Motor Battalion

THE HISTORY OF A LONDON RIFLE BATTALION IN WW2

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Cover photo (front and spine): part of 9 Platoon, G Company after the battle at Stolzenau. Front, left to right: Riflemen 'Flip' Davey, Eric Patience and John Petrie. Back: Sergeant Hart (left) and unknown rifleman. Nendorf, 7 April 1945 – Rfn. John Petrie coll.

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WATERLOO
PRINCE CONSORT'S OWN

8th Rifle Brigade Headquarters, Schleswig, Germany, mid-1945. Standing, 2nd from left Adjutant Captain Nat Fiennes, 3rd from left Commanding Officer Lieutenant-Colonel Tony Hunter – Sgt. Alfred White MM coll.

Preface and Acknowledgements

For me, the story of the 8th Rifle Brigade began when meeting one of its members during the Normandy commemorations of 1999. In the autumn of 1941 Don Gillate had been called up to serve his country and then been posted to the 8th Rifle Brigade in early 1942. A little over three years later he found himself on the Baltic coast in northern Germany. Out of his platoon of 43 men he was one of only three to make it through all the way from Normandy to the Baltic. His story made a lasting impression on me and has led to more than 25 years of research into the history of his battalion.

This book should give some idea of what it meant to be part of this battalion and of the sacrifices made by its members through giving up years of their lives and by living through experiences which for many resulted in decades of sleepless nights and nightmares, in some cases combined with lasting effects of physical wounds. Many others simply lost their lives. In the 8th Rifle Brigade this ultimate price was paid by one in five: 169 men. With it, at least in my part of the world, they bought peace for the next 80 years and hopefully even longer.

Writing this book would have been impossible without the many personal accounts, documents and photos received from numerous veterans, their relatives and others. Next to many published sources, this often very personal input has been invaluable in making this a story not just about the battalion but also about its members. I would like to thank all of them, and in particular the following members of the battalion – all now sadly no longer with us – and their relatives, whose specific contributions have been used in this account*: Rifleman Dennis Affleck, Rifleman Stanley Ayres, Major Noel Bell MC, Sergeant Robin Bratton, Rifleman Igor Chroustchoff, Rifleman Leslie Couzens, Major Foster Cunliffe MC, Sergeant Robert Docker, Rifleman Dick Elmes, Captain Nat Fiennes, Sergeant Jim Fruin, Corporal Don Gillate, Lieutenant Richard Gould, Sergeant Mike Hicks, Rifleman William Hill, Rifleman Norman Hunter, Rifleman Roland Jefferson, Rifleman Donald King, Hendrik-Jan Ledeboer, Lance Corporal Albert Lee†, Rifleman Bill Littlepage, Lieutenant Francis MacGinnis, Lance Corporal Walter Madley†, Corporal Ron Manby†, Rifleman William Mason, Sergeant Norman McEwen, Lieutenant Brian Neill, Rifleman Bert Oliver†, Lieutenant John Painter, Rifleman Eric Patience, Rifleman Harry Perry†, Rifleman John Petrie, Sergeant Peter Read, Rifleman Gino Rizzi, Lieutenant David Stileman, Captain Johnny Straker MC, Lieutenant W.E.F. Trounson, Rifleman Joseph Wheatley† and Sergeant Alfred White MM. Apart from members of the battalion, I have others to thank, for information and support: Jan van den Bossche, Sergeant J.E. Crane, Royal Engineers, Billy Leblond, of the Musée de La Percée du Bocage, Normandy, Karel Margry, Tracey van Oeffelen, Kasteel Ooijen, Sergeant Roy Valence, 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, Marcel Zwarts and anyone who I may have forgotten. Photo credits are included in the captions and document references can be found in the notes appendix.

Two others I want to thank in particular are James Cunliffe and John Russell, both of them retired British Army officers, and the first the son of F Company Major Foster Cunliffe and the second the author of 'Theirs the Strife', about the forgotten battles of the British 2nd Army in northern Germany in April 1945. They were kind enough to do the proofreading of the manuscript. I want to thank them for their advice and for the errors they prevented from slipping through.

Last but not least, I want to thank my wife and daughter for their encouragements in writing this book.

Ronald Jeltes

*): Ranks and decorations mentioned are those held by the end of the war. Names marked with "†" are those that were killed during the war.

Introduction

This book is about the '8th Battalion The Rifle Brigade' – in short '8th Rifle Brigade' – about its formation, its training, its exploits and the part it played in the liberation of Western Europe. Above all, however, it is about its members.

The 8th Rifle Brigade had its origins in the pre-war 'London Rifle Brigade', one of Britain's territorial units, made up of volunteers; part-time soldiers who did their soldiering next to their regular jobs. With the outset of war, however, this began to change. Increasing numbers of conscripts were posted into the battalion and eventually the pre-war territorials became a minority. Despite this change in the battalion's make-up, what remained was its spirit and the fact that, being a London regiment, many of its men came from typical City trades and professions: clerks, bankers, salesmen, dock workers and railwaymen. The officers were different. They were privately educated and many came from wealthy and aristocratic families. Most were just as young as their men and fresh from college or university. Next to volunteers and conscripts there was a sprinkling of professional soldiers, filling in the more senior positions within the battalion.

Part of the battalion's spirit came from being an elite unit. Like all Rifle Brigade battalions the 8th Rifle Brigade was a 'motor battalion'. It had a specialised, important and hazardous role within an armoured division. The battalion's elite character was emphasised by the wearing of distinctive dark green – rifle green – regimental titles and badges of rank and dark green forage caps, which in 1942 were replaced by berets, a type of headdress which during the war was reserved for elite units only, such as tank and reconnaissance units, airborne troops and commandos, and motor battalions. While the others mentioned wore black, maroon and dark green berets, the Rifle Brigade's were khaki.

The 8th Rifle Brigade performed extremely well during the war. They were part of the 11th Armoured Division, considered by many to have been the finest armoured division in the British Liberation Army (BLA) in North West Europe. It is quite remarkable that all this was achieved by a collection of peace time soldiers and conscripts.

The perspective of this book is from 'a worm's eye view', an expression one rifleman used when asked about his insight in the general situation at any time during the campaign. It is a record of the battalion's accomplishments, what its men did, where they went, about the life they led and about their losses in dead and wounded: 681 out of a nominal strength of 854 officers and men. It also is a record about moments of great fear alternating with moments of ecstatic joy and pleasure – when liberating yet another town or when simply having a day's rest – and of comradeship.

To add context to the story, each chapter begins with a short introduction or outline of the general situation, to better understand why the battalion did what it did at a certain time and to have some idea of the situation they were in while doing it. By design these introductions focus on what is relevant to the battalion. They do not provide a comprehensive overview of the campaign in North West Europe in general, for which other sources can be found.

This book contains numerous maps and photos, with the latter helping to visualise what the riflemen's existence looked like, both while in England and when fighting on the European mainland. The maps – all based on contemporary army maps or 'Geographical Section General Staff' (GSGS) maps – enable the reader to find the locations where it all happened or even make a journey along the path taken by the 8th Rifle Brigade. Dashed black lines on these maps show the battalion's centre line. Sometimes there are multiple centre lines, when more than one company was leading the advance. Sometimes diversions from the centre line can be seen. Any geographical names and coordinates shown on these dashed lines

are those through which the battalion is known to have passed. Other names – often those of larger cities or towns – are included to ease orientation.

