AN OFFICE
BOY GOES
TO WAR

The memoirs of Corporal Henry James Chart
You may wonder why I have decided to write a scenario of my experiences, some very humorous, during World War II when world famous authors, film makers and politicians have all had such wonderful experiences and stories which are almost impossible to comprehend. The recent war in Libya set me thinking about my own experiences...
I suppose it really all stems from my father who was involved in the trenches of World War I. He was unfortunately gassed at Paschendale, never really recovered and died at the age of 42.

He would never speak about the war although I was always very inquisitive and wanted to know his stories. However one day he did come out and say, "Do you know you are lucky to be here?" He then told me that while driving a horse drawn supply cart, a live shell fell on one of his horses killing it outright but failed to explode, so that was the reason I am here. It is rather poignant that in 2012 a book, film and play ‘The War Horse’ by Michael Morpurgo should be based on that event with my Father in World War I. I think this was the only story that I ever knew about his war. For this reason, I decided to take the time to write my own personal stories about World War II.

Before World War II started I was involved in a world of poverty like most other people at the time. My father was often unemployed for long periods but I say now that this was kept from me. The years went on and things changed substantially. My father had a good job as a painter and decorator, I won a Jnr. County Scholarship and went to a first rate grammar school, Sir Walter Saint-Johns in Battersea where I studied Latin, English, French and German for the next 6 years.

Sadly, my father died the day before I was due to start work in a government department, the Ministry of Food – now the Ministry of Agriculture and Food – so the loss was lessened for me.

My mother worked hard and life became easier as we were both now earning. So now onwards to 1939, the war and all its consequences.

It was a dull damp cheerless February day in 1940 and the phoney war was making us all paranoid waiting for something to happen. Well in my life it did! A brown paper envelope addressed to me from the War Office arrived, stating that I was to attend the Royal Engineer Barracks at Winterbourne, Dauntsey near Salisbury to join the 66th Chemical Warfare Company.
“Yipee,” said my mother, “You won’t need to wear a uniform as you will probably be wearing a white coat in a lab.” How wrong she was.

The day of our assembly duly arrived when about two hundred somewhat scared bodies arrived at the barracks in lorries from Salisbury Station. Our first job after a meal was on to the clothing store where the sergeant looked each one of us up and down and said, “Universal size 8,” which quite understandably did not fit everyone. Our first appearance in uniform caused a lot of laughter even among the recruits themselves until we sorted ourselves out.

We were then split into 6 groups, No.6 receiving people such as lawyers, doctors, accountants including myself etc., as potential officer material. One particular recruit looked as though he was already a general – incidentally I later understand his father was!

And so after introductory talks about the army generally we started training. Not a white coat in sight! We dug trenches, drilled, built model bridges, drilled, walked through gas chambers and drilled yet again. It was a very hard introduction to Army life.

Our barracks were OK but meal times were bit of a joke. Each mess hall was divided into tables seating 9. Two of us on a roster were designated as mess waiters and were responsible for collecting a big tray at meal times with allegedly 9 portions on it and the job of the mess waiter was to allocate
the contents of the tray fairly to the occupants of the table. Obviously some favouritism occurred and larger portions were given out!

We were all allowed out on Saturday night for a visit to Salisbury. The only transport available was Mrs Jones' ‘Silver Bullet Bus' so the last bus back was always rather crowded. The bus held 70 officially but 150 unofficially. The owner was a great lady and everybody loved her great contribution to the war effort.

And so training continued until suddenly we were told to evacuate our cosy barracks and go under canvas. Something was afoot but at the time we did not realise that over 300,000 troops were being evacuated from Dunkirk. We knew that the war had seriously erupted but had no idea how serious it had become.

Our spell under canvas was not good. We had twelve to a tent, with heads to the centre pole and feet to the edge. If you were over 6 feet tall, your feet ended up outside! One chap suffered from really smelly feet and was always compelled to have his feet outside. The effect on southern England's military accommodation was so severe, trying to provide some sort of help and administration for the returning troops, that they decided to billet us among the civilian population.

We were sent to Cosham near Portsmouth where I was billeted with a train driver, his wife and daughter. We got on extremely well and my wife to be came down to stay with them for a few days.

Training continued and we were then moved to Fort Purbrook, an old First World War fort of large proportions, which was being used underground as an explosive store. Appropriate, I suppose for a Chemical Warfare Company!

We had a rather nasty C.O. at this time, a major ‘M' who, when on parade delighted in knocking our forage caps off our heads onto the ground if they were not set at the correct angle. But we did have a good laugh at his expense — at least I did! One of the old back rooms in the fort had been reorganized as a company office. The room had an enormous brick fireplace, wood burning originally I presume, and I was in this room along with the major and with the adjutant (a Capt. ‘M') who was rather a weak character and obviously in deadly fear of the major. The major had the habit of leaning back in his chair but on this occasion he went back too far and fell backwards into the fireplace. A generation of soot fell over him and the room and really enveloped his whole head and body. We were convulsed with laughter but Capt ‘M' was unstoppably hysterical. One up for the lads!

