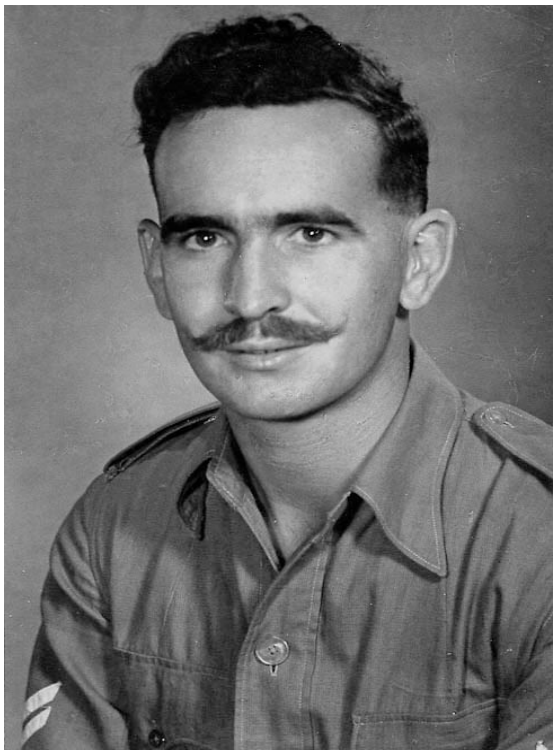
Cpl. Robert Hay Shields

April 1919 - March 2010



RAMC & No 5 COMMANDO

[‘Dad’s Memoirs’, by kind permission of Tim Shields]

Birth to Work

Where to start is really the problem. As the man says perhaps it is best to start at the beginning!

I was born on April 8th 1919 so I was conceived before the war ended. Dad was in the Marines but he did not see any action as he had been called up late in the war as he was not A1. I never found out what his medical problem was, he always seemed fairly fit and lived into his eighties.

I was born at the bottom of Fisher Hill in Walker, which is really part of Wallsend and I think the Roman wall starts around there somewhere. The house I was born in was a small general grocers run by my fathers mother. Both my parents went out to work which I suppose was unusual in the early nineteen twenties. My father was a cinema projectionist and Mum played the fiddle in a cinema orchestra accompanying the silent films. I don't remember much about this time. We had a garden and my granny kept hens there. My earliest memory is crawling out of the henhouse through the hen flap so I must have been very small.

I understand that my grandfather had started the business but he died before I was born. He had stomach cancer. He had been out West in the States where he worked as a bartender, so he must have been part of the true Wild West. Pity we don't have his story to look at.

From Walker we moved to Wallsend proper and I remember starting school and also taking my sister, who was two years younger than me, to school for the first time. I can't imagine that happening these days.

I can't remember an awful lot about Wallsend. We lived at 47 Gerald Street which was very near the ship building and the Tyne. At the bottom of the street you went under a small tunnel into the ship building area and you could look down into the very brown water from a jetty. There was a sort of shelter place there, rather like the places on the sea front. Some odd men used to be in there smoking pipes and we thought that we should keep away as they might kill us or kidnap us

onto a ship. I don't suppose we would have been allowed in there if our parents had known but I suspect they didn't know about the place. The local park was a good place to play as there was a large battle tank from the Great War, as we called it, which we could climb over and play in. The Great War was not far away in my early days.

The house we lived in must have been very small. It was a downstairs flat. A passage led from the front door to a small back bedroom passing a front room on the left. A door on the left led into the kitchen and through the kitchen you went out into the scullery. There was a coal fired range in the kitchen with an oven on the left and a tank for hot water on the right with a small brass tap at the bottom to draw off the water but I never remember this in use. We normally used a large black iron kettle which was always hot. The cooking was done on a Mains gas cooker in the scullery. Sometimes you see these in museums. The washing was done in a poss tub and a boiler. I remember this as a triangular bricked area in the corner of the scullery. It contained a copper pot with a lid and a fire was lit below the pot on wash days. There must have been a chimney attached to this I suppose. Water was also heated in the copper for us to have baths in a bathtub which was kept on the wall outside.

I used to sleep in the back bedroom with my Granny. Mum and Dad slept in the front room with the two girls Peggy and Agnes.

Cleaning the house was a rotten experience. Mum or Gran used to sweep the carpets on their hands and knees with a hard brush. This caused clouds of dust and it was almost impossible to breathe. One can't help feeling that with so much dust about they might as well have left it where it was! Cleaning the mats was much more fun. They were put on the clothes line and beaten with a carpet beater, which looked like a tennis racket made out of cane. You could whack away with this pretending you were bashing someone up. It must have been good therapy for something or other but I don't think people thought about therapy in those days.