The spelling of geographical names, army units, ranks, vehicles, weapons and any abbreviations used – the latter have been avoided as much as possible and an overview of them can be found in the appendices – uses contemporary spelling wherever possible and follows usage in British war diaries and on contemporary maps. Exceptions are made where obvious errors have been made in contemporary records.

Here too it seems good to add a brief description of British Army organisation and designations, so that the reader can understand where the 8th Rifle Brigade fits in. The British Army was made up of armies (just one such army, the British 2nd Army, was involved in the campaign in North West Europe, with other armies fighting in Italy, North Africa and the Far East), which in turn were made up of several corps. The composition of a corps varied depending on its requirements for specific operations, but it always would be made up of several divisions, and possibly some smaller formations, such as independent brigades. The composition of a division in principle was permanent. The 8th Rifle Brigade was part of the 11th Armoured Division, a formation of roughly 15,000 all ranks, which consisted of two brigades, one of which had four battalions, while the other had three battalions. The first one of these brigades was 29th Armoured Brigade, consisting of three 'tank battalions' and one 'motor battalion': the 8th Rifle Brigade. The other was 159 Infantry Brigade, consisting of three infantry battalions. British army designations can be notoriously confusing and the 8th Rifle Brigade is no exception as despite its name it was not a *brigade* but a *battalion*, hence its full name: '8th *Battalion* The Rifle Brigade'. 'The Rifle Brigade' was the title of the battalion's parent regiment. Like most British regiments it consisted of multiple battalions, which were allocated to different brigades and divisions.

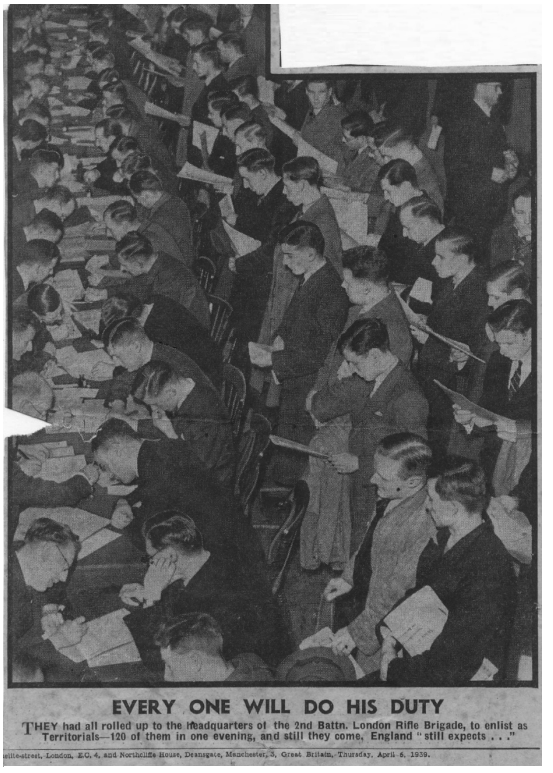
The main subject of this book, of course, is the 8th Rifle Brigade itself. Finally, therefore, here follows some information about the composition of the battalion as it was during the campaign in North West Europe. The battalion was commanded by a Lieutenant-Colonel and at nominal strength consisted of 38 officers and 816 other ranks. It was made up of five companies. The first of these was HQ Company, which supported the battalion's command and handled matters of administration, logistics and other organisational tasks. The other four companies were fighting companies. Each was made up of multiple platoons which, depending on their role, consisted of 29 to 43 officers and men. A platoon was usually commanded by one lieutenant – sometimes by a first and second lieutenant – and comprised a platoon headquarters and three sections of eight to ten men or two sections of eleven to fifteen men, again depending on its role.

With all of this, it is now hoped the reader is sufficiently prepared.

1. War!

On 29 March 1939 the British Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, announces the doubling of Brittain's Territorial Army. It is a year after Germany's annexation of Austria and two weeks after Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia. Despite the Munich Agreement of 1938 the expectation that war is imminent is stronger than ever. On 1 September 1939, five months after Hore-Belisha's announcement, Poland finds itself next in line to be invaded by Germany. This time the response of Great Britain and France is swift and clear. Bound by an agreement with Poland both countries declare war on Germany two days later. It is 3 September 1939. The Second World War has begun.

Hore-Belisha's plan must have been well prepared, for the doubling of at least one territorial battalion takes place at about the same time as his announcement, when in late March 1939 the '2nd Battalion The London Rifle Brigade' is created.[1] In early 1941 this battalion will be renamed '8th Battalion The Rifle Brigade', but for now we will refer to it by its original though somewhat shortened title: '2nd London Rifle Brigade'.


EVERY ONE WILL DO HIS DUTY

THEY had all rolled up to the Headquarters of the 2nd Battn. London Rifle Brigade, to enlist as Territorials—120 of them in one evening, and still they come. England "still expects . . ."

Young men enlisting at 130 Bunhill Row, 4 or 5 April 1939. Seated fourth from front, with hand touching nose, is Donald King – Rfn. Donald King coll.

The London Rifle Brigade had originally been raised in 1859 as a volunteer or territorial unit, meaning that virtually all of its members were serving with the regiment on a part-time basis. The only exception to this would be in wartime, when conscripts were needed to generate a significant increase of men and of the number of battalions. In 1914-1918, the regiment had had two battalions serving on the Western Front.[2] As war came to an end, the active existence of the London Rifle Brigade ceased for about a year, only to be reconstituted in 1920. Conditions of peacetime service were relatively easy. During their first year recruits were required to complete 40 drills of one hour each. Trained men had to do ten such drills. All had to pass a prescribed musketry course and had to attend camp for a minimum of eight days. Fulfilment of these terms meant recruits earned £4 and trained men £5 per year. The number of members during the inter-war years varied, from a little over 250 just after the Great War to about 400 in 1925, and 583 in April 1938, which was more than a battalion's nominal peace time establishment. Throughout these years, the regiment was stationed at 130 Bunhill Row, London,[3] as it had been since 1893. Next to training and annual camps, duties mainly consisted of taking part in various parades and ceremonies in London, one of the more notable being the funeral of King George V in January 1936.[4]

In April 1939, shortly after the formation of the second battalion, recruiting of new volunteers begins and just three weeks later the battalion

reaches full war establishment. A remarkable feat, especially when taking into account that for administrative reasons Bunhill Row has been open for enlisting for just one night per week.[5]

The first commanding officer (CO) of the newly formed second battalion is Lieutenant-Colonel A.T.B. Bignold de Cologan OBE TD. He has been commissioned into the London Rifle Brigade already before the First World War, and at the age of 49 is now considered too old for active service. Nonetheless, he will play an important role in the early days of the battalion, instilling in it the high standards which are maintained throughout the war. Company commanders on formation of the battalion are Captains J.H. Stransom DCM, J.E.L. Wright, Lord D.E.F. Inchiquin, C.W. Suter and C.F.H. Gough*, respectively in command of HQ Company and E, F, G and H Companies. Like their CO, three of them have served already during the First World War. Company designations 'E' to 'H' are a result of 'A' to 'D' being reserved for the 1st London Rifle Brigade. The first adjutant of the battalion is Captain B.C. Baylay, to be succeeded by Captain T.R. Shepherd-Cross already before the outbreak of the war.[6]

With both first and second battalion now using Bunhill Row, the place gets rather crowded and so adjoining premises at Chiswell Street are requisitioned. Training proceeds well and by mid-July, just before both battalions go to their annual training camp, every recruit has done his rifle course and learned at least rudimentary drill. The regiment's annual camp, with both battalions present, is held at Burley, Hampshire, during the last week of July and the first week of August. The camp itself is chiefly remarkable for experiencing the worst weather of the whole inter-war series of camps. After a cloudburst in the second week, the second battalion, being in the most exposed position, moves to billets at nearby Brockenhurst. Both battalions return to London by the end of the first week of August,

HQ 2nd LRB Burley Camp 1939. Officers, wearing peaked caps, left to right: unknown, Lt. Col. Bignold de Cologan, Capt. Stransom, Lt. Risdon, unknown – Rfn. Donald King coll.

