

Summary of Telephone Interview

Interviewee: Peter Allen

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 05.04.2011

Sixteen years of age, living in Woolwich, Peter had just begun a bakery course at the Borough Polytechnic when war was declared in September 1939. The family lived in a house belonging to the church in which his father was employed. His father had left a twenty year teaching career behind him to take up work in the church.

The day that war was declared, Peter was staying with a friend in Lydney, near the Forest of Dean. The family had previously resided in the area but had left in 1936 when his father was offered a clerical position in Lee, south east London. On Sunday the 3rd of September, Peter recalls being in church and hearing the news that war had been declared. He cannot recall whether the vicar told the congregation or if they heard it on the radio. Although Peter did not know much about the war and did not feel frightened, he remembers that most people were expecting a severe bombing campaign.

Returning to his home on Nightingale Place near Woolwich Common, Peter's Polytechnic was soon evacuated to Exeter. The students stayed in Exeter for two or three months, utilising a local bakery and living in a Bed & Breakfast.

The summer of 1940, his first summer holiday while studying bakery, Peter had taken up a summer job at a bakery in Ryde on the Isle of Wight. He recalls how he was suddenly closer to the war. Every Sunday a German fighter plane flew around the area. One day looking across to Portsmouth, Peter recalls, he could see the Germans attack Portsmouth and he remembers one of the many barrage balloons covering the skies of the city being shot down and disappearing in the water.

At the end of the holiday Peter returned to London for the start of the Blitz. He recalls 'All along the Thames the sky was lit up by burning places'. Although escaping damage the first day of the Blitz, the family's house was damaged six times during the Blitz. The house belonged to the church and was a tall house with four floors and a big cellar. The houses on the street all joined up. When the windows were blown, the glass was replaced with plastic reinforcement and wire netting but during another raid

the replacements were all sucked out and more was put in. The family did not have shelter but stayed in the cellar. The kitchen was down in the cellar so the space was adequate to live in.

The cellar was also the neighbourhood's stirrup pump centre and Peter recalls the pump once being used at the house next door when an incendiary bomb came through the roof and had become wedged between the gas pipe and the wall. The neighbours all worked together and the incendiary bomb was put out. Both the gas main and water main were damaged by air raids on different occasions and once a bomb landed on the house next door making the top floor unstable with a risk of falling onto their house.

The times the family was bombed out and had leave their home, Peter's father went to stay in the church house and Peter went to stay in the Toc H in Woolwich. The step-mother and children had previously left to stay with the children's aunt near the Forest of Dean. After a time the step-mother returned to Woolwich. During the times the house was under repair Peter slept at Toc H and went to church for his meals.

After completing the bakery course at Borough Polytechnic, Peter found a job in Exmouth in a bakery only a short distance from the front. While in Exmouth he became a fire-watcher. The shifts used to start at 10pm and finished at 4am, only two hours later Peter had to get up for his job at the bakery.

Eventually Peter turned eighteen and was called up for the army. He was sent to Scarborough for training for the Artillery Regiment to be a gunner's signaller. Peter found the six months training quite interesting and learnt about Morse code, radios and the signallers alphabet. When the trainees were later sent to regiments, Peter was sent to Fakenham in Norfolk. The Artillery Regiment, Peter recalls, was equipped with a 25 pounder field gun.

The regiment was moved to Kilmarnock in Scotland during the winter of '41 to get ready to go abroad. The training went on in Kilmarnock and the soldiers had to practice getting guns on to barges on to ships, which had to be loaded if the army should invade. The soldiers were later sent off and put in brigades; Peter was placed in the British 1st Army with a white triangle as the emblem.

The unit was sent to Tunisia in January 1942 after boarding crowded troop ships at Liverpool. On the journey to North Africa, Peter recalls, it was overcrowded and stuffy. Early one morning just off the

coast of Gibraltar Peter decided to go out on deck. To his great surprise he suddenly saw a submarine coming to surface, fortunately the submarine turned out not to be German.

After marching through Algeria the unit moved to the first vital position overlooking a plain. There was mutual shelling across the plain as the infantry was taking position. Peter remembers how this made him realise that they were going to fight the Germans. He found the idea of trying to kill people very strange.