Another humorous incident involved a visit by Lt-Col. ‘C' who was in charge of the whole Chemical Warfare group.
Each Company had a prescribed list of equipment set out in Army Form 1098 and we were checking a new arrival of equipment to see what was still outstanding and what required a further indent on the War Office. The request had to be signed by the group Commander and conveniently with Lt-Col. visiting on that day I suggested that he signed the indent form which he did there and then.

After looking around at the new equipment he left and the door closed. I looked at the form and said “Oh! My god the silly old bugger has signed in the wrong place”. But it wasn’t him who had left the room it was somebody else. I wished the floor could have opened up and swallowed me. Sometime later, on a big parade, he walked past me, stopped and turned back with a twinkle in his eye, “I hope somebody did eventually sign that form in the proper place”.

Then came a nasty air raid one night on Portsmouth and the company was organised quickly to go to the town and see what assistance we could offer. Captain ‘M’ in his usual panic ordered me to get behind the wheel of a 3 ton truck in spite of protestations that I could not drive. So I got in one door and got out the other.

Then out of the blue I was posted to 65th Chemical Warfare Company as they were being mobilised for overseas duty (they just missed going to France as Dunkirk happened just as they were finally mobilised). Apparently the unit was short of somebody with maths and office experience. I was a youngster compared with the rest of the company as they were all drafted in the 27–30 age group. Training continued with chemical weapons (not loaded I mean) and other engineer activities as we never knew whether Hitler would use chemical weapons in his armoury but we had to expect the worst.

We now moved to Porlock in Devon and Ipswich in Suffolk for further training, particularly in bridge building.

Bombing continued at home with more severity and I remember one unfortunate Sapper in our unit who was on the phone to his wife when a bomb near his house severed the call. Fortunately she was OK.

Suddenly we were all given 7 days leave and we knew it was embarkation leave. I was married before we departed - what a happy honeymoon! In June we embarked on The Arundel Castle in Avonmouth to add to Montgomery’s Middle East Armies. We stood off Barry Road in South Wales for 24 hours while the convoys assembled. One miserable lad on the ship felt awful as he could actually see his home from the deck of the liner.

The convoy soon had its naval escort in place. In the centre of the convoy of supply and troop ships was a battleship and, on the perimeter, several destroyers. This was a mammoth war effort. And so we were on our way. To
avoid U boat attacks we sailed south into the Bay of Biscay and past the bulge of Africa then south towards the Cape of Good Hope.

One amusing aspect of travelling on a troop ship, and believe me there were not many, was that during the day, below decks was our dining room and at night it served as our bedroom without any beds. We all had hammocks strung across hooks set in the ceiling of the deck. It was quite strange at night to see all the hammocks swaying in the same direction as the liner rolled gently.

We took, as far as I can remember, 3-4 weeks to reach and round The Cape Of Good Hope where the ship rolled dramatically causing seasickness in many soldiers in spite of us having got our sea legs. Finally we docked in the eastern side of South Africa, Durban.

The whole voyage had been very depressing. Daily sing-songs took place on the ship with recordings by Vera Lynn and Bing Crosby. These positive experiences were sadly negated by the miserable daily news on the ship’s radio system – Rommel and his Afrika Corps were successfully fighting in North Africa while Hitler was doing particularly well in Russia and was heading for Stalingrad. An unhappy time for us all. At Durban we were told to take all our personal and unit equipment and lorries etc., off the boat, as we would be embarking on a different ship for the final part of the journey to Egypt. We disembarked and were let loose in Durban. At the dock gates several families were waiting to take soldiers to their homes for the evening. My best friend Cliff and I were met by a wealthy elderly lady (a Mrs. Vanklavaren) with a big car and a black chauffer. We were given a first class meal – what a change – and exchanged pleasantries until it was time to return to the dockside. Imagine our surprise when were told to get our kit together and re-embark on the same ship - what a joke!

The ship slowly made its way up to the East Coast of Africa and we eventually stopped at Aden – a real hot spot. All our personal equipment, which was in the hold, was man handled from the lowest deck to our sleeping quarters with average temperatures of 120F. Our journey continued through the Suez Canal to Port Suez where, after a while, disembarkation took place. We then moved onto a train, all spruced up in our new desert khaki, big hats, white faces and knees to match – a real rookie collection.

We disembarked onto another train with all our personal equipment in the last two railway carriages. I was with the 5 Sappers left to look after these stores. The train moved off in the night but they had failed to connect the last 2 carriages, which left our small group stranded in a very strange land (as it was to us then). We were OK for food as all the emergency rations for
250 soldiers were with us in those carriages! We were picked up the following morning and were very glad to go. A large dusty area facing our 2 carriages was used as a general toilet for the whole community.

We next moved to Giza (yes you are right) we were in the famous Pyramids area of Egypt. We settled into our usual routine and keeping fit – reveille at 5am daily for a 3 mile run before breakfast to avoid the great heat.

The first miserable event was the onset of sand fly fever – I suppose it could pass as swine flu today. It was enough to take one out of commission for a few days. We erected an isolation tent – we were, of course, all under canvas but our tent was set on a sand dune well away from the isolation tent.