As I said, my Dad was a cinema worker and he used to work at the Pavilion Cinema in Whitley Bay. This was burnt down while we still lived in Wallsend and he got a job at the Empire, also in Whitley Bay. Mother played the violin and she got a job at the Coliseum in the same town. It was probably for

this reason that we moved from Wallsend to Whitley Bay. We had been there once or twice for holidays so we were all happy about this.

I think our first house was 50 Cambridge Avenue. This was as probably still is a street of terraced houses. These were upstairs and downstairs flats with a tiny strip of front garden. The front street was narrow, paved and blocked at both ends so cars etc could not travel up or down the street. However there was a fairly wide back lane as wide as a normal street without footpaths. The removal vans used this and all the furniture had to come in through the back door. When we first went there the normal thing was an earth closet near the back door and this was emptied early in the morning. Sometime later these were changed to flush toilets, which was a great improvement but the toilet, or Netty as we called it, was still at the end of the yard. Not a place one was keen to visit on a cold dark night.

I went to school at Park Street School Infants which wasn't far away. It was near enough to go home for dinner at midday. Of course everyone did then as school dinners hadn't been invented. How quiet the roads were! There was little or no road traffic, the most common thing was the tramcar. Sometimes we put halfpennies on the line for the tram to flatten them, I don't think we did this often because a halfpence was a valuable piece of currency. Not that you could have a night out and a pint with it but you could buy at least a Jap bar with one. Now don't ask me what a Jap bar was as I can't fully remember but it was probably the original model of the present Mars bars. Sherbet Dabs were also popular for you not only got the tube of fizzy powder but a liquorice tube and four small round "cakes" as well.

Going back to school after dinner was always fun as we played marbles in the gutter all the way, undisturbed by any traffic. Dinner time lasted for two hours so we had plenty of time. School was from 9 to 12 and from 2 to 4, which meant we were not living at school all day and it must certainly have been more relaxing for the teachers to get rid of their pupils for a couple of hours in the afternoon. No-one I knew ever played truant, there seemed to be no need for that as you weren't at school all the day.

Living near the sea as we did was great as we could play on the beach or the rocks as often as we wanted to, even after

dark when it was more fun. Many a time I was in trouble for going home dripping wet after having fallen in the sea.

I left school at fourteen at the beginning of the summer holidays. Secondary education was not for me. In 1930 there was a great depression in the land and neither of my parents had any work to go to. We were of course practically penniless and it would have been impossible for me to have a school uniform or for my parents to pay any of the extras that would be needed. So I did not sit the eleven plus exam. It was not compulsory then. This was my decision, not my parents. I carried on at Park Street Seniors until I was fourteen, reaching Standard Extra Seven. My maths and English were fairly good by today's standards and my woodwork wasn't bad!! So I left scholl after the Easter term in 1933.

My first job was an errand boy for a chemists shop. During the summer I was employed collecting films from local shops, mainly other chemists, and taking them back to Golightlys, our shop, to have them developed and printed. I was allowed to help in a limited capacity timing the tanks and trimming the prints. Of course there was no colour in those days and no enlargements either. How small the prints seem now $2\frac{1}{2}$ by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches, 120 size or box brownie as most of them were then. Then in the late afternoon I had to deliver them back to the shops I had collected them from in the morning. It was a fairly quick and reliable service and I enjoyed the work. However this only happened during the summer and at the beginning of September I was made redundant, as they say nowadays. Needless to say I was broken hearted.

One of the chemists that I collected from was in need of an errand boy and I started there after a week. This was McBride's on the Main Road in Whitley Bay. At first the work was all delivering medicines and the other goods sold in the shop but after a year or two I was allowed to help with the dispensing. First though I had to be general dogsbody around the shop. This entailed washing floors and windows, polishing the woodwork, which was all beautiful mahogany and would be worth a small fortune today. All the bottles and jars had to be cleaned once a week and put back in the exact place they had come from. This was to teach me where to find items when I needed them for dispensing and they always had to be in the same place so that others could find them almost without thinking. After about a year I was fairly efficient and I was

allowed to start to dispense simple things and to serve in the shop.

We had two apprentices at that time and I was promised and apprenticeship if I could pass my matriculation examination. At first I tried to study at night school and by using correspondence courses but I wasn't getting very far. The night school course was to take at least four years and I suppose lots of the time I was rather tired and short of time. Nowadays it would be criminal to work people for the hours we worked. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday we started at nine in the morning and finished usually about seven in the evening by the time all the medicines had been delivered. Wednesday was a half day but I often didn't get finished until four o'clock. Friday the shop was open till eight and on Saturday it was open until nine in the evening. Added to this we were on duty for dispensing every fourth Sunday when the shop was open from eleven to twelve in the morning and from six to seven at night. That is when the doors were open but we had dispensing to do when the shop was closed and then the medicines had to be delivered, this of course also happened in the evenings during the week. This did not give me a great deal of time for study or even for any kind of recreation.

