

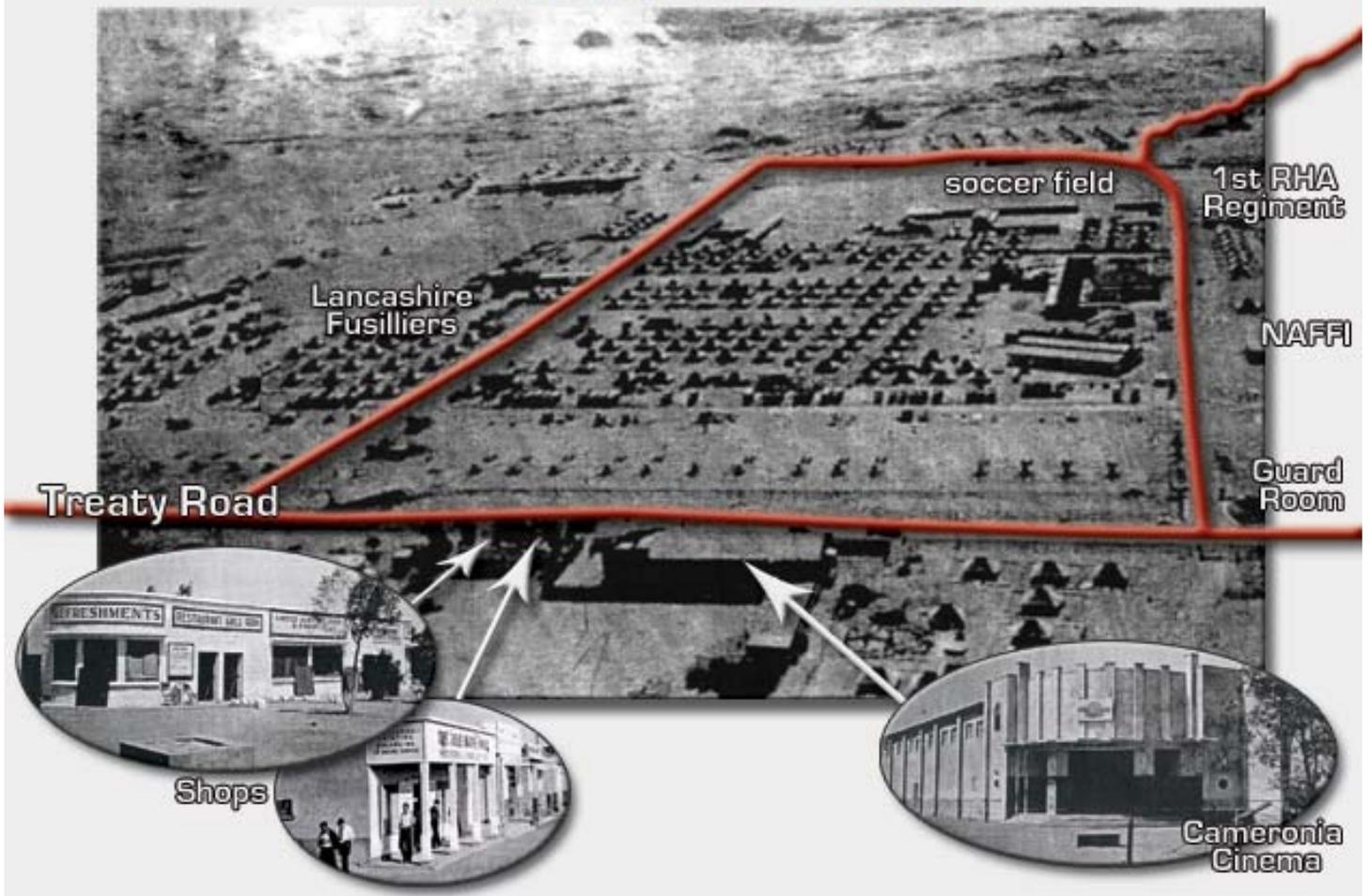
National Service (Part Four)

