



Tom Fowler
4th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment
Polar Bears

Tom Fowler from Lincolnshire, No 4804089 4th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment, Polar Bears



Anyone who was 20 in 1939 had to go and register at the Labour Exchange for the Militia. The first batch of Militia boys was called up in June or July. They went to the



depot and were given a khaki suit, also a blazer, white shirt, tie, grey flannel trousers, shoes and socks. I missed out on this because I was in the second batch in October and the war had started, so I went to the Lincoln depot for the winter. I came home on Christmas leave in 1939 and was late going back due to illness. When I got back to Lincoln they'd moved to a big hangar. Over the top was a ventilator. When I walked in I found a snowdrift down the centre, so that had to be moved out. Our beds were little trestles about 8 to 10" high.

During that time everything froze up, the toilets and everything, so they dug a hole outside. The only people with water were the cooks so we did have a meal. We were given a shovel apiece. From Burton Road in Lincoln to Waddington Aerodrome was completely blocked and we had to shovel the snow out. I was posted to the 4th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment in Ripon, in a cinema. At half past six in the morning we had to walk about a quarter of a mile for breakfast at seven in a big barn. As we went down the street we were all singing "Good morning, good morning" and people were shouting out of their windows: "Shut up, you noisy lot".

Then we went up to a Scottish camp near Hawick – the bagpipes used to wake us up for Reveille on the other side - and then Rosyth about the end of March to HMS Ferwick a big battle cruiser. All of a sudden: "You've got two hours to get your kit off, we're going out." They were going to meet the *Scharnhorst* in the North Sea. Then they put us on the *Empress of Australia* – it still had stewards and all the cabins and so on. Took us round to Norway and just north of Namsos there were two destroyers in a fjord. We unloaded the kit onto a destroyer and while we were on top of the ramp a German bomber came over and dropped some bombs – and missed. Then we went to Namsos. Another German plane came over and dropped two more bombs. We were all sent below out of the way. It was all flashing and banging. I thought to myself: "I can't swim" because I had a full pack on.

We went by lorry to Grong. While we were there the baker was arrested as a quisling; we missed our fresh bread rolls for breakfast! Next day by train to Steinkjer, then on foot to a little village called List. We took up positions at a farmhouse about one and a half miles from there, knocking walls out under Captain Tweedie. It was near Trondheim fjord with German battleships and paratroops. German tracer bullets set fire to the barn we were in. What do you do – stay inside and burn to death or go outside and get shot? We got one or two wounded out, one had two bullets through

his leg, another was hit in the eye. There was about eighteen inches of snow. Under cover of the smoke we crawled along the road back to the little village. As we were going, who should I see but an old mate from Spalding across the road, getting away from the fires, like us. The German battleships were shelling the village while we took cover in the woods above it.

We made our way back to Namsos any way we could, marching, riding, while German planes machine-gunned us from time to time. We got back there about 26th April and boarded a French boat, the *El Cantara*. There was no food on board. We had just a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits between three of us. We came in to Scapa Flow and boarded a British liner. *HMS Alfredie* was there. A Stuka came out of the sky and dropped a bomb in the middle of it. It sank. We couldn't do anything. After a bath and good meal we went back to Glasgow for a change of clothes. We had to go into a big warehouse to be re-equipped. Everything had to be taken off and dumped, no matter what – except a few personal belongings. There were men stripped off and men getting dressed – and then a concert party came in. They were supposed to be entertaining in the next warehouse.

We were told later we were ordered out of Norway, we weren't driven out. We never got a medal for it.

After about ten days leave we went to Motherwell to get our full kit for Iceland. We were there for a couple of years from June 1940 to 1942. Early June 1940 we boarded a troopship and arrived at Akarayri in the north of Iceland a couple of weeks later, billeted in a school. We were not welcome and were spat upon but they got better as time went on. The Norwegian Air Force had a spotting plane at Akarayri. It could land on sea or snow. It used to sit by the road with its engines ticking over, revving them up to annoy the girls going to work, making their skirts fly up, nice legs.

Our platoon was sent to the docks and we made camp there. I was Cook. We had a lot of mutton because the Icelanders brought their sheep down from the mountains every year. They kept the best for Spring and sold the rest to the Army. Also we had a lot of kippers and fish. We bought cakes and so on from the shops, very nice too.