*): Major 'Freddie' Gough will later command 1st Airborne Division's Reconnaissance Squadron during the Battle of Arnhem.

and by the middle of the month, as usual, Bunhill Row closes for the annual break before the winter season.[7] Two weeks later Germany invades Poland.

Embodiment of the second battalion begins that same day and is completed two days later, when all members but one have returned to join the battalion. The one person missing has a valid reason for not showing up as he happens to be in America. Battalion HQ by now have moved from Bunhill Row to 26 Old Jewry, also housing the headquarters of the City of London Police.[8] It is 3 September 1939, the very day that war is declared on Germany and announced to the British public at 1100 hours in a radio broadcast by prime minister Neville Chamberlain. Half an hour later, the first air raid alarm of the war is sounded over London. Fortunately, that day the sky remains clear.[9]

Conditions in the autumn of 1939 for the 2nd London Rifle Brigade are not good. Companies are housed in billets scattered all over the City, making administration difficult and training impossible. One bright spot amid the gloom is the presentation on 22 September of a solid silver bugle to the battalion by Miss Irene Carlebach, soon to be engaged to Lieutenant-Colonel Bignold de Cologan. Another positive note is the fact that from its earliest days the second battalion is issued with the recently introduced battledress. Most other units – including the first battalion – still have to be content with wearing service dress, an old-fashioned type of uniform very similar to that being worn during the First World War.[10] On 11 October the battalion is inspected in the Temple Gardens by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Frank Henry Bowater, and by the end of the month they move to the north-western suburbs in and around Uxbridge, Iver and Eastcote. Here they are to guard Northolt Aerodrome and patrol the RAF station and grounds at Uxbridge and Iver[11] and vulnerable points in general.[12] The riflemen's guarding of these places is not only against possible German attack but also against terrorist attacks from the IRA, which have

Rifleman Roy Ford, doing guard duty at Northolt Aerodrome – Rfn. Donald King coll.

recently let off a number of bombs in London.[13] Sometime during this period Rifleman Buxton becomes the battalion's first casualty when he is seriously injured by a train while on sentry duty.[14] The battalion remains in the area until the middle of December.

On 12 December 1939 the battalion moves to Beckenham where, for the first time since the outbreak of war, proper officers' and sergeants' messes are set up and the men are fed from a battalion cookhouse. The latter is the scene of some excitement when on Christmas Eve – with 20 turkeys waiting to be cooked for Christmas dinner – the cookhouse catches fire and burns to the ground. Fortunately, the turkeys are saved[15] and Christmas dinner is served to all ranks at 1230 hours next day. As tradition dictates, it is the officers and sergeants carving and waiting upon the men rather than the other way around.[16] At Beckenham, where the

battalion is to support the local police, one company at a time needs to be ready to move at ten minutes' notice, usually to be sent out to Croydon Aerodrome for defence against parachute attack. With one company on duty, the rest of the battalion takes the opportunity to do some training, which had not been possible back at Eastcote. Training, however, is again interrupted, by a period of Christmas leave and later by inoculations for all ranks. On top of this, with some very severe weather the sickness rate rises considerably and as a consequence, training is again not as successful as it might have been.[17] On 2 February 1940, there is a change in command, when Lieutenant-Colonel Bignold de Cologan is succeeded by Major Sir Charles McGrigor Bt OBE, who is promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel soon after.[18] Shortly before, company commanders Captains Gough and Suter and one other volunteer to help the Finns in the defence of their country against the Soviet invasion. In the end, however, they never get anywhere near Finland as the country soon capitulates and for the time being, they remain with the battalion.[19] Later, Suter joins the commandos and Gough the airborne forces. Other volunteers leaving the battalion are two non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and two riflemen volunteering for service as anti-aircraft gunners with North Sea merchantmen. Of these four men, by 1 April news gets back that Corporal R.G. Smith and Rifleman T. Jupe have managed to shoot down an attacking German bomber. It is the first loss inflicted on Nazi Germany by members of the battalion.[20]

After Beckenham there are three more moves by the battalion within the London area: to the London Docks[21] – to guard its various locks[22] – in the first half of February, to Golders Green, Hampstead, one month later and to West Norwood, on 10 May 1940.[23] It is the day Germany has chosen to invade Holland, Belgium and France. As a result, from that day on one company has to stand-to each day for emergencies. Also, a motorcycle and a tank-

2nd and 3rd Platoon tents at March, Cambridgeshire, June 1940 – Rfn. Donald King coll.

hunting platoon are formed to be placed under brigade control. Throughout the month the battalion helplessly watches the collapse of Holland, Belgium and France while waiting for parachutists that never come.[24] One duty is guarding the perimeter of Croydon Aerodrome. Having dug some slit trenches in the chalky ground, the men are given a right bollocking by the fighter pilots. Their chalk trenches can be seen for miles around. It is an early and important lesson in camouflage techniques.[25]

In the second week of June a move is made to a completely new area: March in Cambridgeshire. For the first time since the beginning of the war the battalion is now camping in tents and once settled they are given responsibility for the defence of a large area. Even before making a proper start with this, however, on 24 June they move again, to Rugely, some 15 miles north of Birmingham. On the 30th a further move is made, to the village of Ingestre[26] near Stafford. Accommodation, again, is in tents.[27]

On 22 June 1940, the French under Petain capitulate to Germany, little more than two weeks after the completion of Operation DYNAMO – the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk. The Battle for France is over and the Battle of Britain is about to begin.

2nd London Rifle Brigade's – later 8th Rifle Brigade – barracks, billets and camps in England and Wales, September 1939 to June 1944 - author's ill. (GSGS4464)

2. Riflemen

Whereas the London Rifle Brigade had been founded in 1859, the Rifle Brigade dates back to 1800, to the days before the Peninsular War and before the Battle of Waterloo. Originally named the 'Experimental Corps of Riflemen', it had been created to act as sharpshooters, scouts and skirmishers. Contrary to normal military doctrine at the time, being conspicuous was not considered an advantage and so the riflemen's uniforms were green instead of the traditional red of the British Army 'Redcoats'. In 1803 the Corps of Riflemen became an established regular regiment which in 1816 was renamed 'The Rifle Brigade'. The title reflected the riflemen's use of the superb Baker flintlock rifle, the first rifled firearm to be used by the British Army and a distinct improvement over the long smooth-bore muskets used by the rest of the British infantry.

By 1939, 139 years after their formation, the riflemen still pride themselves as being rather different from the rest of the British army. Having started life as a battalion in the *London* Rifle Brigade, and as a territorial unit, this applies even more to the battalion this story is about.