To Matriculate for Durham University one had to have credits in English, Maths, Science, French and a pass in Latin. The only way I could see to do this was to go full time day school. The College of Commerce in Newcastle did such courses and I enrolled. However they had to be paid for, which meant working at the chemists every evening and at weekends. So I still had no spare time!

My house tutor, Cecil Pattison, took an interest in my work and he used to tutor me at his own home when I could find the time. He was very good and helped me to complete the course in nine months, which was a bit of a record. With the result that I was apprenticed to Mr Parkinson Heyes at McBride's in Whitley Bay.

Call up to Africa

Mum, that's Doreen, says that I ought to put down some of my Army experiences as the family would be interested.

It all started in 1939 when Germany declared war on Poland. I was twenty years old then and I had only recently passed my Matriculation exams and been apprenticed in Pharmacy. All men aged twenty were conscripted to serve in the forces. My first choice was to join the Navy but my eyesight was not good enough, I was short-sighted, so I was put in the R.A.M.C. I think I was actually called up in Dec. or Jan.1940. We were an odd lot of chaps who were met at Newcastle Central station and taken by train to Malton in North Yorkshire. Of the group I was with, I think I was the only one who had a job!

We were billeted in a dentist's house which I suppose had been requisitioned as all the rooms were empty. After collecting a palliasse, which is a sort of Hessian sack which should have been filled with straw but wasn't, we had to go for our first injections. T.A.B. Tetanus etc. These had a marked effect on most of us. Eight were sleeping on the floor, on unstuffed paillasses, and almost every one had rigours from the jabs. The banging on the floor was terrific. Next morning we found we had to march more than a mile to get breakfast.

We did drills etc in Old Malton on the field beside the church. H.Q. was in the pub. Off limits to O.Rs of course but I hadn't learnt to drink then.

From Malton we went to Market Rasen in Lincolnshire. The weather was very wet and cold and we slept upstairs in a barn. From there we were returned to the drill hall in Jesmond Newcastle. We must have been there a month or two. I celebrated my 21st birthday on guard duty at the drill hall. It was actually called picket duty and one was armed with a pick axe handle, medics were not allowed to have firearms, to protect the place. No cake or presents or party. It was a very cold winter. We had to wash and shave in a yard at the back using cold water! I remember having to chip my razor off the bench as it froze on as soon as you put it down! From here we moved to Pocklington and spent time putting in field drains for some kind person who made use of us because we were camped on his land. He was probably one of the Holderness big knobs. I was not thrilled with this idea. This was at the time when Hull had its first lot of bombing.

We could see the explosions from our tents which were on a bit of a hill. I was a Private in the 151 Cavalry Field Ambulance. The only horses we had were bicycles. These were real bone shakers with back pedal brakes and we used to fly round the countryside on these for no good reason that I remember.

However I was taught map reading. This was more than interesting as all the sign posts had been removed so that German parachutists could not find their way around. Neither could we of course, and as most of the map reading was done in a pick- up truck at any thing from 40 to 60 m.p.h. it wasn't easy. We often got lost! I often wondered why, as a medical unit, we were not used to help the people of Hull during those air raids. Recently, I was informed by television that a force had been sent to Yorkshire to deal with any civilian riots that might occur because of the raids. If we had known about this at he time I am sure we would have mutinied.

Generally, I was browned off most of the time and I did not approve of digging drains for gentry on the cheap, so when volunteers were asked for to join a special unit called a Commando some of us, not many, did apply. I was sent to see an MO. called Joe Patterson. All he asked me was could I carry a 12 stone wounded man along a beach. I said perhaps not but I would give it a try! In a few days I was told to pack up my gear and to report to the medical section of a unit in Bridlington. Here I met up with Capt. Joe Patterson, Ted Hofford, Duncan McGregor, Tom Mitchell, and George Smith. The change of unit was like winning the pools! No barracks or tents. We were to be billeted with the people in the town who were to be paid 6 shillings and eight pence a day for giving us bed and all our meals. Like living at home and going to work!

Our MO. was Captain Joe Patterson. He was an Irishman and I think he had been doing general practice, in the Lake District before he joined up. Ted Hofford came from around Plymouth, I think, but he seemed not to have any family connections. He was a regular soldier in the Medical Corps as we all were in the medical section. He had served some time in Malaya and had been partly native I gather, although I never found his whole story. McGregor, a Geordie like me was also a regular soldier. He had served in Malta and Palestine before the war and was married to a Maltese girl. For many years I had a small piece of black velvet from her wedding dress which I used to polish my army boots with! He had been unfortunate to be in France at the beginning of the war and

had escaped through Dunkirk. A good few of the commando chaps had been through the Dunkirk business and had volunteered to have another go at the Germans. Tom Mitchell came from somewhere in Lancashire, I think and George Smith came from Kings Lynn.