27th July 1949 to 12th August 1951

by Stan Briggs

Guard Duties - During my time in Egypt, I had a very good friend from Pontefract by the name of Roy Towler. Roy used to lend me his KD (khaki drill) uniform when ever it was my turn to go on guard duty. The uniform comprised a cap, a shirt, a pair of shorts and boots etc, in fact the only two things that I actually had of my own were my socks, underwear and my rifle. Anyway, the situation worked well for us, we were both the same build and his kit fitted me perfectly. The best turned out soldier would be awarded what was known as 'The Stick Man', the officer would tap you on your shoulder from behind and you were excused guard duties that night. So all you had to do for the night was to organize refreshments for the guard before you went to bed and then again the first thing next morning. I was lucky to have a friend like Roy, who I am still in contact with, although I don't get to see him as much as I used to as he now lives in Malta.

Fayid Camp - 1949 to 1951



General Harding was the 'C in C' (Commander in Chief) of the MELF (Middle East Land Forces) and each regiment in the Canal Zone took it in turns to do guard duty. One night when it was our turn, I was on guard at the rear of the Headquarters; I was told there was a searchlight available to scan the area. The first time I touched it I got a hell of a shock and it was a case of once bitten twice shy, so I didn't touch that again and made do without the aid of the extra light. I actually spent a great deal of the evening watching the bigwigs playing snooker through the large patio doors. A few years later, during the uprising, I remember watching terrorists storm that very same building on the TV.

I think it was in 1950 when Field Marshall Montgomery visited the Middle East and came to inspect our camp. Talk about Bullshit, we worked day and night bulging everything up around our tent lines, they worked us stupid making sure that every single item had a place and was in it's place, which was fine but after all of our effort, when it actually came to his visit, we never even got to see him!

I recall during that same time marching down to the Stadium behind a Scotch Pipe Band and I actually think I could have marched all day. We all hated the regular square bashing but marching to the band the way we did really was something special. I think I even walked taller that day, very proud of where I was, what I was doing and what we represented.

What a stupid place to dig a hole!

One day I was detailed to take Bombardier Barnard to TEK (Tel-El-Kebir) workshops to pick up an Austin six wheeled recovery vehicle and bring it back to camp. When we arrived, Barney went to find the vehicle he was to pick up while I parked up my lorry. I found what I thought was a nice safe spot near the guard room yet out of anybody's way. I looked to the rear and all I could see was a couple of hundred yards of flat sand, so I reversed up to park my vehicle. I must have only gone about ten to fifteen yards when I suddenly found myself looking up at the sky through the windscreen, I had absolutely no idea what had happened, so I opened my door which was by now level with the ground and found that my back wheels were halfway down a six foot hole. Hmmm! ... what a stupid place to dig a hole! There appeared to be no reason for this hole, there was nothing in it and I never did find out what purpose it served, other than to swallow my lorry that is. I decided that it wouldn't be much of a problem, as after all, we were here to collect a six wheel recovery vehicle! Barney would turn up soon and be able to pull me out quite easily. Well to cut a long story short, Barney got the pick up truck but had no idea how to use a winch, so I hooked it up myself and towed it out, there was no damage done to my vehicle so we both set off in convoy to go back to camp. I was constantly checking my mirror to make sure Barney was still behind me and about half an hour into the trip I noticed that there was smoke coming from his recovery vehicles back axle. We stopped before it burst into flames but quickly realized that it couldn't be driven any further. After some discussion about it, we decided that Barney would stay with the broken down recovery vehicle while I went to camp Moascar Garrison, near Ismailia, to bring the mechanics back and sort it out. By the time I arrived back with the mechanics it had gotten dark, and we arrived to

find Barney sitting in the back of the truck, wide eyed and gun to hand. He had managed to use up all of his Sten Gun ammunition, he said that the locals were hiding in the dark and trying to steal what ever they could get their hands on. He was well spooked and although I can look back now and see the funny side of it all, I do remember quite vividly thinking "rather him than me sat in that broken down truck in the dark in the middle of nowhere".



Don't mess with the nurses!

