



**ALF conscripted 1939 - 46**

## Alfred Halgarth born 22 Aug 1918, retired Lincolnshire farmer



Conscription was announced in May 1939 and I was called up and reported to Oswestry Shropshire on the 15<sup>th</sup> July. They'd starting building the camp but we were all under canvas and it was very wet. We had to walk onto the parade ground on duckboards or walk ankle deep in mud. It was quite a shock but not as bad a shock as I thought it was going to be. I quite enjoyed the training, especially when the sun



came out. We had First World War uniforms with brass buttons and puttees. We didn't get battle-dress till early 1940.

When war broke out on September 3<sup>rd</sup> I'd already been in the Army 8 weeks. When I heard Chamberlain make his speech about fighting "evil things", I was in the NAAFI at Oswestry. Ten days after that I was in France. I expected to see bands playing to see us off at Southampton but there was nothing like that. We landed at Cherbourg on the 14<sup>th</sup>, I think. At that time we didn't have any guns. All we had was a few lorries, so instead of loading us up with shells they loaded us up with petrol and supplies. We set up depots for the people coming after us. So wherever we went for the first six weeks of the war we were the first in and had a marvellous time. It was like Christmas, our lorries were festooned with gifts from the locals, cheeses, Normandy cider and so on.

At Le Mans our lorry was the last of five. We were held up at a crossroads and lost sight of the other four. We had no maps and not a clue where we were supposed to be going. We stopped at a few cafes. Nobody knew where Villiers was. We needed a latch-lifter, enough money to go up to the bar for half a pint of beer and somebody says: "What are you going to have, Tommy?".

We finished up in Rouen and a French officer came out and asked: "Where are you going?" We told him and he didn't know where it was. He said: "Have you had anything to eat?" We said No. Actually we'd been eating and drinking all day. He treated us to a marvellous meal in a grand restaurant. Then he said: "I think you go in that direction". So we did. We finished up in Rouen again a couple of hours later. We saw Rouen three times that day. Then about midnight we found Les Amboulise (?) on the Seine. In the square a chap came out, the local schoolmaster. He said his son had just been called up and it was his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. So we went to the party. He tore a page out of an exercise book to give us a map and we set off again.

It was late so we decided to pack up for the night. In the morning we saw Villiers just in front of us. They didn't know we'd been missing. The Army wasn't organised very well then. We were so far ahead of the troops the money wasn't in the banks to pay

us so we weren't paid for the first few weeks. It didn't matter because there was plenty of stuff to sell, especially petrol.

We settled down and just waited for about three months. The guns turned up eventually, and we were supplied with shells. We moved to Plouvain, near Arras, for the winter. The billets were rat-infested stables so we went round knocking on doors asking if they had any rooms. We were pretty lucky. Plouvain was marvellous, and the next place. We found a farmhouse that took four of us. But when the Army found out, we had to have a corporal with us and he was one of the worst types, on the beer every night.

Three or four horses and carts used to go through the village when it was getting dark with loads of compressed coal dust called ovoids. We used these on the fire at night. They were very slow to start so we'd add kindling and half a cigarette tin of petrol. One of the chaps, Alec Cuthbert, was sleeping on the floor in the corner. The corporal was carried in and dropped on the floor. He couldn't stand. He crawled over the floor and tried to pull Alec out of bed. I told him to stop. I was standing up and he came over to me and tried to push me back against a table. There was a candle in a beer bottle on it. I grabbed the bottle and crowned him with it. It laid him out.

Someone fetched the guard. They came to take him out. In the struggle he brought down a big ornate hatstand in the passage. He was put under open arrest and brought back next day, not allowed out. We went out and left him. He tried to light the fire and poured a whole cigarette tin of petrol on it. It went Whoosh! And blew the chimney off. We came in and went to bed. Next thing I knew, somebody pulled me out of bed. The ovoids had been smouldering all night and we were suffering from gas poisoning. We were late for parade and someone came to see why. They kicked in the window to let the air in, and walked us up and down for an hour or two.