I imagine that almost every Regiment and Corps of the British Army was represented in the Commando. We had to wear our own regimental badges and uniforms so there was a great diversity on parade. Normally R.A.M.C come under the Geneva Convention and do not possess any arms but we were issued with bayonets to wear and later on we had small arms, first a Colt 45 revolver and afterwards a Colt 45 automatic. I remember in our billet we were pulling our bayonets out of the scabbard. Mine flew out of my hand and smashed the china chamber pot!

We had one or two air raids on Bridlington at that time. One night while two members of our unit were doing Post duty at the main post office in Bridlington, there was an air raid and the front of the office was blown apart. The two soldiers were asleep in the back of the office and never heard a thing and were not hurt. It was during that raid that a civilian was awarded the first George Cross.

After about four weeks we packed up and were sent down to Walton on the Naze for a few weeks and then on to St. Margaret's at Cliff in Kent. (My memory fails me here for we may have done this the other way round.) Any way we had to defend Britain against the might of the German Army if Hitler decided to cross the Channel. This was ridiculous really because we had very few weapons. Just enough to arm one troop of about fifty men. We had to man the cliff but when we changed guard the weapons had to be left behind for the relieving troop! However we knew Britain was safe because we were backed up by a Boys Battalion of the Buffs! If Hitler had only known, history would have been completely different. We did not realise it then but the real reason for Hitler's abandonment of the invasion was due to the RAF and the battle of Britain.

We used to go swimming in the Channel. Mac and I didn't have swimming gear so we swam in the nude. The last item we took off was a tin hat. Lying floating on our backs we would watch the blue sky cloud over with the ice trails from the fighting aircraft. Not till years later were we made aware of the importance of what we were watching. This was the Battle of Britain.

From the coastguard station on the cliff, France was plainly visible and Jerry used to shoot at Dover with his long range

guns. Mac and I went into Dover one afternoon and we were buzzed by a Jerry plane. Mac dived through a plate glass front door to take cover. It did not bother me all that much but then I had not been at Dunkirk. The shells which the Germans sent over to Dover were very small. They would remove a few tiles on a hit on a roof but really caused very little damage.

One night there was a great panic. A terrific noise was going on so we all got out of bed sure that Jerry had landed. However it was only a Barrage balloon that had slipped its mooring and was banging into houses as it passed down the street. Incidentally we were still in civilian digs at the time. While here we had to take turns manning a Bren gun on board a mine sweeper patrolling the Channel against German E boats. I never worked out how a medical orderly was told to man a Bren gun in the first place. Perhaps I had some training for this but I doubt it. Anyway the sea was very rough that night and the boat was a converted Hull trawler. She did everything but turn over. I was lying on deck under the Bren tripod waiting for some action! There was a full moon and that revolved around the gun. The sea sickness was so bad that when I eventually got ashore at Dover the whole of the place was going up and down.

After some months it was opinioned that an invasion was not coming off and we were sent to Walton on the Naze for more training. I can't recall much about that. Next we were sent up to Scotland to Helensborough. We were still to be billeted in the town. Ted Hofford and I were sent to stay with a local doctor. In those days doctors were important people and they all had servants etc, so we imagined we should be billeted with the staff. Not a bit of it. We were treated as honoured guests and had all our meals with the family. Breakfast consisted of porridge, hard enough to stand on, bacon, eggs or kippers followed by toast and marmalade. Then a three course meal for dinner at night. We had never been fed so well. Ted and I helped the doctor in his garden by double digging most of it. He had a good collection of rhododendrons.

When Helensborough was being built, Dr.Hunter had been on the local authority and had planned the streets. These go north to south and east to west on a grid system. He considered it his town and he used to travel in an Austin Seven exactly down the middle of each road holding up the traffic as he went. We must have arrived in Helensborough in the late autumn 1941. Experiencing a Scottish New Year is just that- an experience. I can't recall New Years Eve, but

the following morning the Helensborough swimming club kept to tradition by having the first dip of the year in the Clyde from the pier. Ted and I had to perform as the Dr. was the chairman of the club, and any way Commandos were supposed to be immune to cold etc. I dived in to the water from the end of the pier. Nobody told me the tide was out, mud from head to foot!!