What with all the cross-country running and football that I had been doing, I developed an in-growing toenail and so I was whisked off to the BMH (British Military Hospital) in Fayid, located a few hundred yards from our main gate on Treaty Road where I had to have a small operation. One day as one of the nurses was leaving the ward after inspecting me and my mate in the next bed, we started singing "You're Breaking My Heart Cos You're Leaving," a very popular song of the fifties, but it backfired on us because she didn't like it and had us both out of the hospital in double quick time. I finished up walking round the tent lines for a fortnight until I was fit enough to drive.

For King and Country

Our time served in the desert seemed very long, but to make matters worse at that point, we found out that the Ministry of Defense had decided to add an extra six months service on to National Servicemen who had originally been drafted into the army for eighteen months (I happened to be one of those). We were also told we were on standby for the Korea situation, what a thought!

We had been used to counting down the days to our 'Demob', but on hearing this latest news, we stopped counting, we even stopped counting the ships that came into the Great Bitter Lake and instead, we just settled down to doing our time to serve our King (George VI) and Country.

Learning the 'Lingo'

Many of our evenings were spent with Busty, who was one of the camps shopkeepers, we would sit in his tent listening to his radio; he used to translate the programmes for us from Arabic to English. It was good in two ways, as we used to find out what all the latest news was, but we also managed to learn some of the Egyptian language from him too. One of the first things he taught us was how to count up to ten:

One - Wahed	Two - Etneen	Three - Talata	Four - Arbar	Five - Camsa
Six - Setta	Seven - Sabba	Eight - Tamanya	Nine - Tessa	Ten - Ashra

A few other words that I remember were 'Saeeda Effendi', which means 'Hello Friend', 'Mafeesh Much', meaning 'No Brains'. 'Inter' means 'You', 'Bint' means 'Female'. A 'Dhobi Wallah' was 'Laundry Worker', 'Aeewa' meant 'Yes' and 'La' was 'No'. I know he taught us a lot more than that, but that is all that I can still remember.

I can still recall us all sat together in Busty's tent listening to the Freddie Mills v Joey Maxim boxing match in January 1950, it was Freddie's last fight and Maxim knocked him out in the 10th round. Another fight we listened to together in 1950 was when Lee Savold stopped Bruce Woodcock, the Yorkshire man, in four rounds.

Busty was one of the few 'nice' Egyptians, most of them just wanted us out of Egypt, but Busty always had time for us, and to be honest, as 'Arfur Daley' used to say "he was on a nice little earner".

Sun, Sand and Cigarettes

The Korea rumor didn't end up materializing, but the next thing we were subjected to was a three day sandstorm, which apart from other inconveniences, it also put a stop to our smoking, you couldn't do much smoking in a sand storm as you were already eating sand for breakfast, dinner and tea. After those particular three days, I remember going to the vehicle park and found the sand had drifted up to the sump of my lorry and had got into every nook and cranny.

Apart from the occasional sand storms, we did of course have the sun and its intense heat to content with, not something us Brit's were used to. I think it was down to the sun and it's heat at one time that must have affected our regimental Irish armourer, L/Bombardier Paddy O'Neill, as one day he simply locked himself in the armory and refused to budge for the best part of a day, It took our RSM (Regimental Sergeant Major) Nobby Clarkson (from Armley, Leeds) and a couple of his Sergeants to persuade him out. Actually we never did find out what punishment he got for that little stint, I must ask Nobby as I still visit him to this day. He is doing really well and he swears by the Pontefract Cakes that I take him.



A '50' tin of Woodbines cost 1/3d, 15p in today's money!

He says they are keeping him going in more ways than one! Nobby will be 83 this year (2008), a fellow Yorkshire man, a good friend to me in Egypt and still is. He has recently related a story to me that he and his father both served on the Normandy landings together on D-Day in 1944. They were in different regiments but said he used to be able to contact his Dad and regularly visited him in his dug-out for a tot of whisky or two, what a character and what a memory!

While we were sleeping ...