Fortunately I escaped the illness but had the unenviable job along with a few others of taking up the necessary food and drink to the boys in the top sand dune.

One amusing story was about a Sapper Head who was rather heavily endowed in the bottom area. One evening he let a lighted cigarette fall onto his shorts and set fire to himself but not seriously. From then on (you guessed it) to all our comrades his ‘nom de plume’ was ‘Arson Head’.

Our life and training continued, with anticipation that something very important was about to happen but the football tournament was still in progress between the different army units. We had a very good side with 3 ex-professionals. My claim to fame was that I actually scored a goal in the shadow of the Pyramids.
About this time we were re-designated as the 65th Field Company R.E. as it was discovered that the mortar-mounted trucks, necessary to deliver chemical weapons if required were unsuitable. The soft sand terrain meant the weapons were unable to identify targets with exactness – a dangerous situation when dealing with gas shells.

Our life continued in the desert with keep fit training especially mine lifting. We now became aware that something very important was about to happen as artillery, tanks and supply vehicles were on the move westwards. The big battle was nigh. Rommel and his Afrika Corps had swept across Mediterranean Africa, leaving Tobruk under siege. Montgomery and his 8th Army, supported by many planes, had decided that El Alamein – a lonely spot on the coast – was going to be where Rommel could advance no further.

At 10pm on 23rd October 1942, war really started when hundreds of artillery pieces on the whole 10 mile front opened up on the German lines. Hell could never have been worse than this. A barrage lasted 20 minutes and I don’t know how anybody could have lived through this terrifying noise. Even our unit fired our six inch mortars into the fray to add our own contribution. A short lull took place and the flail tanks went in. These were huge monster tanks with additional sections welded onto their front and huge chains thrashing the ground as they moved forward, blowing up any residual mines in their wake. Then came the Sappers with their hundreds of poles making safe avenues as the flail tanks proceeded. Torches with blue lights were attached to the poles and were created for other tanks and the infantry - led as usual by a lone Scottish piper - (a brave man) to advance forward. The whole scene, apart from the noise, was somewhat eerie.

We did not move from El Alamein for some time as there were more large mine fields to be cleared - a very hazardous job which, unfortunately, led to the death of eight of our company. Although the fighting had moved on, the terrible realities of war lived on.

Then it was Christmas and all I can remember about that festive season was an approaching lorry along the desert road which was bringing our turkeys (cooked many miles back). At the sight of this dot coming in the distance, we began to cheer the truck all the way to the campsite. Water was rationed and brought daily from a set-up-point pumped continuously to a distribution centre. If we had any water left after cooking and minimal washing, a hole was dug in the sand, two or more ground sheets inserted and the remains of our water rations were poured into it. Six of us drew lots and the lucky ones had a reasonable wash down but the last one had somewhat dirty water to wash in!
The general advance had moved on but we were still behind them, bedevilled with mine lifting. Our new C.O. was a Major ‘S,’ a brilliant organiser and really liked by his men. He was also responsible for discovering the ‘PICRIC’ mine which was a non metallic device which produced an electrical current which activated a mine some distance ahead before an unfortunate soldier or tank had the chance to make it safe – a nasty device.

We eventually caught up with the main army as it advanced to wreck the Afrika Corps through Tobrouk and Benghazi, eventually arriving in Tripoli with Rommel’s army defeated. The prisoner haul was enormous.

Tripoli eventually became full of shipping and supply vessels – a lovely target for enemy planes – mostly dive bombers. In order to make this more difficult it was decided that, in a raid, the whole harbour would be covered in smoke and our Company were given this responsibility. A series of machines which could produce smoke, were placed around the harbour and were activated immediately on the order ‘SMOKE’. No delays were allowed. There was some confusion however as somebody gave the order ‘SMOKE’ just as a ship laden with NAAFI supplies was unloading on the beach. Our evening meals were greatly varied for a few days! The bombers did get through one night and hit an ammunition ship in the harbour with a remarkable display of pyrotechnics. Our billet, which over-looked the harbour, had all the windows blown in. Fortunately no damage to personnel took place.

With Rommel’s Afrika Corps broken and the 1st Army on the other side of North Africa, I found out that my stepfather (nearly twice my age) was indeed in the 1st Army and we established contact (by post of course). I used to send him my weekly ration of cigarettes (the dreaded Victory V from India) which I’m sure accentuated his death from smoking. Now with our job finished in that part of North Africa, our unit was ordered to return to Alexandria in Egypt. Most of the unit was sent back in a hell-hole of an old troopship but some of us had the apparent enjoyment of returning by road with all our stores and equipment – a lengthier journey but certainly better than the troopship.

A few weeks elapsed and a new undercurrent of feeling developed that our next mission was fast approaching. Suddenly thousands of soldiers were taken to a quiet part of the coast, told to strip off and go for a rejuvenating swim and a thorough clean up. I don’t think anybody could have envisaged 10 miles of naked flesh swimming in the sea.