The winter was again very cold. There is a pond up the hill from the town and this was beautifully frozen and ideal for skating. MO Joe had an attack of jaundice at the time but he also had skates. He accused me of only coming to see him to borrow his skates. However I did learn to skate fairly well. Another thing I learnt in the early spring was horse riding. We could hire ponies near H.Q. and we explored around the Loch Long and the Fruin. Hill climbing we did a bit of when Joe had recovered from his jaundice. This we did around Loch Lomond on the hills of both sides of the Loch. Another amusement was going into Glasgow for a night out. On the bus, if you were on the top deck, the conductor seemed to be blind when he came to take the fare, just could not see us! Favourite drink in Glasgow was a pint with a whisky chaser. It was said that beer made you full before you were drunk and whisky made you drunk before you were full. Whisky and chaser made you full and drunk at the same time!!

This was really a wonderful time but Jerry spoilt it all by bombing the factories on the Clyde. Singers Sewing Machine factory was very badly hit. The Unit had to move out because the rooms we used were needed for refugees from Glasgow.

The next move was to Paisley. My digs here were much more working class, more as I was used to, I suppose. Here we had baps and tea for breakfast. Going into Glasgow was by tram this time but we had to pay a penny. Not bad if you look at the distance from Paisley to Glasgow, about 12 miles.

From Scotland we were sent down to Falmouth and stayed there for about 9 months. This was a different experience. The Scots could not do enough for us. We were all treated with respect and as friends. The folks in Cornwall treated us as common soldiers and did not mix or talk to us very much. Life wasn't too bad, however. Joe kept us fairly busy. Sick parade every morning treating the poor souls who had been injured when training or the various illnesses they picked up. Not many trying to swing the lead though. Most of the chaps wanted to keep fit and be a credit to their troop. There was excellent troop spirit and each troop considered it was better than the others. There were 10 Troops, each of 50 men and also H.Q. troop. The Medical section was H.Q. but

each one of us had a secondment to a troop. My troop was No.3. CO. was Capt. Chips Heron. When we were separated from H.Q. training or in action I was used as a doctor. I took sick parade when the MO. could not be present and tended sick and wounded within my capability which gradually got more extensive as Joe was a good teacher. He also kept us fairly fit. Running every morning, route marches of course and he manage to borrow a 16 foot sailing boat to teach us to sail in Falmouth harbour. This was good fun and we used it a lot for fishing. Don't remember catching much, though. About 4 of us lived with 2 old dears up on the hill above Falmouth. That is west of the town. The lunch they packed for us was a real Cornish Pasty! This was large enough to overlap the sides of a dinner plate, stuffed with meat and veg. More veg than meat for we were on rations as well as the civilians.

Besides the swimming and sailing we did other things. For some reason we got leave every four weeks. The journey up to Newcastle took 2 days. There was only standing room on the trains so the journey was very uncomfortable. Not only this, but Jerry kept on bombing Tyneside so we spent most nights on leave in an air raid shelter. It was a relief to get back to peaceful Falmouth; I don't remember any air raids while we were there.

Part of the time we were sent to stay at Dartmouth. This was to train with landing craft and to be ready to do landings on the European coast. None of these came about then, thank goodness.

Another adventure was to go to Scotland for special training. Some of us were sent up to Achnacarry in the Western Highlands. Here we were really put through it, landing in rough seas, climbing mountains, forced marches. The worst thing was that the nearest pub was 3 miles away so that after training if time was available we had another 6 mile route march to the pub and back. One episode here, we had been on the hills for three days, camping rough with no tents just ground sheets and heather to sleep one. We had rations for three days but these consisted of the minimum calories necessary to exist. As usual in the Army, the quarter master's people had extracted a certain amount for their own purposes so our calories were short to say the least. After three days we were ravenous. One troop after a long march was given the job of take the top of the hill by storm. Experimentally they were given Benzedrine to help. They stormed the hill in double time but when they got to the top they all fell asleep!!

Back at Falmouth again some of us were sent to Newlyn. Our job there was to protect Belgian fishing boats while they were fishing. Again I had to man a Bren gun. This time, though, the weather was glorious, calm seas and lots of sunshine. The Belgians fish with lines and many hooks, not nets. On deck there was a biscuit tin full of oil on a stove. Fresh fish was put in this and it was the best fried fish I have ever had.

Towards the end of autumn we were warned that we were going overseas, up to Glasgow to embark on the Empire Pride. We left some officers and senior N.C.O s behind. These were some of our very best soldiers. They went on an operation to St. Nazaire and most of them were killed.

We had no idea were we were going. The voyage was to take six weeks! Because of the threat of submarines we sailed over to near America in a very slow convoy and then back across the Atlantic to Africa. We only had sea water for showers. A special kind of sea water soap was issued to deal with this but one was left in a sticky mess after using it. About Freetown the heavens opened and the rain came down in sheets. Almost every one on board was on deck, stark naked with proper soap having a smashing shower. In Freetown harbour we were not allowed ashore. Small boys used to shout out "Glasgow tanner?" The troops threw pennies over board into the water which resembled liquid mud, but the boys always found the pennies. From there we slowly worked our way down to Cape Town. I remember the sunsets in the South Atlantic were spectacular. We did the usual sick parade every morning and for exercise we ran round and round the deck. Joe gave us lectures about treating wounds etc. but we had a lot of spare time. Sunbathing was the order of the day and I was so bored that I taught myself to tie knots with my toes!