Alec was nearly dead. He went to hospital. I didn't see him again until after the war. We were very popular there after all that! We didn't go back.

The balloon went up on the tenth of May, I think, when the Germans went in. We went forward and finished up at a place called Ellflingen, not far from Brussels. A chap said it's called Ellflingen because they'll fling 'ell at us. Anyway we got away from there after about a month. We left for Dunkirk on the 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> May, I think.

By now we had guns and ammunition. But this didn't last many days because everyone was retreating as fast as they could. So we were looking either for guns or for ammunition. Sometimes we had guns and no ammunition, other times we had ammunition and no guns. Sometimes we had both, but not very often.

We went through a place near Tournais when it was burning. Near there a German plane was shot down. The pilot came down by parachute. The road was crowded with refugees of every nationality and everyone seemed to have guns; they were all shooting at him. He landed a few hundred yards away from us. Some officer said we'd better go and fetch him. So we went with a lance corporal, a tall chap called Nobby. The three of us ran over to get him and found some others had got there first. They'd almost stripped him and one was going to cut his throat with a pocket knife. Nobby swung his rifle round his head and we stood over him, one in front and one at

the back. Then we put him in the workshop lorry. It was the most hair-raising thing I'd had so far, all these guns round us, wanting to get at him, one chap with a ruddy great revolver behind me. The refugees tried to turn the lorry over as we left.

We took him back to our base near Tournais and he said: "Where are we?" We told him and he said: "You don't want to stop here, we're bombing it tonight." And they did. He was quite a nice chap, from Berlin. He told us about all the bullets firing at him as he came down with the parachute; not one hit him. I've still got his throat microphone. It was about the only thing they left on him.

Then we were at a chateau at Messines where I got hit by a shell. It was where my uncle was killed in the First World War, probably within a few yards of the same place. We spent the night in the grounds. Early next day I was standing at the top of a deep ha-ha in the garden. The next thing I remember was being pulled out from under a lorry streaming with blood. The shell was at the bottom of the ha-ha. They bandaged up my head and we went on to Ypres, a few miles away, then Dunkirk. The road was full of refugees. There was water on either side of the road to Dunkirk. A German plane came over, machine-gunning along one side. We jumped into the dyke. There was a chap with a rifle shooting at it. It was so close you could hear the bullets hit the plane. A second later the plane went up with a bloody great bang and clouds of smoke. Everyone thought he'd shot it down. Later we found a Spitfire got it. One poor old chap who must have been in the First War, even the war before that, had tears running down his cheeks. He was waving his hat and shouting: "Vive le Tommy!" I often wondered what happened to him.

By this time the Belgians had packed up. We were ordered to dump the lorries and immobilise them. I'd never heard of Dunkirk before. We found our way onto the beach by an iron bridge and were taken off the mole by a destroyer that night. Everyone remembers the mole with the plank to walk over. I think most people were taken off the mole, not by the little ships. We didn't see many. I've been back to Dunkirk several times and I can find the beach where we were for a day but I can never find the way we got onto it. All I can remember is an iron bridge like the Tyne one, with bodies all over it. Nobody else can remember where it was.

When I got back to England I went to hospital near Bournemouth, an Army hospital. They looked at the stitches and told me to come back in three days to have them taken out. Then one eye closed completely. They put me in a hospital bed. The other eye closed so I was blind for about a week. "You've got a cracked skull" they said. This turned out to be a good thing because it went on the Army medical records. It saved a lot of problems. If they wanted me to do anything silly like PT I went sick with a headache; they'd check the records and let me off.

One woman M.O. took a special interest in my case, she was quite sure she was going to cure me. I had to see her every other day and would sit opposite her over a bowl of water with a towel over my head. I kept giving her good reports. She'd say: "How are you feeling this morning?" So I'd say: "A little bit better. But I didn't have a very good night." There was nothing to cure but it was a very good thing!