As mentioned, two days after embodiment, in early September 1939, virtually all pre-war members have re-joined the battalion at Old Jewry, London. The battalion at this stage consists of about 550 officers and men, some 200 short of its early-war nominal establishment. By mid-July 1940, 145 NCOs have left the 2nd London Rifle Brigade to be admitted into the Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU), a testament to the high quality and standards of the battalion's original recruits and members.[1] Standards that will be maintained for the rest of the war, through training, the spirit emanating from the battalion's core of territorials and – deliberate or unintentional – through the battalion's process for selecting new recruits.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bignold de Cologan sometime after World War One – Author's coll.

England during the Second World War is still very much a class society. A significant portion of the battalion's officers are recruited from the British upper-class, with quite a few stemming from British aristocracy and eminent families. The 2nd London Rifle Brigade's first CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Bignold de Cologan, while born in England, bears the Spanish title of Marques de Torrehermosa of Arotavia, a family originating from Tenerife. Other examples are Captain The Lord Inchiquin from Ireland, Captain The Honourable Richard Greville of Warwick Castle, Lieutenant The Honourable Leslie-Melville from Scotland and Lieutenant Nat Fiennes, heir to the title of Lord Saye and Sele and Broughton Castle in Banbury,

Oxfordshire, and later to become adjutant of the battalion. Apart from being upper-class, many are also very young, with quite a few lieutenants being just 19 or 20 years old, certainly later on during the war. Most have a deep-felt sense of 'noblesse oblige', which is plainly demonstrated during the advance from Normandy to the Baltic, when a disproportionally high percentage of casualties occurs among the junior officers.

All future officers at first undergo six weeks of basic training, just like any other recruit. This is followed by six months of further training, during which at some point they get selected for commission, or not. In order to reach the standard required to command a rifle platoon in a motor battalion, the aspiring officers need to acquire mastery of all weapons, learn to drive all types of vehicles, including armoured and tracked ones, ride motorcycles, learn about radios and their use, lay and lift mines, and excel at assault courses. Part of their training also involves assuming all manner of appointments, from Bren gunner to despatch rider and from platoon commander to company commander. Physical fitness too is an important element and every Monday morning begins with a 10 mile forced march in full kit, often to sweat out the excess alcohol left from the jollity of the cadet's previous weekend.[2]

In early 1942, when observing some of these prospective officers during their initial period of training, Rifleman Don Gillate is not so impressed:

'*…that particular year, 1942 was an icy winter. And one of the first things we did was an early morning run and PT. But not of course before we'd washed and shaved. Now, this we had to do in wash houses which were away from the barracks. So you had to go out, often blundering through the snow, in the dark. And these were wide open to the elements except for a corrugated iron roof. And when you got there, you washed in ice-cold water, you cleaned your teeth in ice-cold water and you shaved in ice-cold water. …we had this platoon of aristos, who were in theory going through the ranks…* [And] *whilst they had their own room and kept themselves to themselves, they had to share our icy wash houses. And to see them in there was really rather revealing and terribly funny. I really don't think that the Lord Morpeths and the Hon. Gerald Lascelles and the rest of them had ever washed their own faces in their lives, I think nanny must have done it for them. …they tended to bend low over the wash trough with an ice-cold flannel which they would rub in a small circle around the area between their eyebrows and their chin, never straying across the neck or anything of that kind. … this was terribly funny, because in fact the Eastend Cockneys were scrupulously clean. Even in those circumstances they would strip off to the waist and wash themselves right down almost to the subcutaneous tissue in order to keep clean.*'[3]

Not only do the battalion's NCOs and riflemen manage to keep scrupulously clean, they are found to do equally well in soldiering. Their background is somewhat different from most of the officers who lead them. They are middle-class clerks and City bankers, cockney railwaymen and dockworkers. Like the officers, many of them have joined the Rifle Brigade at their own choosing, having either volunteered or requested to be posted to the regiment after being called up. As the Rifle Brigade stands in high regard and is considered an elite unit, some want to be part of this elite as a matter of pride or in search of adventure, others see it as a means to get their own back at 'the Hun', which have been bombing their city incessantly since September 1940. Some have fathers and uncles who fought with the regiment during the First World War. Naturally, many also are far less enthusiastic, some being outright resentful at having been called up, some just trying to accept the inevitable.

Even for some of the more enthusiastic, actual confrontation with army life can be rather dispiriting. Most, after all, are just civilians having been called up '*to go and die for their country*.'[4] And even while most, as a basic

principle, can live with that idea, to be shouted at by army sergeants for having a hand in one's pocket when walking out with a girlfriend, or being obliged to end a request for leave to visit a gravely ill relative with a phrase like, '*I beg to remain, Sir, your obedient servant*' can strike a nerve. As one rifleman put it: '*It was one thing to condemn men to death, but there was no need to humiliate them on the way to the scaffold*.'[5]

The resulting intake of officers and men, without undue exaggeration, can be described as a mixture of somewhat haughty officers and a blend of NCOs and riflemen ranging from eager pre-war territorials to conscripts showing anything from great pride in the regiment they have managed to join to an outright disdain for the Army in general. Despite – or owing to – this mixture of characters, at the moment when it matters most there is great and true comradeship in the battalion, also between its officers and men. At that moment, reservations mentioned are no longer important and as a result the battalion will prove itself to be among the finest in the British Army.

To compensate for the loss of the 145 men to the OCTU, on 16 July 1940 100 other ranks – NCOs and riflemen – from the 2nd Motor Training Battalion arrive to join the 2nd London Rifle Brigade. Most are reservists or regular members of the Rifle Brigade. Some have been with the British Expeditionary Force in France, some have been wounded and many are known to some of the battalion's officers.[6] With the 2nd Motor Training Battalion, the men have been trained for their specific role in a motor battalion, but more about that later.

Any fresh recruit first of all needs to learn what it means to be a rifleman. This they are taught at the regimental training depot: Peninsula Barracks in Winchester. Arrival at Winchester is a mass-event, with up to several hundred men joining at a time. On arrival, the new recruits first of all assemble and are told to strip down naked for inspection by a medical officer. Apart from a check on physical fitness, the inspection is also meant to see if the men are not full of '*lice, bugs and beetles*.'[7] Some of the poorer Londoners in particular are found to be rather skinny, probably because of their poor diet. After the inspection, eating utensils, biscuit palliasses[8] – to be filled with straw by the men themselves[9] – and blankets are distributed, enabling the men to have dinner and then put themselves up for the night at a barrack room shared with about 30 others.[10]

Real service begins the following morning, announced by 'rouse', the call of the bugle, at half past six. From that moment onwards for the rest of the day the fresh recruits get rushed around in such a hurry as up to then they had not known existed. At muster parade the men, still in civilian clothing, stand around looking foolish and get shouted at by their CSM. Then at the barrack's store the issuing begins of further kit such as webbing equipment, uniforms, boots, helmets, holdalls and kitbags, and an assortment of smaller items. Uniforms are often found to be ill-fitting and needing to be either exchanged or mended by the tailors over the next few days. A field dressing is issued to each man, with the explicit instructions that it is meant for dressing their own wounds, or as one sergeant says: '*If you get your arm blown off, it is your field dressing that the other chap will use to stick it back on again, and when he has his arm blown off, it is the other way around.*'[11] Sometime after kit has been issued, it is time for inoculations and vaccinations, against tetanus, TAB and smallpox. TAB tends to knock people out for about a day resulting in them lying on their beds, moaning.