We went ashore at Cape Town to a very different world that we had left in Britain.

South Africa and Madagascar.

Army life was totally different in this part of the world. The sun was warm, there was plenty of all kinds of food and sweets which we had not seen for months at home. Sweets were not rationed when we left Britain but they were unobtainable. Here we could buy half pound bars of Milk chocolate for very little money but I can't remember exactly how much. Oranges for half a crown (25p now) one could have a full net sack of oranges. Maybe 30 lbs or so!

We were in barracks with the South African Army and they seemed to be overpowering us with food. It wasn't because they were being kind, it was because they always ate like this.

You could see how this had affected their physique. Nearly all the South African men were much bigger than us. As I have said previously, we were nearly all brought up during a depression when food was short for most of us and it showed in that the average man was shorter than he is nowadays with better food supplies. The civilians were also very kind to us. Almost all the troops were invited out for meals etc. That is as long as one was white. It upset many of us that the black members of the unit were excluded from these outings. I'm afraid we did not know about apartheid in those days.

South Africa is a lovely place. We went from Cape Town to Durban were we were still looked after as before. And then orders came to re embark again to go into action but we did not know where. We sailed North with the Yorks and Lancs regiments and then were told we had to take Madagascar. Most of us had never heard of it and even less about what had it got to do with the war. It appeared that it might fall into Japanese hands and cut off the Cape route to the Middle East, thus isolating that area from all supplies and troops. Also Madagascar was in the hands of Frenchmen loyal to Vichy and therefore allied to the Germans. The French could not do any thing about cutting our lines of communication as they had been cut off from all supplies from Europe and they had no ships but the Japanese would change all that.

We had landing craft with us and we landed just at dawn, west of the peninsula where Diego Suarez is situated. The local garrison had a battery of guns here but, as it was before reveille, the gunners were still in bed. We did have to fight a bit to get into Diego but we did not have many of

our chaps hurt except for our troop skipper, one Chips Heron, who was shot in the backside but being a gentleman, old school tie and that, he refused to admit the site of his injury. Some of the French officers were hurt and I had to help them and quite a few of the native other ranks. Our troop, No3, was then stationed in a small village on the north coast. We established a dressing station here and treated both our own and the enemy wounded. Mac and I were sent as medical cover for a small expedition down the East side of the island. We consisted of 3 or four small trucks. I can't recall how many officers and men but we had sergeant, one Rupert Hart Davis, the author, from the Intelligence Corps with us and we were after some Germans who were on the Island. How long we were away from the main unit I don't know now but I recall doing camp fire cooking. Coffee beans were easily obtainable. These we roasted on a shovel and ground up by bashing them with a stone. In places the water we used to make coffee was as black as the coffee when it was brewed. The Germans were found and taken prisoners and we all returned to main camp.

Two adventures followed this. The first was the taking of Majunga. Before we went ashore we had to apply lots of anti-mosquito cream. Of course I was terrified about landing this time. We knew that they would not be asleep again. The sweat from the heat and the fear pumped out under the cream and I'm sure it just washed it off. This landing was not as easy as before but we managed without a great loss. We next had to go round to Tamatave and take that. In between times we lived on the boat. This was a similar operation to the last one. From there we went up and inland to Antananarivo the capital of Madagascar. This was different to any of the other places we had been to. The capital was like a European town. The sort of town one would expect to find in France and except for the black people you could have been in France. We had a Victory March through the town.

However we were not here long and it was back to the boat. We sailed round the island back to Diego which one could smell at least ten miles out at sea long before it came in sight. It was an odd smell mainly French cigarettes and rotten fruit. This reminds me of another typical smell at that time. The people here had been cut off from oil etc for some time but they still ran motors and small boats. As they passed you could smell rum. They had a lot of sugar cane and they made rum from this to run their engines. It must have been very environmentally friendly. It was certainly friendly. The rum was very crude and strong. They put it in

bottles and added stems of some kind of herbs to make it more palatable. I don't know if it was palatable much but it certainly got me into trouble. I was charged for running round the parade ground in the nude and being under the influence.

