

Interviewee: Bernard Skinner

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

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Bernard: The unit was moved north to Austria and I can't think of a more pleasant place to relax than the snow-covered Austrian terrain. By relaxing I think I could say that most of us were waiting either to be demobbed or leave – have some leave. The story may lack certain details after all it was sixty-five years ago and my memory is not that acute now but it was to do with war torn Europe particularly the as far as the railways were concerned. They had attracted a lot of attention from Allied air forces and most railways lines, particularly in Germany itself, had been severely damaged. Bridges were targets as well. My story starts in the winter of 1945/46 – 1945/46 – that's right. I was walking past the regimental office and I heard a call 'Bombardier, I want to talk to you'. It was the strident voice of the Regimental Sergeant Major, he spoke with some authority and I wondered whether I had breached, what was then known as, King's Regulations or was I wearing my cap at the wrong angle? Who knows? As I approached his office his voice warmed a bit, 'Come in and sit down'. Sitting down meant sitting on two empty ammunition boxes and I noticed at his desk were two or three planks on two piles of more ammunition boxes. On his desk over which he was intently looking at a pile of papers also, was the usual military telephone otherwise it was bereft of any furniture or other equipment. He was clearly looking for information in a pile of papers which I know guess were from military government. In a hesitant way as he fumbled with the papers, 'I want you to take a train to the Ruhr and come back with another train. The outgoing train will be loaded with pit props for the mines and you will return with a coal train back to Austria here. I will give you four men to form a guard and you will be responsible for the safety of delivering the train to the Ruhr and bringing back the coal train to Austria. Be ready by nine o'clock tomorrow morning'. As I stood to leave his office, 'Oh' and I turned again towards him as I was leaving, he said, 'Don't forget¹ the chitty'. I remember wondering what on earth he was talking about but didn't dare ask him. We were trained to look after ourselves and if we didn't know something we would find out.

Next day I and my four colleagues were transported down to the local railway sidings. They had taken even in Austria, something of a pounding and were being repaired. It was a sideline, another mainline and as we arrived I could see this long train of trucks. It seemed to be a mile long but I've forgotten how many trucks were involved and obviously much of the equipment and trucks were from various countries in Europe. On the end there was the usual guards van and that was to be our home for the next week or two. The service personnel dealing with the matter at the railway siding warned me, as the guard commander, to look out for defective equipment or breakdown of trains and there was they warned me, possibility that these poorly maintained trucks would have faults to the wheels. Apparently the brakes tended to get stuck on and the wheels got red hot and troublesome – I alter that. Wheels got red hot and it would cause damage not only to trucks but to the railway lines. How I

¹ 5 min

was to tell the driver of the train without any communication or telephone, they hadn't thought of mobile phones in those days, I don't know but I was told to tell the driver to stop if I saw any trouble. It was a very slow start this journey to the Ruhr, across to the northwest Europe and I found it interesting but it soon got boring.

The trains moved at a very slow rate due to the poor condition of the railway lines and the equipment we were riding. We reached the border with Switzerland after two or three days. To my pleasant surprise along came a, what appeared to be, a brand new Swiss railway engine. Looking back and thinking about it might have been an electric diesel as there were electric cables overhead in Switzerland. The driver was smartly dressed, he spoke good English and, important to me, he invited me as the guard commander, to ride with him in his very impressive engine. I noticed and I recall clearly that he had an upholstered chair and another one for me and one for a colleague. He had facilities for heating his meal and I rode with great pleasure into Switzerland with him. My colleagues went in the uncomfortable guards van at the rear. We had been told incidentally² to guard our rations as the Germans would be hungry and there was always a risk of the rations being stolen. Mention of the damage to the braking system causing further damage to the wheels was recalled immediately we crossed the border into Switzerland. The driver of the train had told me he didn't want any of this equipment or any trucks that might break down left in Switzerland. They were to be trained by any means out of Switzerland into Germany on the north border and lo and behold one of the trucks did present a problem. The brakes had been binding, the wheels were hot. I could see smoke coming from the truck and fortunately the driver had seen it in a huge rear-view mirror on his modern railway engine. We stopped by some means. He found the equipment to hose down the truck to cool the heat and prevent any possibility of a fire. He moved slowly to an area of the railway system a few miles further along as I recall where equipment was available for repairing the truck. This was done after a few hours and we continued to the German-Swiss border. I was sorry to leave the comfort of his cab and back to the old German railway engine which was then connected and I had to go back to my guards van. It was fun though riding with him.

Germany was a different place all together, there were many people begging for food. They saw the trains coming slowly and they seemed to know that we had food in the guards van. I can now recall only some of the events but one was when we had stopped to fill the tender with water. A mother and two young children came over dangerously close to the train begging for food. We were not permitted to fraternise and obviously any food we gave them would have attracted attention from others and I could foresee problems. We had reluctantly to say no. At the same time two teenage girls approached, they were showing more of their flesh than they should in a wintry scene in Germany. Quite clearly I might say that they were on the game. They were members of the oldest profession. I could foresee problems here. The driver of the engine had arranged when we stopped that he would forewarn me with two pips on the whistle before he started off again and by good fortune I heard the

² 10 min

whistle blow³. We warned the girls away from the train and jumped aboard and off we went. At the same time we were able to toss a few bars of chocolate of which we had quite a few in the truck, to the lady and her two young children. The smiles on their faces were more than enough, they didn't have to say thank you. Whether they swapped the chocolate for a good meal I don't know. I'm sure they could have raised quite a lot of money for chocolate in post-war torn Germany.

Other items which come to mind was the crossing of a bridge over a deep ravine. The bridge had been destroyed either by aircraft or possibly during the fighting and had been repaired with what appeared to be very flimsy steel girders. It was a deep ravine and to cap it all there were two damaged German tanks at the bottom of the ravine. They'd obviously been on the bridge when it was either bombed or perhaps blown up. It looked a very serious and dangerous place to be with this heavy train loaded with pit props and quite frankly I was rather concerned. There was no safe ground if we wanted to drop – jump out if anything went wrong. I could think of nothing but to grin and bear it and the train slowly crossed this temporary bridge, it felt unsafe but we managed to get across. The driver told me afterwards if he'd stopped on the bridge it might have collapsed. We were relieved to get to the other side.

Other incidents in Germany as we approached the Ruhr were attempts by, we would call them jobs today, Germans trying to disconnect some of the trucks. If they had we being the guard in the guards van at the rear would have been in trouble. We managed to prevent any loss of vehicles and we were able to make headway. I was rather relived that when we arrived at our destination called Bochum, B-O-C-H-U-M, if I recall it correctly, in the Ruhr we had a train complete with no losses. I received a receipt from a German official for a train of so many trucks. The other train was taken back to Austria on the return journey the next day. It was more modern equipment designed solely for carrying coal. We were going back on a more mainline route partly used also by passenger trains it followed in parts the main rivers and many of the German⁴ towns had been severely bombed and devastation prevailed. The home journey was much faster with the new – newer equipment. We saw a lot of Germany from angles that are normally not available to people as the roads were also damaged. I think it took about a fortnight for the return journey but I'm not quite sure of this and when I reported back to the RSM he called me in. He had little to say other than 'Have you got the chitty?' I did realise this time what he was talking about. The two receipts for the outward and return journey for the complete railway trains with no losses I handed rather proudly to him. I think he said, 'Thank you', but I'm not quite sure and there may have been a smile on his face. I had to believe that he thought I'd done a good job. I did! End of story.

Interviewer: That was Bernard Skinner recalling his, eh, travels through post-war Germany and that was on the 1st of October 2010.

End of Recording.

³ 15 min

⁴ 20 min