Besides uniforms and equipment, while at Winchester the men also need to acquire sound knowledge of the Rifle Brigade's past achievements and traditions. As part of this, a message from the Duke of Gloucestershire is hanging in all barrack rooms. It tells them, amongst other things, about the regiment's achievements at Calais in 1940, when the first battalion prevented the Germans from

advancing on Dunkirk. Also the fact that during the First World War the regiment has won 10 VCs – Britain's highest distinction for gallantry and more than awarded to any other regiment – gets due attention. During the Second World War one more VC will be added, won by Lieutenant-Colonel Vic Turner of the 2nd Battalion The Rifle Brigade – not to be confused with the 2nd *London* Rifle Brigade – during the second Battle of El Alamein in October 1942. One of the traditions with which the men need to get acquainted – and requiring some practice – is the regiment's marching at 140 paces to the minute instead of the regular 120 paces. Like many traditions its origins lie in the 19th Century, either stemming from the retreat to Corunna in 1809 or the need for riflemen to move around the battlefield faster than the rest of the army. March past is even quicker and done at double march, meaning 180 paces to the minute. The riflemen never slow march.

For the malnourished Londoners, going into the army has at least one positive side-effect: the food situation. It is plentiful, with porridge at breakfast, or occasionally tinned sausage or bacon with powdered eggs, and hot sweet tea. Everything in the army is over-sugared. At midday there is a fairly full meal, of stews or sometimes meat, spam or corned beef, with plum duff or rice pudding or something similar for dessert. It is the main meal of the day. At tea, at about five o'clock, there is bread, butter and jam and the occasional piece of cake. Finally, in the evening, there is cocoa and biscuits, again all heavily sugared.

To keep their barracks clean, the men do fatigues, such as cookhouse and dining hall fatigues, and officers' mess and sergeants' mess fatigues. The last two are quite popular as it usually involves having the same meal – though not at the same table – as the officers or sergeants, which usually is of a rather better quality than the men's cookhouse's offerings. Least popular of all is sanitary fatigue: cleaning out the latrines.

Apart from a generous serving of Rifle Brigade traditions, adequate feeding and fatigues, the rifleman's average day from the moment the bugle calls consists of training, and of '*being shouted at, marched around, made to do things that you'd hitherto thought were impossible as if it was something that you did every day, and generally* [being] *treated with contempt*.'[12] Idleness is frowned upon. After breakfast, there is an early morning parade, marching up and down the barrack square, followed by weapons training either on the parade ground or in the lecture room, map reading lectures, classes on regimental history, and further entertainment consisting of either some sort of fatigue or physical training in the gymnasium, or both. Some days the programme is augmented by guard or fire picket duties. One very popular duty at Winchester is the hospital air raid picket, when during air raids the recruits are to help carry patients downstairs to find shelter in the hospital's basement. The alluring aspect is that after these duties there is not much more to be done but to have coffee and buns with the nurses.[13]

When there are no duties to be done, in the evening the men are free to go out into town. On Friday nights there is the occasional dance at the local NAAFI and on Sundays – or at least some Sundays – there is church parade when the men are marched down by the band to Winchester Cathedral.

In the centre of Winchester there is a statue of King Alfred holding a sword. Being a little worried, apparently, about the men's activities while in town, one platoon sergeant has a story to tell about the statue:

'*He* [Sgt. Block] *also told us of the mystique of the sword which is held by King Alfred, down in the town, in the bottom of the city near the Chesil Mill, opposite the big town hall. There's a statue of King Alfred and he's holding up a sword, and he gave us quite early on a lecture on that sword, that if ever a girl of virtue passed, that sword would drop. This was supposed to be a warning*

to us, and he told us it had been up there for two thousand years...'[14]

There is also the occasional sports afternoon, with football being played at Saint Catherine's Hill on the opposite side of the valley from the barracks, or a compulsory cross country run.

Being in the Rifle Brigade means commands too are different from other units of the British Army. No rifleman will react to the command 'Attention!' He is, after all, always on the alert. A rifleman will only respond to the order 'Stand to your front!' No 'sloping of arms' for him either. The riflemen march with the rifle 'at the shoulder', meaning arm and rifle are kept in a vertical position, with the upper part of the rifle resting against the hollow of the right shoulder.

The rifleman's uniform is somewhat different too. Boots are treated with dubbin instead of being polished, so as not to be shiny and give away a man's position while skirmishing. The men wear rifle green (dark green) instead of khaki forage caps – or side caps – with black buttons sewn onto them, as on their battledress uniforms. Their badges of rank are black on dark green and the NCOs' chevrons are worn on the right arm only; a tradition dating back to the early 19th century and introduced so that badges of rank are not visible to the enemy when in a firing position. The bayonet is called a sword, originating from the original long sword-like bayonets that were fixed to the riflemen's Baker rifles in the early 19th century. These rifles were relatively short and therefore needed a longer bayonet to be effective. The fact that by 1940 the rifleman's 'sword' is the same as any other soldier's 'bayonet' does not change any of this. It is the tradition that counts.

After six weeks[15] of arduous training at Winchester, training is still far from complete. As the riflemen are destined to join a motor battalion in one of the British Army's armoured divisions, they now need further specialised training with the Motor Training Battalion at Tidworth.

3. Becoming the 8th Rifle Brigade

Before describing the riflemen's training at Tidworth, let's see what happens to the 2nd London Rifle Brigade and to Great Britain and the British Army in general after the Battle for France and the evacuation of the British Army from Dunkirk.

July 1940 sees the beginning of the Battle of Britain, culminating in defeat for the German Luftwaffe three months later. Despite this victory in the air, 1940, 1941 and most of 1942 are the toughest years of the war for Great Britain. The country remains under attack from the German Luftwaffe, which after failing to destroy the RAF reverts to the bombing of British cities. There is still the threat of invasion and the battle for the Atlantic is raging. Losses of 50 to 100 or more vessels per month, mainly from U-boat attack, are not exceptional. In North Africa, the British, supported by Empire and Dominion troops, are under attack, first from the Italians and then the Germans. While the Italians are overcome relatively easy – with large numbers of prisoners taken – fighting the German Army proves much more difficult. In 1941 the Libyan city of Tobruk is under siege for more than seven months. In mid-1942, after the second battle for Tobruk, the city finally falls to the German Army commanded by Field-Marshall Rommel. A year earlier, in May 1941, Crete is captured by German airborne troops, following the fall of the Greek mainland earlier that year. Also in May 1941, the Royal Navy's battlecruiser HMS Hood is sunk by the Bismarck, resulting in the loss of all but three of its 1,418 men crew. This loss is only marginally compensated for three days later, when the Bismarck itself is sunk after multiple attacks by torpedo bombers and Royal Navy ships.

As if things in Europe, North Africa and the Atlantic are not bad enough, in December 1941 the Japanese begin their offensive in the Far East. Soon after attacking the Americans at Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941, the British also come under attack. On 10 December, the Royal Navy's battleship HMS Prince of Wales and battlecruiser HMS Repulse are sunk. Hong Kong surrenders just two weeks later, and both Malaya and Singapore are taken by the Japanese in February 1942, as are the Dutch East indies.