Talking of tastes reminds me about malarial precautions. One of my jobs was to prepare a quinine mixture to control malaria. The stuff I used was a pink powder consisting mainly of quinine sulphate, I suppose. This dissolved in water but the taste was horrible as quinine always is. I made up the awful prescription by adding a tablespoonful of the powder to a beer bottle of water. Lord only knows what the strength was in mg per teaspoonful. It must have worked because I did not see a case of malaria until we were in Burma some years later. One night a sergeant turned up for his routine dose of quinine. He had been on the local rum and refused to wait till I found a spoon. "Gimme the bottle." He took a enormous swig and soon had a reaction to an overdose of quinine. He was blind and could not hear, then he passed out. Of course he was a Glaswegian, named Cosgrove, and refused to listen to reason but he was very brave, an attack by Japs was driven off by him standing up using a Bren gun and eliminating most of the attackers even though he was seriously wounded in the process. This was later when we were in Burma.

For nearly a month we were under canvas north of Diego waiting for a boat to take us away from the Island. There was a severe water shortage and our ration was 1 gallon a person a day for everything. Washing, tea making etc. Four of us used to muck in and used the same water for washing and shaving. Mucking in was the right word!

At one point I was working with 3 Troop. We were stationed at a railway station. 3 Troop H.Q. were in the station and half the troop were up the track about a mile and the other half were down the track about the same distance. If you have bare feet in Madagascar you get an infection with Jiggers. This is a small flea which burrows into the skin and lays its eggs there. These I had to cut out with a scalpel and then dress them. The patients could not walk to me so I had to go to them. Mode of transport a railway engine! This was wood fired and I was allowed to drive this up the line, hold sick parade, and then reverse back down the line to the other group, hold another parade and then back to troop H.Q. Also at this place we had the services of a young native who did the cooking for us. Some how we came into the possession of a rabbit and he was asked to cook it. It was almost impossible

to cut into the joints; the young man had plucked the rabbit instead of skinning it!
After about 40 days on the Cape north of Diego Suarez a troop ship did arrive and we were taken home. Only the commandos were to go home and the unfortunate rest of the division went on to India. I think we were to be used for the second front. On the way home we called in again at Cape Town. Coming round the Cape was a bit exciting. The shore was visible; I think the mountains are called the Seven Sisters. The seas were enormous and the boat rolled from side to side so that from were I was on the starboard side the portside looked like an enormous wall falling into the sea. From S.A we travelled back to Liverpool in convoy again. Then some leave. I think we had been away for 9 months

Far Eastern Experience

We returned to Britain from Madagascar and Africa to do some more training for what was to be the second front although that was not told to us at the time. I can't remember the exact date but it was in the back end of the year. The bands on the radio were playing the best tunes of the year as they often do near Xmas. My family were amazed that I knew none of the tunes. They did not know how we had been living out in the wilderness for most of the year. Post from home used to take about six weeks to reach us never mind dance tunes. We were stationed at various places along the South coast and practised lots of landings etc.

Soon we were collected up. Given new kit for the tropics and boarded ship again. This time we went through the Mediterranean. The Med should have had blue sea but this lot was dull grey and cold. Opposite to the South of France, the convoy was attacked by Flying Bombs and some vessels were completely destroyed. Bombs right amidships and the boat folding in half and sinking within seconds. A very horrible sight.

Our boat made it alright and we went through Suez and across to Bombay. Some training was done around India.

After some time we were gathered together and joined a flotilla of various crafts including landing craft. One dark night we were put ashore at a place called Alathangu which we learnt was part of Burma. We made a defensive box and tried to settle down for the night. Not much hope of sleep. There were some Japanese fairly near and they kept shouting to us. Come morning we had to patrol forward in front of the box. From here we came under small arms and mortar fire. Two of my medics were killed here, two lads who had not been long with us.

The Japs were forced back and we were able to get back into our defensive box. During that night a Jap patrol attacked us again but they gave up before it was light. When it was fully light Chips Heron our troop commander asked me to go into the deserted Jap position to see if any of our chaps were lying out there wounded. The troop would give me cover if needed. I might need a weapon other than my Colt automatic so I was given the Sergeant Major's rifle. In much fear and trembling, I searched the forward area but only found a few dead Japs. Japs are supposed to be little but all these were at least six foot! Getting back to base I made my

report and then thought that I had better clean the TSM's rifle. I was horrified to find that the bolt was rusted in and could not be removed. If it had been my weapon I would have been on jankers for a month.

Chips said he would mention me in Despatches but nothing came of that. Probably they were ashamed to admit they had sent out a medic unaccompanied by a cover of proper soldiers. More panic. Just at dawn a massive, figure appeared in front of my slit trench, over six foot tall and totally black but then I knew Japs weren't black. This was a section from West African Rifles come relieve us.

We left on small boats and went up to Chittagong. I can not recall how long we were in the Arakan area that time but it must have been a few months. From there we moved back into India and then down to Tricomale in Ceylon. Some higher up said this was a non-malarial area so stop taking our Mepacrine. Within a fortnight we had 140 cases of malaria on our hands which we had to treat in camp. None were to go to hospital as the complete commando was due to go elsewhere. So the M.O. and our small section of medics had to nurse the afflicted through their malaria. In a way this was a good thing for me as I was taught to diagnose the condition and how to treat and nurse the patients. Between us we got them fit for duty.