After about three weeks I was out of hospital. I never saw anyone from my unit again. I went home on leave to Fleet. While I was there a telegram arrived for my mother. I took it from the boy. It said I was Missing, believed killed on an unknown date.

No. CAO/R/20 Army Form B, 104-88  
 (If replying, please quote above No.)

RASC Record Office,  
Hastings  
3-7-1940

SIR OR MADAM,

I regret to have to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office to the effect that (No.) 98859 (Rank) DM (Name) HALGARTH Alfred Frederick (Regiment) RASC was posted as "missing" on the date unknown

The report that he is missing does not necessarily mean that he has been killed, as he may be a prisoner of war or temporarily separated from his regiment.

Official reports that men are prisoners of war take some time to reach this country, and if he has been captured by the enemy it is probable that unofficial news will reach you first. In that case I am to ask you to forward any postcard or letter received at once to this Office, and it will be returned to you as soon as possible.

Should any further official information be received it will be at once communicated to you.

I am,  
 SIR OR MADAM,  
 Your obedient Servant,  
*G. Williams*  
 An Officer in charge of Records.  
RASC

**IMPORTANT.**  
 Any change of your address should be immediately notified to this Office.  
 WL 3004/1250 400,000 (14) 109 K/L/0422 Gp 0503 Form B.101-550

Things had quietened down a bit by then. They put me into a troop-carrying company and we commandeered about 60 civilian coaches to take the troops out to the (ignore) invasion beaches which never happened, of course. We carried the Home Guard around all over the place. We selected the man with the biggest voice and asked: "Would you like to borrow my hat?" So he'd go round with the collection plate. After about six or eight weeks they put me on a radar course for gunners. I spent some time on gun sights in charge of the radar. Batteries came and batteries went but I stayed on. Most of the time I was on a gun sight not far from Glasgow. It was only half a battery, only 4 guns, 3.7's. An Honourable Artillery Company battery came. They were crazy.

They were credited with shooting three planes down, two Spitfires and a Blenheim. As far as I know they never shot any German planes down. They had a lot of fun because we were right on the flight path for Belfast and Liverpool.

At that time we only had the Mach 1 radar. You could tell the height of an aircraft and the slant range but not the direction. They stationed a sentry on the receiver with a little telescope on the side of it and he used to push the receiver in the direction of the plane otherwise they could fire 180 degrees out. I was on this for about a year.

## The Sonic Deception Company

I was in the workshops one day when an Army major was there doing interviews. The Sergeant Major came up to me and told me to go forward to make up the numbers. The Major asked me a few questions about what I'd been doing and where I'd been, and said: "You'll do." I asked: "What for?" He said: "We're forming a secret company. And you'll be in it." I was pleased about that! It was called the Sonic Deception Company. We had about six armoured cars equipped with loudspeakers and the soundtracks on cinema projectors like tanks and building bridges and so on. We had our own film-making company. With the cars being mobile you could travel round in 360 degrees and change the volume and so forth. It was very clever, very

realistic. I was walking down a road in the dark and got out of the way for a tank, but it was just one of our cars coming along.

We had to demonstrate what we could do to some top-class generals and so on. It was Top Secret so nobody knew what we were doing although when we got to Italy they must have found out somehow because they wanted some film. The Americans sent a film unit over from the States and we looked very good. Douglas Fairbanks came over. There were only about thirty of us on the unit and no cook. We were peeling spuds and cooking them when he came up and said: "That smells good. Can I have some?" One of them said: "You'll have to peel your own tates first." "Oh, I can do that too," he said, and he got on with it, chatting away as if he'd known us all his life.

Then we left Liverpool heading for North Africa. It was supposed to be the biggest convoy that ever sailed. Our OC, Major Smith, was a bit of a fire-eater. He was going to win a medal and his men were going to win it for him. He came looking for volunteers to man the guns on the troopship. I said to my mate: "We want to be in here. We'll be playing about on deck for six weeks." So we volunteered. The others were doing PT and all sorts of exercises. We were living the life of Reilly, our own little cabin and meals with the rest of the crew, it was alright. We reached North Africa but the OC stuck his nose into other people's business and got his leg blown off.