When the Allied troops advanced, the unit moved onto a hill and started digging gun pits. Peter recalls his luck when at dusk the Sergeant Major detailed Peter, a couple of signallers and a bombardier to take some signalling equipment and move a mile down the road. The small group set off and found a hollow to set up the equipment. Soon all but the guard had gone to sleep. Gunfire was heard but only once and no one in the group knew what was being fired at. When it was just getting light Peter woke up being shook by the shoulder by the guard who said, 'I think you better wake up. There's a tank battle going on'. Looking out Peter discovered a tank battle with perhaps thirty/forty tanks milling around. The position of the tanks made it clear that the war had moved past the group during the night and that they were now on the German part of the front. The bombardier and a signaller went off to find the troops and Peter and the other signaller loaded all the equipment into the van. The regiment had been pushed out of position as the Germans pushed through. The Germans, Peter recalls, had advanced more or less where the regiment had been digging in guns. Peter was later told that the regiment had been digging the gun pits when they heard the tanks coming but they thought these were friendly tanks coming to protect them. As the tanks came closer they could hear the singing of the infantry. It was not understood that the enemy was coming until it became clear that the infantry were singing in German.

No messages from Intelligence about the attack had been received. The Intelligence, Peter remembers, had missed it. The regiment was caught flat footed and no guns were in position. A young officer and a sergeant managed to mount a gun and damaged a tank with a shell of solid steel. All those who had not cleared off were taken prisoners of war. Peter's two friends, who he, as fit eighteen year olds, had joined the army with, were captured. His friends, Peter remembers, were unlucky as they were taken onboard one of the last German ships to leave North Africa. Other

prisoners, who had been taken, including the officer and sergeant who had damaged the tank, got taken to a different ship that never got out of port and were later freed.

'Being a prisoner – it's terrible', Peter believes it affected both his friends after the war. One suffered nervous breakdowns and eventually died whereas the other lost all confidence and would not drive and became reliant on his wife to take him places. 'We were all the same age and joined the army as three fit eighteen year olds'.

Peter considers himself lucky to have been sent away a mile down the road that day as he otherwise likely would have been captured along with the others and taken prisoner.

For the final push on Tunis was successful and Germany and Italy retreated in to the Cap Bon Peninsula. The orders were received over the radio from head quarters, at what range and how many guns to fire. The aim was to keep the Germans and Italians moving. The artillery was chasing the enemy troops. Then, Peter recalls, the orders stopped and in the distance a cloud of dust could be seen. 'Is it German tanks?', Peter remembers the anxiety of seeing the cloud approaching and no orders to fire coming through. Eventually as the cloud dust came closer big Italian lorries came out stuffed with troops with guns. The Italians, however, were shouting not to shoot and took themselves to the prison camps. That was, Peter recalls, the end of fighting in Tunisia.

The still life of growing potatoes and swimming in the warm sea in Hammamet once the fighting in Tunisia had ended was not for Peter as he soon became bored. Back in England troops were being built up for the invasion and Peter decided to volunteer to become a paratrooper. The hard training to become a paratrooper brought back the bronchitis Peter had suffered as a child. Not able to complete the training Peter was sent back to the unit. By troop ship from Liverpool he was sent to Naples to join the fighting in Italy. Arriving in Italy at a transit camp it became clear that the regiment had already left to invade Anzio. Peter never returned to the unit but joined the 4th Indian Division, with an emblem depicting a red eagle, as they were in need of a signaller gunner. About 1/3 of the regiment were British and 2/3 were Indian or Ghurkhas, whom Peter spent a lot of time with. Later they were also joined by New Zealanders.

The regiment was to take part in the attack of Cassino. The first battle of Cassino had already taken place but it had failed. The General of the 4th Indian Division, Peter recalls, was a specialist in

mountain fighting and had drawn up a plan. As the Germans were in the mountains they could see what the allies were doing. For the infantry to attack the mountain was suicide. The troops should rather circulate and isolate the mountain and then attack. The plan was never put into action as the General died.

The regiment stayed at Cassino for six weeks and fought the second and third battle and then withdrew to the Adriatic side to fight their way up to Bologna. The fighting was sporadic and Peter remembers how the 4th Indian Division liberated San Marino without much resistance.

The regiment was later sent to Greece 'to help to bring peace to Greece which we did'. The war finished while the regiment was still in Greece. When Germany had retreated from Greece they had burnt almost everything in their way, Peter recalls, and left things useless. There was a food shortage in the country and Peter was posted on a feeding point to feed the Greeks one meal a day at the port in Athens. Peter remembers how the population was almost starving. Once Peter was sent off as an armed guard for a small convoy of lorries to transfer relief stores from the Bulgarian borders to mainland Greece. Only armed with a Tommy gun, Peter did not feel he could have done much good as a guard if something would have occurred. In the village on the border to Bulgaria, the locals had not seen a British soldier since the First World War and Peter was presented with the biggest plate of fried eggs he had ever seen and bottles of Retsina.