In spite of all setbacks and outright disasters, somehow there is a belief that one day the tide will turn and Britain and her allies will go on the offensive again. In preparation, as early as 1940, Churchill therefore famously orders the creation of the commandos and of the airborne forces. The creation in late 1940 of the 11th Armoured Division should be seen in the same light, for without armoured divisions no army can hope to win the war. With it, when the time comes, Great Britain can once again set foot on the Continent, liberate France and invade Germany itself. Out of these high resolves the 11th Armoured Division is born, the embryo beginning to develop in December 1940.[1]

The beginning of the Battle of Britain more or less coincides with the influx mentioned earlier of 100 NCOs and riflemen into the 2nd London Rifle Brigade on 16 July 1940. Apart from personnel, the battalion also receives its first four Bren gun carriers. Other specialist equipment, however, is still lacking completely: there are no anti-aircraft mountings or trucks for the anti-aircraft platoon's Bren guns, the mortar platoon has no mortars and transport is '*a miracle of makeshift*'.[2] Given the lack of weapons and equipment it is fortunate the battalion by this time is located north of Birmingham rather than in the south of England. Here at least, the enemy is unlikely to begin his invasion.

On 5 August the powers of the transport officer are called upon once again when the battalion moves by road to south Wales, where they are

given an anti-invasion role in the area of Porthcawl. Similar to elsewhere in Britain, there is a great alertness for a German invasion and German parachutists[3] and much time and energy is spent patrolling the coast as far as Port Talbot and digging slit trenches and preparing machine-gun pits covering the beaches.[4]

Men from No. 3 Platoon, E Company, Porthcawl, 1940 – Rfn. Donald King coll.

On 29 August 1940 the commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Charles McGrigor is succeeded by Major R.A. Macgeorge, who gets promoted to acting lieutenant-colonel the same day. Lieutenant-Colonel McGrigor leaves to take command of the 2nd Motor Training Battalion at Tidworth. A sad note for the 29th is the reported missing of the battalion mascot 'Paddock', the joint property of the battalion's padre and the medical officer.[5]

At the initiative of the Royal Porthcawl Golf Club, the officers of the battalion are made honorary members and are lent rooms for use as an officers' mess.[6] The club's grounds are also used for battalion exercises.[7] One day, there is a slight alarm when a message is received concerning a suspect material floating down from the sky looking very similar in appearance to cobwebs. The material is regarded to be dangerous and not to be touched. A bomb disposal unit is called for to investigate and shortly after a second message is received, which reads as follows:

'*Reference my 7/in/3046 dated 6.10.40 subject cobwebs. The material, very similar in appearance to cobwebs, to which the above quoted message refers, has upon investigation proved to be cobwebs.*'[8]

Riflemen in the grounds of Porthcawl Golf Club, Porthcawl, 1940 – Rfn. Donald King coll.

The battalion's visit to the Welsh seaside ends in mid-October when they move a bit further inland to Monmouth.

Billets at Monmouth are comfortable[9] and made even better by having a good fish and chips shop and pub nearby. One day, rather than the usual 10 or 12 mile route march, a 25 mile march is held in full fighting order. In addition to his personal equipment, each man is to carry 50 rounds of ammunition and Bren gun magazines. Corporal – later sergeant – Mike Hicks remembers it as being the worst march ever, with all men suffering from severe blisters and some needing to be supported by others towards the end of the march. One man has blood seeping out of the eyelets of his boots but perseveres nonetheless. Ultimately, all riflemen make it to the end.[10] On 11 November 1940 news arrives that the 2nd London Rifle Brigade will become a motor battalion and is to become part of the soon to be formed 11th Armoured Division.[11]

In the morning of 9 December the battalion leaves Monmouth for a 120 mile train journey

to Uttoxeter, Staffordshire. Here, battalion HQ is located in drill halls, F and H Companies in the grand surroundings of Loxley and Crakemarsh Halls, G Company at the Uttoxeter race-course and E Company with most of HQ Company in the rather less salubrious workhouse. Despite their unfavourable surroundings, on Christmas Day HQ Company at the workhouse wins the inter-company competition for best decorated dining hall! By the end of 1940, battalion strength comprises 34 officers and 836 other ranks.[12]

On 7 January 1941 the sad news gets through that the battalion's pre-war headquarters at 130 Bunhill Row has been completely destroyed in an air raid. That same month a further change takes place that will prove highly significant for the rest of the battalion's existence. They become part of 29th Armoured Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Christopher Peto, and with-it part of the embryonic 11th Armoured Division. In 29th Armoured Brigade, the riflemen will serve alongside three tank regiments: 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, 23rd Hussars and 24th Lancers. Only in March 1941 11th Armoured Division's HQ is formed and Major-General Percy Hobart takes command. The division is now no longer embryonic. General Hobart, a great enthusiast for armour, has only recently returned from the Middle East, where he formed and commanded the 7th Armoured Division. He it is, also, who chooses the 11th Armoured Division's formation sign: a charging black bull on a yellow field. At its birth the division consists of two armoured brigades, which between them have some 350 Valentine tanks – later to be replaced by Crusader tanks and then again by American Sherman tanks, the type to be used in Normandy. Both armoured brigades in the division comprise three tank regiments and a motor battalion. Apart from the two motor battalions, there is just one other regular infantry battalion in the division. In 1942 this order of battle changes when it is decided an armoured division should consist of one armoured brigade and one infantry brigade only. This organisation will enable the division to regain momentum when slowed down or halted by enemy defensive positions, establish bridgeheads, fight effectively in close country and on occasion to fight a pitched battle of its own.[13]

Another important change, taking place on 18 January 1941, is the battalion's redesignation as '8th Battalion The Rifle Brigade (London Rifle Brigade)',[14] or in short: '8th Rifle Brigade'. The battalion will bear this title and remain part of 29th Armoured Brigade and the 11th Armoured Division for the rest of the war.

The battalion leaves Uttoxeter for a move north, to Leeds on 6 March 1941, in three trains. A road party has moved ahead a day earlier. From Leeds the journey continues to nearby Rawdon, where they remain until early April. There, on 12 March and again on 3 April, the battalion is visited by Major-General Hobart. By the end of March battalion strength is 36 officers and 764 other ranks. Equipment of motor transport has now reached approximately 50 percent, enabling the battalion to make its next move by road instead of rail, and between 1 and 10 April, all companies make their way to North Yorkshire and the villages of Thirsk – G, H and HQ Companies – and Hustwaite and Eastingwold – E and F Company respectively.[15] Training here includes river crossings, with the object of achieving a launching, loading and crossing in silence in order to land a reconnaissance party on the enemy-held bank in the dead of night. Moving about without some piece of equipment clanking or banging on the side of the boat, with the resulting noise traveling across the water, is found to be particularly difficult.[16] On the 25th, 50 men of G and H Companies, commanded by Major 'Joe' Savill, take part in the parade for Thirsk's War Weapons Week. The salute is taken by Air-Vice-Marshall Cunningham. Sergeant Hicks from H Company remembers:

'*Various units were rounded up from all around the area including ATS, Land Army Girls, Home Guard, a couple of other regiments and sundry*

other groups, and of course a band for all to march in step to. We knew this would present us with some difficulties because our ceremonial marching pace was much greater than that of all other groups. It was, therefore, useless putting us anywhere within the column which meant going first or bringing up the rear.