I'm not clear how we got from Ceylon to Assam, maybe by boat to Chittagong and by train to Assam. I remember we ended up on the banks of a river. No camp and we had to dig slit trenches for the night in case of attack, so we must have been near to some Japanese patrols. But with the usual great communications with the troops we were not told very much. Do you know how ants change their territory? Well they grow wings and swarm to a new place. Then the new wings fall off! Well this happened above the place we were dug in for the night. The wings come off but the ants still have their stings. It was a very painful experience. We were all covered in bumps which itched more than somewhat!!

Next day we were given tents to put up. These were brand new. "Great" we thought" we should be alright tonight". How ever this was the start of the monsoon. The rain came down in torrents but the new canvas was not waterproof and the rain came straight through. Another disturbed night.

From here we were sent out on patrols. As usual I was with my number 3 Troop. We were away from the rest of the unit for a week or so. I was the only medic. Rather like a GP to the rest of the lads. The proper doctor was about 20 or 30 miles away.

We were in Naga country. I had never heard of these people before and very rarely since then. They are smashing people! The men came with us as scouts when we were on patrol. We were in very high country west of Imphal, on the look out for Jap patrols and the gear we carried was fairly heavy. As we struggled up the jungle hills, they would take our packs add them to their own and lead us upward. Though small people, who resembled Incas and did not resemble Indians in any way at all, they are very strong and they could carry their own packs as well as ours up the steepest of the jungle hills. Their hair is worn in a bob with a fringe across the forehead.

When we got back to camp, I used to have a sick parade for my troop and some of the Nagas brought their children to be helped. This was not easy as I had no interpreter to help me. Diagnosis and treatment was done by sign language. There were bigger queues the next night, so I must have made some impression.

On one patrol, I was walking with our signaller who carried a wireless." Hi." he said "they have just started the second front in France." So that fixes the date, 6th June.

After the Japanese had been repulsed in Northern Burma we were sent south to Madras. This was by train and it took a week. The train had only wooden seats and we had to sleep on these. At that time I had an attack of prickly heat. A rash like chickenpox all over the upper part of my body, so I did not appreciate the luxury of the seating accommodation. However for some reason which I can't recall we had some neat alcohol in the medical kit. This diluted with orange juice was a good sedative. But a week on a train was a bit bleak.

I'm not sure of the timing and where we went following this time. I remember being somewhere in the south of Burma. My section was living in a basha. That's a large hut made of bamboo. At that time I had two books. Mathematics for the Million, a large tome which I used to keep up with my maths, and Lawrence of Arabia's Nine Pillars of Wisdom. Coming back from patrol we found the basha on fire. I was heart broken to have lost my books.

Some time after this I was admitted to hospital as I was losing a lot of weight due to some rotten tropical disease of my guts and liver. This made me unfit for Commando duties and I was sent R.T.U. That is return to unit. Well they could not return me to my medical unit which was a territorial field ambulance in Britain. So they sent me to the Deccan District Lab in Secundrabad.

This was a pathology lab dealing with all the troops for most

of Middle India. Who organised this arrangement I will never know but it did me a great favour as it was just up my street. We did 150 Wasserman and Vidal tests every day. For this we had to make our own reagents. This meant taking blood from sheep and also from guinea pigs and I had to do all this.

The chap in charge was a Captain Ross, not the one that did all the work on mosquitoes and malaria, although this work was done somewhere beside this lab. We had a shortage of glass pipettes so he made some. He moulded the glass and expanded the middle piece. How to calibrate it? Well a certain weight of mercury has a definite volume. Having got the required weight into his pipette he could mark the glass with the necessary volume. Great use of applied physics.

The blood letting taught me a lot. I took blood from a sheep's jugular vein but the guinea pigs blood had to come from the right ventricle. This means sticking a needle into the heart which you would think would always be fatal. However I think only four died during these jobs. At this time I had the rank of full corporal. My section sergeant was a Sikh and my pal in the unit was a Burmese. The rest of the lab chaps were Indians.

All this was a happy time for me. No bombs, not being shot at. No shouting sergeant majors or drill parades. Just a quiet peaceful time and being treated as an intelligent person by my officers.

I can't remember how long I was at this Lab. But my number came up for demob. I travelled from Secundrabad to Bombay, on to a ship which took me to Liverpool. I arrived there at the beginning of March 1946 and was discharged from the Army. After 2 years plus in the Far East Liverpool seemed the coldest place in the world. I was home again in Whitley Bay on March 6th after what seemed like a lifetime away!!