Almost immediately we were re-equipped, and headed for the port where we, and thousands of others, embarked on a series of liners. On a warm July afternoon we set sail on the afternoon of 10th July after our meal. We came on
deck to witness an unforgettable sight. What met our eyes on that day I shall never forget. Ships, ships and landing crafts stretching out in their hundreds as far as the eyes could see. We were staggered. I had never visualised this as they scudded around our mighty convoys of transports. We had a lovely ship but she began to roll a bit in the afternoon when a high wind suddenly sprang up. One could detect the undercurrent of excitement and apprehension as we noticed those white capped waves that boded ill for climbing into small assault craft at dead of night and landing on the beaches and – we knew not what else.

Naturally we had all been well drafted and the part of the beach we had to land on was imprinted in our brains. As the afternoon wore on, the wind suddenly became less harsh. These little ships began to appear from their almost submarine existence and in spite of everything it was almost impossible to believe the level of confidence that existed.

About 8 p.m. as dusk was falling there was a yell from deck, “Land”, “Could it be Malta?” we asked ourselves, but we felt sure we had passed Malta sometime ago. Then it must be Sicily and we could see it in daylight too. That means, if they had been awake, they could have seen us. We could see quite plainly now the outline of Mount Etna and we knew at last our suspense was coming to a head. The next 5 hours was a hubbub of excitement and even laughter. We, not being the first off, had to go down into the fevered heat of below-decks. It was about 2.30 a.m. with a chilly wind and a pale moon shining above. The grey shapes of the assault craft disappeared into the distance. We were all expecting dive bombers but, save for the crump of shells from our cruiser and a belated reply by an Italian Coastal Battery, the whole scene had an eerie stillness. Spasmodic machine gun fire and one or two small fires and the invasion was on. Dawn broke and the whole scene was before us and the skyline depicted exactly as we had been shown. Not a hitch, not a slip up marred the smooth precision of this machine. Soon it was our turn to disembark and still no German planes. With our bodies literally weighed down with kit, water cans and bivouacs, we clambered into our small craft. The huge liners, incidentally, had now moved about 800 yards from shore. Our kit was dumped as soon as we got ashore and we looked around for a place to sleep before we got down to work and you can guess, there was plenty to do.

Prisoners were already rolling in - surprised with incredulous expressions on their faces and clothes in shreds. Some were badly hurt, covered in blood and were being removed to our own temporary hospital which was already in action. Some of our own boys, injured in the initial landing, were going back aboard our troopships before we came on shore. The Sicilians in the little fishing village were at first terrified and they had to put their hands
way above their heads, but the jovial expressions on our faces I guess, soon put them at their ease for they were making a gesture of the old victory sign. The entire staff turned up from their surrounding homes for their day’s work at the local wine factory, only to find it occupied by the soldiers. A battle for a nearby airfield gave us some excitement but the poor Italians just couldn’t do a thing about the invasion. Later that day 3 Messerschmitts appeared and decided to disturb our work. I laid back in my hole and watched the tremendous barrage give those 3 Messerschmitts absolute hell. One came down in a dead dive and I moved from my hole to a huge 18 ton road-making machine to get a better view.

And so our first day passed. We cooked our own meals, had loads of ice cold water - delicious and fresh from the wells - and cleaned ourselves up into something like shipshape. That day was literally amazing. It was only 24 hours since we had first set eyes on Mount Etna and now here we were on foreign soil - enemy soil - which we had captured, after we had expected - well I guess it is not worth repeating. History had been made and I was in on it. If I had thought way back in 1939 that I should have been engaged in such a venture, I guess I would have passed out and now it seemed just a normal day’s affair.

But I did get terribly scared later that night. We expected Jerry over naturally, but not with the viciousness that he displayed. For one hour I lay flat on my face with my body as close to mother earth as possible and a handkerchief in my mouth ready to bite on it every time we heard the Junkers 88 scream down into that dive to let loose their bombs which screamed down even louder. It was all so sudden that my legs just went to jelly. The prisoners, in their improvised cage, were screaming and moaning when a bomb fell near. Altogether one nasty hour and weren’t our Ack-Ack boys magnificent! They sky was like a mass of bursting stars for that solid hour. I think I was so tired I just didn’t even wait for the end of the raid. But we got use to Jerry. Night after night he paid us visits, but like you in London we just woke up, put on tin hats and snuggled down closer.

After a week or two, our bridgehead was established and we moved into our first town, Carlentini. To give each soldier somewhere to sleep we each had half a bivouac and a tent pole so we could chum up with a friend with similar equipment and we were snug - after a fashion.

Our first night with this equipment was magical - we slept under the trees of a lemon grove with the perfume of the blossom everywhere. What a fantastic change after 6 months in the desert. After settling the battle we moved on to a bigger town – Lentini. We thought everything was going according to plan until the news came through that a Herman Goering special
PANZER Division was dug in on the slopes of Mount Etna. The Americans, who had invaded Sicily on the western side of the island had - so I understood - a fairly routine job in advancing towards the eastern provinces. Then they met the PANZERS and like us were stopped stone dead. Eventually the battle turned in our favour and the town of Catania eventually fell to the allies and the good people of Sicily took us to their homes and hearts - I don't think they had any stomach for Mussolini anyway.