Later on in life Peter discovered that a later neighbour had been in charge of sending relief to the borders of Greece and Bulgaria.

As the war had ended and Peter was due to be sent back to England, he developed pleurisy which was complicated by a high fever. Peter went on a 'tour of hospitals on my way back to England'. From a hospital in Naples he was sent on a plane back to England but as the pilot flew over Elba one engine stopped and the plane had to go back to Italy. With the use of only one engine, the pilot could not keep the speed for a soft landing and bounced a few times as it came down. Waiting at the airport was ambulances ready to take the passengers to hospital. Although he was not injured Peter had to remain in Rome for a while. Peter remembers how he went for nice walk and sold cigarettes for chocolate and lire which he used to discover the area by bus.

Back in Britain Peter was sent to Kilton Hill Hospital in Worksop. According to Peter, he did, as many other injured soldiers 'marry one of the nurses'. The first time he met his future wife was when he returned late from a visit to London and she served him with cold custard instead of tripe.

Discharged in March 1946, Peter had to face becoming a civilian. With no desire to go back to baking after five years in the army, he searched for a job where he would not have to be shut up inside and decided to go in to farming. The Agricultural Committee was running a scheme at the time placing ex-service men on farms but after a few postings on farms Peter decided that farming was not for him and joined a government teaching scheme to train as a teacher.

End of Interview.

Transcript of letter sent following the telephone interview:

Dear Malin,

Here are a few notes in no particular order, re the telephone conversation about Memories of War.

- Sited in 1941 on Woolwich Common, at the end of Nightingale Place, was an anti-aircraft gun. This helped to make air raids quite noisy.
- The prelude to one air raid was the dropping on thousands of incendiary bombs over the area. We had two or three in the roof space which my father and I were trying to deal with. The threat of fires in the area was so severe that soldiers were sent out of the barrack to help put them out. Two or three soldiers came to help us, but I cannot recall how we got rid of the bombs!
- Getting on buses or trams to get home each evening from the Boro' Polytechnic was often quite a fight so another way evolved. At the Trocadero cinema, Elephant and Castel, large flat lorries of Bowater Lloyd, having discharged their loads of newsprint (at Fleet Street?) came past that way on their journey to their depot. They would skew to walking pace and all who could jump on them did so. When one's destination was reached someone would bang on the cab. Of course, a hat was passed around.
- Toc ; a society to maintain comradeship of the Great War (WW1). The first meetings were held in Talbot House, Poperinghe, near Ypres. (Toc Hitch: Signallers' letters.)
- My father, Rev. V.A.C. Allen, moved from the 'daughter' church in Woolwich to become Vicar of Charlton. After the war he moved to Somerset to become Vicar of Wiveliscombe and Rector of Fitzhead. While at Woolwich he had given Rev. Cuthbert Bardsley much help in understanding the work of a parish priest: it was Red. Bardsley's first parish. Rev. Bardsley

later became the Bishop of Coventry. After a short illness my father became the Vicar of the small parish of Angersleigh. He enjoyed his ministry there and died in the Vicarage.

- The church house mentioned before as a refuge during the Blitz was (St?) Francis House.
- In fighting up the Adriatic side of Italy in the 4th Indian Division, 11th Field Regiment, R.A., I was detailed with another couple of signallers to find the command post of some of our infantry in order to call up support from our guns as needed. As we came out of the cover of the trees near the farm house where the infantry were it became obvious that the Germans could see us. Mortar bombs started exploding around us. I was hit in the head by a bomb splinter and was evacuated by plane, my first ever flight, to hospital. I was very concussed, but recovered and rejoined my regiment.
- In war there is a price to pay. Two sons/brothers were killed against the Japanese. Captain John Allen, 10th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment died 17.8.44, age 25. Buried in Takkyan War Cemetery, Rangoon. Leading Airman Mark Allen, serving with the Royal Navy, H.M.S. Implacable (aircraft carrier), missing presumed killed 29.4.45, age 20. No known grave but the sea. I remember them every day.

Best Wishes,

Peter Allen