We had patrol and guard duties at a village near the entrance to a fjord. We had twenty-four hours of daylight in summer, or wintertime it would be dark at three o'clock in the afternoon and light just before nine in the morning. One of the best sights was the Aurora Borealis on a winter night, nearly like daylight, amazing. The town had a swimming pool with warm water piped in from the mountains. There were some geysers, big water spouts, very spectacular. We went on a patrol to the end of the fjord just to check on the submarine net. We had to pass the nesting ground of some ptarmigans, a bird about the size of a seagull but with tail feathers like a swallow. As we were passing they dive-bombed our steel helmets!



Early 1941 we returned to our company in camp, to new Nissen huts. One Saturday evening I was getting my brass polish ready for sentry duty on Sunday when the door opened and a voice said: "Is Tom Fowler here?" It was my brother; he was a regular soldier in the Royal Engineers. He was in Gibraltar when the war broke out, had three

weeks in England, and been sent to Norway for about three weeks. He was about a mile away from us. My younger brother finished up in Ceylon all the war. My other brother was twenty-two years in the RAF and was mentioned in Dispatches twice, flying in Lancasters. There were four of us and we all served King and Country.



From the Nissen huts we began mountain training, sleeping in two-man tents, and under a glacier. It had an entrance where we went inside to sleep on shingle, nice and dry. It also had running water. In daytime we went out on snow shoes. It depended on the time of year. The hospital ship, RML Leinster, arrived and moored just away from the docks.

Early 1942 we were on the move again to take up the place of another regiment at Sedisfjord. This was all a bit of camouflage as not long after, the Americans arrived to take over. Inside the fjord was a large oil tanker; then in came an aircraft carrier, a cruiser, a destroyer and the *Duchess of Bedford* troopship with the Yanks on board. The aircraft carrier had all its planes on top deck and the Americans were unloading when we had a visitor – a German plane. He dropped a bomb and missed the lot except a rowing boat on shore.

We went on the *Duchess of Bedford* round to Reyjavik, picked up some more, and then to England to start training for the Invasion.

Normandy

The end of May 1944 we left Pakefield camp, near Lowestoft, to go south of London to a camp in a wood surrounded by barbed wire. No-one was allowed out of camp only under escort. About 8th June we were on a train with military escort to Newhaven. Then off the train and onto an LCT landing craft tank. We had the side, and tanks had the centre of the boat, so the landing in Normandy 9th June was good and wet. We had bicycles on our backs. A short way inland we got into our dry clothes which were wrapped in our gas capes.

We cycled a mile or two inland and had a meal from our packs. We carried a tin of tomato soup, some biscuits and chocolate. The tin of soup had a small lid in the centre of the top which was lifted off with a pocket knife, then it was stabbed and a lighted cigarette or match held to it and within a minute or two there was real, hot soup.

Next day we moved up to the front line, left our bikes, and took over from the Green Howards near Tilly. We had a bit of shelling from Jerry with his six barrel mortars. Our Artillery then gave them a barrage from early morning. Then we had breakfast and went forward behind a creeping barrage from our own guns through a cornfield. We didn't see many Germans and we dug ourselves a new trench.

After a while we were on the move again further up the line to Fontenay and soon we were on the attack again. Near Fontenay there was a church cemetery and Jerry sent over some air burst shells. Whilst in the trench we saw a big bombing raid on Caen, a thousand planes so we heard. All we could see in the distance was a huge cloud of smoke and dust.

After a few other exchanges as we moved forward there were more mortar shells from Jerry. I don't remember being taken to hospital until I was given a tablet and slept for a while. I was one of several from different regiments with shell shock – "Bomb Happy" – and after just a week I was in orders to Company Officer and asked how I felt, and would I go back to my regiment? I said Yes. I had got over shaking like a leaf. I was told to pack my kit for 8.30 in the morning and instead of going back to my regiment, myself and five others were taken about two miles from Bayeux to guard prisoners. They were coming in hundreds. So for the rest of my army service I stayed as prisoners guard and escorted them on working parties.

I still have good memories of Spalding friends I went to school with and I have been back there to put a cross on their graves. Many thoughts come back of these men from my old regiment.



"Grandad Tom" and Dutch girl