We opted to be last and left a five-minute gap between the unit in front and us and then off we went going through the town like a dose of salts much to the astonishment and amusement of the local populace who had never witnessed that kind of marching before.'[17]

By mid-June, the battalion moves again, to Pickering this time.[18] Like Thirsk it is on the borders of the North Yorkshire moors. Sergeants from several companies attend a two-day anti-tank course at Ripon,[19] and on 17 and 18 June a demonstration of a motor platoon in the attack is given by G Company, under the direction of Major L.M.B. Rathbone. Major-General Hobart and Brigadier Peto observe the attack and are well-pleased. Individual training is now completed, although the full number of drivers has not yet been achieved. From mid-June until 11 August 1941 focus is on intensive platoon training. On 17 August the battalion leaves Pickering and once more is on its way.[20]

The move from Pickering is again by road, as will be all future moves. The battalion travels 20 miles further north to Whitby, where the whole of 29th Armoured Brigade takes up quarters on the sea front. Only F and H Companies are located outside town, at nearby Ruswarp and Aislaby respectively. On 1 September 1941 thirty-eight 15-cwt trucks arrive, making up the battalion's war establishment of 15-cwt's. Training now becomes more realistic, as these vehicles at this phase of the war provide the main battle transport for the battalion's motor platoons.

Following the platoon exercises from June until early August, the next few months are devoted to formation exercises.[21] On 8 and 9 September there is the first divisional exercise, entitled JOHN. A week later, on the 15th, Exercise CHRIS at brigade level is held. This is followed from 21 to 23 September by a second divisional exercise, appropriately named BULL. From 25 September to 5 October 1941 the battalion provides umpires, White scout cars and wireless operators to assist in Eastern, Southern and South-Eastern Commands' Exercise BUMPER.[22] It is the largest training exercise held in England up to that moment.[23] On 8 October, at an inspection of 29th Armoured Brigade's vehicles by the brigade commander, the battalion is placed first. Then, from 10 to 16 October, it takes part in Northern Command Exercise PERCY. At the end of the month a draft of 150 men arrives from 2nd Motor Training Battalion, and the following day Major L.M.B. Rathbone is promoted to acting lieutenant-colonel and appointed commanding officer of the battalion to replace Lieutenant-Colonel Macgeorge, who has been on leave already since 15 September.[24] From now on the appointment of commanding officer will have a more permanent character.

The chief event for November is the visit and inspection of the 11th Armoured Division by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, on the 6th, at Duncombe Park. The divisional commander pays a visit on the 17th and has lunch at the officers' mess. On 12 December 1941 the battalion leaves Whitby to spend the winter months at Scarborough. There, on the 24th, the battalion is again visited by divisional commander Major-General Hobart.[25]

The 8th Rifle Brigade's winter at Scarborough is uneventful. Towards the end of January 1942 the weather is very bad. On 28 January Major-General Hobart gives a lecture to all ranks on the North Africa theatre of war.[26] In February the battalion enjoys a visit from the regimental band, giving some successful concerts in aid of the Prisoner of War Fund.[27] Operational Order No. 1, dated 17 January 1942, provides a reminder that there is a war going on. Each day one company will be designated 'Emergency

Company', which is to be at half hours' notice to act against and destroy any enemy landing in the Scarborough area. During Exercise EQUINOX on 22 and 23 March the battalion acts as enemy to the remainder of the brigade and from 27 to 29 March signals Exercise PALM is held. On 26 April the battalion's time at Scarborough is over and the riflemen move south, to Brighton, a trek of some 300 miles. Halfway, the night is spent at Lutterworth transit camp in Leicestershire,[28] and on the second day, at East Grinstead, there is a welcome meeting up with the 1st London Rifle Brigade, who are by then on the point of leaving for service overseas. It is the only time during the war that the two battalions get to meet.[29] At Brighton the battalion gets billeted in various seafront hotels. Because of anti-invasion measures, the whole coastline up to 20 miles inland has been declared a restricted area and is barred to visitors; hotels are therefore empty and made available to the troops.[30] The battalion remains in Brighton throughout the spring until early August 1942.

Two days after its arrival, on 1 May, a serious fire breaks out at Bisley Detachment Camp at the Bisley shooting ranges near Woking. Fifteen vehicles, 11 tents, a marquee, a large number of rifles and some anti-tank rifles, pistols and 135 'kits' are lost. Through the gallant conduct of Private Elley (RAOC) and Rifleman Horwood some vehicles and property escapes the fire. During the first three weeks of May, 763 men from all companies fire their rifle and Bren gun courses at Bisley.[31]

As already noticed, by early May the division gets re-organized on the basis of one armoured and one infantry brigade and an increased quantity of divisional artillery. The new arrangement is tested during Exercise SHIKER, from 9 to 11 May. That same month the situation in North Africa begins to affect also the 8th Rifle Brigade in England. Over a period of two weeks, the battalion is required to find four drafts totalling 14 officers, 12 NCOs and 219 riflemen for service overseas as reinforcements to other rifle battalions serving in North Africa. As a result, the battalion is reduced from four to three companies, with H Company being temporarily disbanded.[32] Rifleman Don Gillate only just escapes one of the drafts due to a 48 hours' leave:

'*…I returned to Brighton and got there after dark and the room was completely dark. Instinctively I looked for my made up bed, because one of the things that everybody did… his chums used to make up his bed for him while he was away. This was one of those little touches of friendship that made it all worthwhile. But I couldn't find my made up bed. And I looked around – I daren't turn any lights on – but I felt all the way around the floor and I couldn't find anybody else's bed either… It was completely empty! Well, soon I heard somebody stumbling around outside… and I went out with a big question mark on my face and somebody said, "Is that you, Don?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Your bed's in there, it's still folded up." So, I said, "Where is everybody?" He said, "They've gone…, they've been posted. …they wanted reinforcements in the Middle East, they've done it again…" Well, this was everybody that I'd come down with. And they'd all gone, except one other who was also on a 48 hour pass… I couldn't believe it! In spite of what Colonel Rathbone had said, the cynics had been proved right and once again they'd raided our battalion and just taken them away like that, overnight.*'[33]

As if all this is not enough, on 20 May while in harbour at Benenden during Exercise TIGER, a tin of petrol catches fire near a vehicle, damaging a camouflage net. Captain Kenneth Mackenzie, standing nearby, seizes the burning can and carries it some 20 yards clear of the vehicle, thereby preventing serious damage to personnel and equipment, but not to himself, as he suffers serious burns to his left hand and remains in hospital for a considerable period.[34]

At some point during the battalion's stay in Brighton, Rifleman Joe Hunt of E Company manages to get himself being put 'in the nick'.

He is the driver of E Company Commander Major Tony Rowan and decides he needs to borrow the Major's Dingo scout car for an urgent visit home, to London! Leaving the vehicle parked outside his house, he soon gets caught and is put in prison somewhere in the north of England. Apparently his sentence is for more than 28 days, as for any shorter sentence he would have been detained in the battalion's guardroom.[35]

On 12 June a fresh draft of 250 other ranks and a number of officers joins the battalion. This sudden influx of personnel puts such a strain on training requirements that the battalion is granted a period of two months free from higher formation exercises. The 250 new men are posted to all motor companies in approximately equal numbers and begin intensive training, concentrating on physical fitness and the completion of a two-week battle course. On the 18th, the battalion is visited by the commander of South-Eastern Army, General Montgomery. It is less than two months before 'Monty' will leave England to take command of the 8th Army in North Africa. He inspects the battalion's training and is introduced to all officers of the rank of captain and above. A week later another distinguished visitor arrives: Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, General Paget.[36]

Another draft of some 175 other ranks arrives from 2nd Motor Training Battalion on 10 July. These again get posted to all companies in equal proportions. Four days later a further six officers and 85 other ranks leave the battalion to be posted overseas. Another 30 other ranks follow before the end of the month. By early August the period of two months free from higher formation exercises is over and on 6 August the battalion takes part in a full-scale divisional exercise, named BLACK BULL.[37]

Next day, 7 August, it is time for another move. A little over three months since their arrival at Brighton, the battalion initially moves to camp at Stanmer Park, just outside Brighton. Four days later they move to Thetford, Norfolk, some 130 miles north of Brighton. The move is accomplished in one day. While all these moves may seem a waste of energy and resources, they actually prepare the battalion for all the hasty and unexpected moves and packing up during the fighting overseas and the related convoy planning, timings, road discipline, camouflage and coordination of the significant number of vehicles involved.

