aground once, had two torpedoes fired at us by a U-boat and were dive bombed – but all missed!! I must pay tribute to the Navy – especially the AA gunners – their shooting was marvellous! When we encountered that U-boat, we had the additional thrill of seeing depth charges go off and, at least, scare off the raider.

At 7.30am on the morning of Friday 31<sup>st</sup> May 1940 we steamed into DOVER!

We were home!!

Trains took us to various “rest camps” where we gloried in the welcome English countryside. We got a great welcome and were a “Seven Days Wonder”!!

We rejoined our own regiments, got 48 hours leave each, then began to be re-equipped –a job which is no easy matter when 30,000 men are concerned!

However, my story ends, for the present, and later on, I may make another “effort”, and tell of the happenings after our return from France and Belgium!!

If and when I continue this “sequence of events” I trust that I may be able to tell you of our Ultimate Victory. And a return of the Peace, which we so earnestly love and wish for!

James M. Spence

5<sup>th</sup> November 1940