Sicily is a beautiful island and we settled down in a lovely climate, which enabled us to carry out our normal unit duties of building bombed out roads etc., What a remarkable change from the desert. Our idyll did not last long however. Orders came for us to pack everything up and return to Suez. For what we thought? We had made a distinct contribution to Sicily including drainage systems, water supplies and repairing runways at Catania Airport.

We moved to the north eastern part of Sicily and crossed the Straits of Messina, disembarking at Reggio Calabria. We then moved to the port of Taranto on the south eastern coast of Italy. We were now fully equipped as an Engineer Unit but a bit battle weary and ready for the next job.

We all anticipated joining other units already fighting in Italy. Imagine our surprise when we were told to gather up our own kit and personal belongings and leave all our lorries, armoured vehicles and heavy equipment on the dockside and embark on the 'Highland Princess', a ship normally used for transporting meat from Argentina to Britain. What a tremendous surprise!

We embarked quickly and left Taranto at night just as the German bombers were attacking the town. We couldn't get out quickly enough. The next day at a unit conference - Jubilation! We were going home but then the excitement became subdued as we were told we were to take part in the Invasion of Europe. Our O.C. was very aware of possible 'U' boat attacks on the ship as we were well behind the rest of the convoy which had moved out earlier. In his wisdom, he decided to volunteer for our unit to undertake guard duty on the boat so at least if a tragedy occurred our chance of survival would be greater if a third of the unit were on the upper decks of the ship at any one time.

The journey back to England was uneventful and we were now known as the 'Mediterranean Tramps' because life in the desert had resulted in some bizarre outfits. We disembarked at Avonmouth in early 1944 and received some precious disembarkation leave. It seemed a lifetime since I had seen my wife.

We then moved to Willington in County Durham where the only other unit was the Royal Army Pay Corps who took a dislike to the 'mad mob'
who were destroying their comfortable existence. Our next move was to the Stirling area of Scotland for more training. Our home was Tullibody – a village near Alloa – where advanced bridge training was undertaken. We were now being fully re-equipped with stores, transport and manpower.

We now learned that we were to mobilise on a war footing with new equipment and we eventually moved to the Southampton area. Now the full extent of the job we would be called on to do when the invasion of France would take place became a little clearer. At this time however, we were unaware that it was to be Normandy. Our job was to train with, and to construct, the floating Mulberry harbours which eventually played a very important part in the invasion, together with all the intricacies of motorised power to drive these constructions. And to where?

Some of our unit were on the Isle of Wight where seamanship training took place on the new small tugs that had been constructed and were scuttling around the coast.

As our vehicles were being waterproofed and prepared, the feeling of excitement (or was it dread?) became very strong.
The whole South Coast of England now resembled a mighty film set stretching for hundreds of miles. Guns, tanks, armoured vehicles were everywhere and as for personnel - I could not even guess - but a million might be reasonable. Security was overwhelming and restrictions on movements were very strong. D-day was obviously fast approaching – I remember watching a film in a cinema in Ryde when a notice was flashed on the screen for all military personnel to return to their units immediately! In our units we were shown mock ups of the beaches and town on which we were going to land and our boys had now the unenviable prospect of towing these masses of steel harbours across a choppy channel. Our destination was Courseulles-sur-Mer. I was one of the lucky ones awaiting the terrifying landing of our troops on June 6th but I did not cross the channel until D-day plus 6 when the main thrust had moved partly in land.

If the scene of the invasion of Sicily was absolutely spectacular, here, even on day 6, it seemed that the whole coast was engaged in working. Tanks going ashore, supply lorries trundling along their metal harbours, thousands of troops disembarking onto hastily constructed bridgeheads, noise everywhere, battleships shelling German forward positions. Then there were the planes flying overhead, though most were friendly. Still the noise did not abate for a second (a Hollywood blockbuster director would have been proud but this time it was for real.) One unfortunate incident a few days later was a Polish Division - (first time in action) - was ordered to advance towards Caen (the first major objective) but had its’ Signal Section wiped out by friendly fire and had to be withdrawn. One cheering moment however was when a VI directed towards our beach suddenly decided to do an about turn and retreat over the German Lines.

While crossing the channel we had our first loss. Apparently, although not confirmed, word was that a shell from an enemy battery had exploded near our troopship and the resultant waves had swept him overboard. We never did really know what happened.

Our so-called ‘billet in Courseulles’ was an old fishing hut that was still standing. Nearby by was an A A gun placement dug into the sand. The problem was that a German gun fired regularly from the other side of the bay at Honfleur and caused us some distress. One shell fell near to the A A battery and we thought that they had all been killed but the soft sand had reduced the impact of the blast and they all emerged from the sandpit looking like actors from Lawrence of Arabia.