One day, an American bomber makes a crash landing a few fields from where some riflemen are camped in their dark khaki bivvy two-man tents at Duke's Ride, a few miles south of Thetford. A party of riflemen goes out to give the airmen help, only to find themselves being held off by the pilot with his revolver, who then proceeds to put a bullet in his secret bombsight. He clearly believes he has come down in unfriendly territiroy.[38]

Then, suddenly, in the morning of 16 August 1942 the moment everyone has been waiting for – or dreaded – finally arrives. The 11th Armoured Division, and with it the 8th Rifle Brigade, is ordered to mobilize for service overseas. Mobilisation is to be completed by the end of the month.[39] The division's destination is unknown, but most men – correctly – assume it will be the North African desert.[40] In preparation the battalion receives six 2-pounder anti-tank guns and Lloyd carriers to move the guns. All guns go to E Company's number 2 Platoon, which is converted to become an anti-tank platoon. With the exception of NCOs, the battalion is now considerably overstrength. Deficiencies in personnel, vehicles and equipment are few and by the end of the month, the shortage in NCOs is made good when 18 new ones are posted to the battalion coming from other units. The shopping list of what is required is now brought down to two subaltern officers, two sergeants, one rifleman bootmaker and several other specialists, four Bren carriers, 16 six gallon cooking containers, 11 watches, 67 binoculars,

The 8th Rifle Brigade being inspected by the Lord Mayor of London, Artillery Ground, Finsbury Barracks, London, 8 October 1942 – Rfn. Donald King coll.

24 No. 19 Wireless sets and some other equipment. Two weeks later – with the battalion still in England – most of these too have been found. With mobilization completed and no embarkation date set, training continues and by mid-September another full-scale divisional exercise is held.[41]

From 3 to 8 October, the battalion minus H Company moves down to London to take part in Exercise SYDNEY STREET, training street-fighting in a bombed part of the London Docks area.[42] An assault course has been marked out covering the length of a number of streets for the men to practise firing through open doors and windows, throwing grenades, entering and searching rooms, covering the man in front, clambering up and through roofless attics, through grime, shattered rafters, nails, glass and debris of all kinds, and crossing from one house to the next and into the next and so on. By the time the men have reached the end of the street, they are filthy, cut, bruised, hot and sweaty and hoping they will not have to do too much of this for real.[43] The week ends with a parade on the Artillery Ground, Finsbury Barracks with the battalion being inspected by the Lord Mayor of London, as it had been three years earlier. Many years later, Rifleman Don Gillate mainly remembers the somewhat peculiar regimental 'drill for removing headdresses' put into practice on this occasion:

'*…the parade headdress was a steel helmet… On the command "prepare to remove headdresses", you bring up two fingers of the right hand, fit them behind the chinstrap and ease it forward beyond the line of your chin. You then get the*

'Drill for removing headdresses.' Artillery Ground, Finsbury Barracks, London, 8 October 1942 – Rfn. Donald King coll.

order "remove headdresses", and the right hand goes smartly up to the front of the brim of the steel helmet and you lift it just off the head, about half an inch. Then you get the order "the Battalion will give three hearty cheers, for His Grace, or his Royal Highness or his Princeship or whatever it was… Hip, hip…", and then you all shout, spontaneously, "hurray", and as you do so you lift your hat about six inches off the head and you bring it down again… And you do this three times… And on the third occasion, you allow your steel helmet to remain a perilous half inch just above your head. And then you get the order "replace headdresses". This is where it gets a bit tricky. You slam the steel helmet down on your head and at the same time you bring the strap down under your chin… I suppose I wasn't alone in the fact that I got this back onto my head and the chinstrap got fixed around my nose…'[44]

On returning from London, on 10 October the battalion moves into winter quarters in and around Newmarket, 10 miles east of Cambridge. On 15 October, Major-General Brockhurst-Burrows takes over command of the 11th Armoured Division and nine days later inspects the 8th Rifle Brigade at their quarters at Newmarket.[45] On 8 November 1942, the 8th Rifle Brigade itself sees a change of command, when Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Treneer-Michell replaces Lieutenant-Colonel L.M.B. Rathbone.[46] After a battalion church parade – preceded by eight days' embarkation leave for all members of the battalion during the first half of December – most men believe it will be their last Christmas in England, at least until the end of the war.[47] On Boxing Day an officers against sergeants football match is held – sergeants winning – and in the evening there is a dance at

the Home Guard drill hall at Newmarket. During the final days of 1942 the regimental band plays on the march and stays for two days to play for all companies and for the officers' mess. Also during this period, No. 2 Anti-Tank Platoon has its 2-pounder anti-tank guns replaced by the relatively new and much more potent 6-pounder anti-tank guns.[48]

Then, five months after initial mobilization orders, in the morning of 18 January 1943 the first men of the battalion finally leave from Newmarket's Old Station to their port of embarkation. They are the battalion's first-line reinforcements consisting of six officers and 75 other ranks, leaving England ahead of the remainder of the battalion. Officers are allowed 112 lbs of kit, including greatcoat, valise and pack. Other ranks are allowed one kit bag and are to wear their greatcoats and steel helmets. All divisional signs are removed from clothing prior to departure. For the remainder of the battalion January is spent in training and in being inspected on the 6th by the Duke of Gloucester – the regiment's colonel in chief – and by HM The King on the 25th. The latter gets to inspect not just the 8th Rifle Brigade but the entire division.[53] According to one member of the battalion it is upon a remark made by the King during this inspection that afterwards all riflemen wearing a utility battledress – with buttons exposed rather than covered – are told to have the plain khaki buttons replaced with regimental black buttons.[49]

On the last day of the month, a competition for all motor platoons is held at the Stanford battle area, just north of Thetford. 11 Platoon wins. Live ammunition is used but fortunately no casualties are reported.[50]

On 4 February, the rest of the battalion also starts leaving Newmarket for various ports of embarkation. Next day, rail parties arrive at port and carriers are loaded aboard ships. Then, suddenly, on the 6th, road convoys still underway are ordered to halt and loading at port is suspended. At the very last moment the 11th Armoured Division's departure for North Africa is cancelled.[51] Following recent developments in Libya – Tripoli having been taken on 23 January – and in Tunesia, it has been decided at the highest level that no more armoured divisions are required. The tide has turned and by 13 May 1943 all Axis forces remaining in North Africa will indeed have surrendered. The battalion's first-line reinforcements, having left port earlier in January, are never seen again. On arrival in North Africa they have been absorbed in other units as reinforcements to replace battle casualties. For the rest of the battalion the anti-climax is complete.[52] By 10 February all men, vehicles and equipment have returned to Newmarket and over the next three to four weeks five days' leave is granted to all.[53]

Even while the division remains under orders to be ready for embarkation, this will not happen until after D-Day. The division, and with it the 8th Rifle Brigade, is destined to remain in England for another 15 months.