After that we had another chap called Robinson who was just the opposite. He didn't want to win a medal; he just wanted to get home in one piece. The convoy was an impressive sight, ships everywhere. At night it was pitch black so you couldn't see them, then in the morning there they all were. Ours was the Almora.

We landed in Algiers and went to Sicily, 1943 I think. Whether the Germans took any notice of us or not I don't know but they dropped bricks over us and made a few loud explosions. From Sicily we went to Italy and finished up at Cassino. It was right in the middle of winter, very cold and wet, the worst time. Being in the Army corps I suppose we took the place of the Cavalry before the first War. If they didn't have anything to do they would go along with the Infantry. We didn't like that a lot.

Funny thing happened there, on the banks of the river, the Rapido, I think. The river went round from Cassino to the west coast of Italy. About March '44 we were manning the line and a German came down most mornings to fill a canvas bucket. We didn't take any notice of them. They weren't bothering us so we didn't bother them. My mate said: "Tomorrow I'm going to do him." Sure as eggs, the German came down as usual next day and my mate put a hole in his bucket.

We were with the Ghurkas on the east coast, marvellous little chaps. They used to tell us: "You don't need your rifles tonight, Tommy, we're going in the camp."

We were about three or four miles behind Cassino and I got to know the local blackmarket man. Got quite friendly with him, actually. Well, the Sixth of June, D-Day, the day they took Rome, about ten o'clock in the morning we heard on the tank sets they took Rome about eight. Cassino was about 60 miles from Rome. I think they moved up in a couple of days because there was no resistance. Well my friend,

Luigi, came at ten that morning. There were no phones, no post, of course. He wanted to pinch an Army lorry and load it up with grain stored in a barn somewhere and take it to Rome. There was going to be a man meet me at a cross-roads outside Rome and I was going to get thousands of lira for doing it. I told him: "It's not on." He moaned: "Ah, payola." I said: "Too true, it's payola. My feet would never touch the floor." There were redcaps all over the place.

But what beats me is how he knew this chap was going to meet me in Rome just two hours after we'd taken it. Lots of funny things happened in the war. We stayed around there until about August or September 1944.

At some point we captured a German self-propelled gun. I can't remember how we got it because it was quite intact. It must have run out of petrol or something. The powers-that-be decided it had to go to England under escort. Because of my experience with guns they said: "You'd better go with it." We went on a cargo boat, SS *Wheatsheaf*, to Newcastle. But God knows why it needed a guard because the Germans made the gun and knew all about it!"

We were to go back to England and then do a bit of jungle training in Burma. But then they decided I wouldn't be going because they'd already got enough troops out there. When we arrived in Newcastle they said: "We've got nothing for you to do so you might as well stay on the guns." So I stayed on the *Wheatsheaf* going backwards and forwards to the Med. It was a good job but the boat was old and kept breaking down.

As the war in Europe was almost over, they decided First in, First out, so anyone with a low demob number, below 30, wouldn't go to the Far East. Mine was 25. They sent me back to Woolwich. There were thousands and thousands of people waiting to be demobbed and to go into the Army. They had to be given things to do. There were about six people on the dockyard detail so I went and found out who was coming off it and took his place next day. We had a day off every third day. Our job was to smash up electronic equipment. If it was any good we sold it to radio shops.

A lorry turned up one day with a load of stuff. He asked: "What are you doing with them?" We said: "Smashing them up." He said: "That's a bit of a bother." We asked: "Why?" He said: "Where I fetch them from, they've all got to be put in working order before I bring 'em."

I was demobbed in 1946.

I started my Army career as a gunner and ended as a trooper nearly eight years later. That's quick promotion. You can't do much better than that, can you?