The battle had now moved away from our bridgehead and we were now attached to the Canadian 1st Army and became front line troops, entering
the outskirts of Caen – the provincial capital – which had been devastated by bombing and shelling. There were mines to clear as the Germans retreated leaving plenty of booby traps. One such trap was reported to be hidden in about 300 tons of coal, essential for the small power station which was vital for supplying future power or what was left of it. The hazardous coal clearance fell to our unit. After many days of toil nothing was discovered.

Our home on the outskirts of the town was a bunker which housed about 10 of the Germans who had walked out suddenly and had left everything – beds, food, blankets and a bevy of German pin ups. We checked for booby traps and did not eat the food (afraid of poison I suppose).

There was only one route into our section of Caen that was passable but just before entering the town there was a hill which descended into the town. A solitary German artillery piece had a fixed range within its sight on the hill and made the descent into Caen rather precarious. So lorries, tanks etc., had to run the gauntlet. Our Ration Corporal (Ken Crow) delivered his rations daily under extreme danger and was decorated for this daily manoeuvre.

Eventually Caen was cleared and the streets made passable. We were now beginning to move a little more quickly and venues were often limited to a stay of perhaps a few days. One amusing incident was when we spent a few days in a chateau. Ken & I were able to converse fairly fluently in French, not only to the French servants still in the chateau but between ourselves. Because of this, the servants used to call us 'Les Aristocrats' – a little bit far from the truth.

We began to move across Northern France, not spending more than a day or so at each location. We stayed at Brienne and Neuchatel with extensive training wherever possible on bridge building, obviously with the crossing of the Rhine ahead.

We crossed the Franco Belgian Border and continued the advance with little resistance. We eventually reached our destination which was the town of Ghent and we were the first British Troops (now part of the Canadian 1st Army) to enter the town where we received a rapturous welcome from all the inhabitants [apart from the odd sniper] overjoyed to be free again after years of Nazi domination. My lasting memory was of a giant Scotman in an armoured vehicle at the head of the convoy wrapped in Union Jack and Belgian flags, with the biggest grin and waving of arms I shall ever see.

Unfortunately we could not take part in the liberation ceremonies as our next move came in a few days to the small town of Turnhout near the Dutch frontier and opposite the town of 's-Hertogenbosch. This was to be our home for a few weeks and my driver and I were billeted in a house in
the Beguinage, a religious area of the town where we met a most wonderful old lady – Jeanette Verwoort. She had inherited the house (she was the housekeeper) from the priest who had died and left her with the home and all its paraphernalia. She spoke Flemish as her native tongue but had a good knowledge of French so we were able to converse quite easily. We settled in and she asked us if we would like to come to dinner that evening. Since we were aware of a food shortage after German domination we felt that it would be unreasonable to eat their food. She was insistent however so we accepted. We had our army meal and went back to our billet where Jeanette was waiting for us.

“Would you come into the big room?” On entering, there was a long table laden with food and drink. After a few platitudes and introductions we ate this great food and drink with gusto. How the Belgians had managed to fool the occupying Germans with their store of food I shall never know, but good luck to them and that applied to us too.

We stayed there for a week or two but we were now fully committed to preparing for the Rhine crossing. All our vehicles had their identification symbols muddled out to stop any spy planes - or indeed spies - from identifying the units preparing for the Rhine crossing.

We had to return from our forward positions in Holland – I think it was a small town called Smeermaas - to collect supplies and we had the great
fortune to stay in our former billet with Jeanette again. Our lorry was parked outside her house with muddied identification marks. Next morning our lorry with all it’s supplies was gone in spite of the essential removal of the rotor arm (a standard procedure). We had to tell somebody in authority about this and hurried to the Military Town Major and there in his car park was our lorry! Apparently he had taken a rotor arm from a similar lorry and fitted it in our lorry. We were hauled before him but all our travel and work permits were in order. He thought that the vehicle had been stolen, especially as identification markings were obliterated. We thought that an apology might have been in order but there you are!

The winter of 1944 was extremely cold and my driver and I had accommodation which was an old shed with a tarpaulin for a roof. We were close to the firing points of Vls (directed against Antwerp) and the roar as they passed overhead shook everything in the shed (ourselves included). The bridge rebuilding was over the river Maas (a strategic crossing in advance of the Rhine crossing). As it became more urgent, our unit worked in three shifts including an all-night one where the cold was absolutely bitter. Now I became the most popular chap in the unit as I was selected to give out a rum ration during the night and looks of adoration were directed at me! I still had some left in the jar after everybody had received their ration. If I had played my cards right I could have had instant promotion!

One relief we had was a lottery for 20 of us to spend a weekend in Paris and I was one of the lucky ones. We stayed at a first class hotel in the Quai d’Orsay where we were billeted 5 to a room which was more like a palace. I met a friendly Parisian family who took me around and it was remarkable how the French had settled down after their occupation. The Germans had spared any bombardment of Paris expecting, I think, to move their Provincial Headquarter there after winning the war.

Now everything was in preparation for the crossing of The Rhine. Our bridge ‘Yardley Bridge’ had been completed and the cold still never let up. We had a sort of Christmas, along with our Canadian friends, in an old warehouse but it was a muted affair. Nobody sang ‘White Christmas’ and we were all glad when it was over.

Spring was beginning to show it’s magic and we moved to the forest of Cleve. One humorous story came to mind at this time. My driver and I were driving through the forest and on all sides the paraphernalia of war was being prepared; artillery pieces cleaned, tanks prepared, bridges and equipment already on lorries. Suddenly, as we were driving through the forest, we felt alone – no guns, tanks and soldiers – we felt we were in no mans land. We
arrived at a division in the road and the sign said 'Keep Left' but there were three alternatives. We decided on the middle one of three. About a hundred yards along this deserted road a burly MP Sergeant said "What the f---- hell do you think you are doing? Didn't you see the sign back there?" "Yes," I said, "But it was ambiguous." "Well if it's big enough for everybody else it should have been big enough for you!" Oh dear, so much for an Eton education.

Then the crossing of The Rhine erupted with the first aerial bombardment then the artillery. The sky became full of planes towing their gliders. In the face of such overwhelming power, the Germans cracked. Special forces in their small craft quickly established bridgeheads (not without several casualties) and the engineers were ready with their part-bridges ready to be locked together so supplies, ammunition etc., could be immediately available to the soldiers who had crossed.

We crossed the River Rhine at Bislich but not before we had passed through the mediaeval country town of Wesel.

I had never seen anything like it. It seemed that every building had been sliced off at about a metre high. The whole town was a series of short brick walls with a cloud of reddish smoke and dust hanging over this once beautiful town.

A sudden sense of revulsion overcame me. I had seen many dead soldiers, pulled bodies off mine fields, given help to comrades but this murder of a wonderful old town did affect me.

Bridges had now been erected everywhere and with a never-ending flow of traffic on our bridges, would they be able to take the strain? They did.

There was a sense that the war was beginning to end, the final stages were everywhere and smiles began to appear more often.

Our next move was deeper into Germany and we arrived at an old coal mining town of Ibbenburen without any problems. The village itself was a coal mining area and the first thing we noticed was that there were only elderly men around together with women and children. Our billet was in the Burgermeister residency - the local town hall. Whilst setting up the company office on the ground floor we heard noises coming from the cellar below. Three of us decided to investigate, as the possibility of a rear guard German sniper could not be ruled out. So, armed with rifles, we went down into what might be termed a vast cellar. There, among a colony of flies was the Burgermeister himself, 2 lambs, his daughter and 5 children from about 3 – 9 years of age with their identical crisp dresses, blond hair and blue eyes - a truly amazing sight. There was a non-fraternization code in operation for our troops but this did not apply to me as I was an official interpreter.
They were all obviously terrified and I told them that no harm would come to them. To get some terror out of their minds I told them I would have their cellar cleared of flies. Then I had an idea, I went up to the ground floor and said to our comrades who were putting the office in order “You had your NAAFI ration to-day. I want 5 bars of chocolate. Typical of them, the bars came immediately when I explained what they were for although I had to surrender my cigarette ration. The chocolate worked wonders and an entente cordiale (I don’t know the German for this) was quickly established as we cleared out all the flies with an obnoxious spray but it was very effective, netting a sackful of dead flies.

The Unit was stationed in various uninhabited homes in the area and were visited now and then by one or two Russians that had escaped when their P.O.W. camps were overrun by the Allies. They had a free run in the countryside until lorries arrived to repatriate them. Some were over-zealous in their activities in rural farmhouses and we had to carry out patrols to prevent too much carnage. Hey ho! We were now protecting the Germans against our allies.
One particular Russian soldier came often to the village – he must have been 7 ft. 8ins. With the most enormous feet I have ever seen - about size 18 even though his toes peeped through his boots. He had a very loud and rasping laugh and once he tapped me on the shoulder - I must have fallen away about 10 yards.

About this time the Russians overran the concentration camps of Belsen, through Auschwitz and others. The English newspapers were now appearing regularly in the Unit and showed, in graphic detail, the unspeakable horrors in these camps. Our O.C. was so incensed that he had all these pictures posted on billboards outside the town hall and the entire population of the village was to look at them and march slowly past. I don’t know whether I was too happy about this as the congregation was composed of elderly men and women plus a few younger women and many children. I kept quiet about what I thought – I didn’t want to be called a Nazi Sympathizer. One look at these unforgettable pictures of what man can do to his fellow human beings – I have no words for. The war was now advancing rapidly on all fronts – Russia and the Allies were pressing for an amnesty or complete surrender. Suddenly it was upon us – PEACE!!

We did hold muted celebrations but all our thoughts were to get home and pick up the pieces of a normal living. We were all very tired of it all.

One incident I shall never forget about that day. Two of our Officers – absolutely wonderful leaders – and ‘two of the boys’ celebrated rather unwisely and on returning from their amnesty celebration hit a tree and were killed instantly.

Strangely ‘Killed in Action’ was their citation but the war was over. What a terrible waste of wonderful human beings.

Now a dilemma occurred. What could the Unit do while awaiting orders? The O.C., a brilliant leader, had the idea that as engineers we all had a trade. Why not use this knowledge and start some instruction classes. We had plumbers, electricians, carpenters and mechanics etc., I sent home for my French Grammar Book and undertook to take French classes.

And so we were cruising along looking forward for the day to go home. Depending on the years of service we had been allocated a demob number so the longer the service the quicker the demob would come along.

My number was 29 and the news came though that anybody whose number was over 26 would be eligible to go to the war in the Far East against the Japanese. Another edict however was anybody who had served 4 years already overseas was exempt. What a colossal piece of luck for me as I was in that latter category.
Suddenly after all these years of comradeship with my fellow soldiers and all the campaigns we had lived through, a memo came through to Company Office to the effect that I was to be transferred on the order of Head Quarters command to report forthwith to H Q Military Government in Hanover. I felt very despondent leaving all my friends behind but the Military Government urgently needed German-speaking soldiers with a knowledge of office procedure. The glove fitted me exactly. I was genuinely upset. It was really like starting a new life. Non-fraternization was now over and our job was to help organize some resemblance of control along with German office workers who were delighted to even have a job. The country was really in an awful state and we really worked hard along with the Germans to stabilize the area.

One drawback was that a German sausage factory had been unharmed in the bombing and, while we were in Hanover, at least 2 meals a day were composed of German sausage. I have hated them ever since!

Now another job was advertised for German speaking soldiers (3 were needed) to run a taxi service for senior officers in the Hanover area. This sounded to me like there might be interesting ‘perks’ to be had. The three of us went to stay in ‘Schloss’ (castle) with about 20 German drivers. Some had probably been driving Tiger tanks a few months previously.

The cars were unimaginable; huge Mercedes Benz, Adlers and many more. We really liked the job and there were perks as I thought there might be.

During this period I met the previous leader of the Hanover Symphony Orchestra – a brilliant violinist. He was working with a quartet of other players in the NAAFI canteen which was billed as a recreational centre. The poor chap had to ask from the boys (no Nazi war songs) but he confided to me that if they requested ‘The Warsaw Concerto’ any more he would walk out. He didn’t because at that time there was no other work.

However, what did come out of these meetings was my everlasting passion for the opera. The Herrenhausen, which was Hanover’s Opera House, had miraculously survived the bombing mostly unscathed and the Germans soon had the idea of helping some sort of normality by opening up and presenting ballet and opera. As members of the control commission for Germany we had the best seats in the house. My first opera was Carmen and when the overture started I nearly fell off my seat. The music and performance were absolutely brilliant.

After the war, with my wife whom I had cajoled into liking opera, we visited Sadler’s Wells, the London Coliseum and Covent Garden regularly.

The days of waiting for demobilization were spent in a somewhat surreal
atmosphere as we were mixing with Germans as if the war had never taken place. Maybe I noticed this more because of my job in Military Government. We had our free days as well and I recall a young German driver asking me if I wanted to meet his family (ostensibly they were still POWs) and this rosy cheeked youngster drove on his free day to the Harz Mountains where I met his charming parents. Whatever happened to the war!

My final days drew closer and then it happened. No. 29 came up and the drivers with whom I had worked decorated a huge Mercedes Benz with flowers and garlands to take me to the barracks for the necessary part 1 of the demob procedure. Even the guard on the barrack’s gate came to attention when I was driven in.

Procedures were over and we moved on to the long train journey to Calais through some of the towns that had been devastated by the war.

The embarkation at Calais had to be seen to be believed. Every soldier had his kit bag and accompanying bags crammed full of ‘acquired’ possessions and I must confess I was among them. One soldier had over 40 aircraft clocks acquired from a Messerschmitt factory which had been overrun.
It was even rumoured that one enterprising soldier had tried to take a pony aboard the ship.

The white cliffs of Dover soon appeared, bringing a loud cheer to the 'Demobbies' and soon we were on our way to the clothing centre where we were kitted out in civilian attire. The clothes and shoes were quite good quality. Then it was all over – 6 years of life changed forever.

My greatest regret about the war was the loss of the first 6 years of married life when this period should have been the happiest and most memorable of both our lives.

What did I learn about the war? What a terrible waste of lives, property and understanding! Have we learnt anything? I don't know. Wars still happen, human life still counts for nothing and the nuclear age has begun to dominate everywhere. Sorry I'm so miserable but that's life!

One tiny anecdote with which to finish. Both my wife and I did keep our promise to revisit that wonderful old lady Jeanette Verwoort in Turnhout three times after the war to thank her for her gratitude to us in war.

*Henry James Chart*

N.B. Some of the chronological data and locations may not be entirely accurate as I have had to rely on my memory so I seek your forgiveness in advance because of my age, 93.

**Addendum.**

I should like to make special mention here of the person I met in the war who had the most effect on me - my driver for 4 years, (his name was Willy Wicks). He was a large affable cockney with a profound sense of humour that carried us through the darkest and most miserable days of the war.
With my friend, driver and companion, Willy Wicks
Medals
Corporal Henry James Chart’s Medals 1939 - 1945

The 1939 – 1945 Star
The France & Germany Star
The African Star
AN OFFICE
BOY GOES
TO WAR

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