One night insurgents broke into our camp and stole a number of items including boots, greatcoats, clothing etc., from our tents, some of the items were actually taken from under our beds whilst we slept, so in hindsight it would seem that we had a lucky break, as they could have just as easily cut our throats. If one of us had stirred and kicked up a fuss, who knows what would have happened.

They had initially made a clean get away and in fact were only caught in the end because they started arguing as to who should have what. Their heated exchanges had alerted the guards who quickly found them, retrieved our gear and got rid of the thieves. The next morning we were all told to go up to the football field and retrieve our kit.

Other incidents...

I remember that there was a rumor that one of the RHA (Royal Horse Artillery) officers from the next camp to us was killed whilst out riding and had his horse stolen. If there is anyone out there reading this article that can enlighten me on this subject, I would be very grateful to hear from you?

Another rumor that actually did end up being true happened in August 1950. We had noticed that workmen had started to build scaffold between our camp and the Gebel Shabrawit Mountain (The Flea), and on asking what it was for we were informed that it was in readiness for a hanging. We were of course very surprised that hangings were still carried out, but the whole truth of the matter was to shock us even more. On the 31st of August 1950 a British soldier was hung there, he was a gunner from the UA/ Tank Battery Royal Artillery and he was just 22 years of age. The official report stated that "He was hung by judicial process by the British authorities for the murder of an Egyptian taxi driver during the attempted theft of a motor vehicle. This statement can be verified on the Suez Veterans website.

My weekly wage was £ 1/10 shillings, £1/50p today, and I had to stand to attention and salute the paymaster for that!



Homeward Bound

Finally it was time to go home and we were all happy about that? Although, when I got to the dock at Port Said, and got my first glimpse of our ship, the 'HMT Lancashire' I have to say that it didn't fill me with much confidence that it would actually make it all the way back to Liverpool. It was a really drab and old looking ship with just one funnel.

Most of the other troopships I had seen in photographs had two or three and were always a lot smarter looking. Once we were on board, my

confidence didn't grow! It didn't look any better than it did from a distance and there didn't seem to be a lot of room on deck.

On the dock side, there was the usual crowd of Egyptian boys waiting for us to throw pennies into the water so that they could dive in and retrieve them before they reached the bottom; it was obviously the same group of boys who looked for every ship that came in and went out, I even recognized one of them, I remembered him from the day I arrived two years ago, back then I remember him shouting up to us "My father is Jock Mcgreggor", I wondered if he was going to shout it again, but he didn't. As well as the boys, there was also a group of peddlers in their boats who kept circling us, after all when a ship is leaving; it is their last chance at selling their leather goods and watches to that particular group of soldiers.

I took a minute to myself, stood on deck and waved Egypt good bye with a big sigh of relief, even though I had one hell of an experience there, I was glad to be going home. As the ship started to move away from the dock, I thought about all the friends that I had made in the 71st HAA RA, all the different schemes, sports, guard duties and driving that I had done all over the Canal Zone and maybe ... one day ... I would write about it and let everybody know what it was like there! (It only took me 60 years!!!!)

Well what an education it was, I am still convinced that travel is the best form of education, Since then I have preached this to my children and their children, travel as much and whenever you can. But for that moment, my next trip was not to take me on a new adventure to places new, it was to take me home, two years older, two years wiser and very anxious to meet up with Dorothy again after two years of not seeing her, we had stayed in touch throughout my time away in Egypt and her letters from home had kept me going in times of severe homesickness. I simply couldn't wait to see her now.

On board the HMT Lancashire, we were all allocated a bunk (we were told that the ship previously only had hammocks so we were thankful for small mercies) and besides, I was just looking on the bright side and thinking that at long last I am going home, I wouldn't have cared if it still had hammocks.

I thought I had pulled a fast one when I was the first to find the bathroom, I filled the bath and jumped in, eager to get the sand off me, but after about a quarter of an hour of trying, I had still failed to get the soap into a lather to get rid of the sand and smell of Egypt, I eventually gave it up as a bad job. It wasn't until I was back on deck and mentioned it to the others that I found out that you needed to use special soap for salt water.

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Unlike the Westralia we were all allocated jobs for the duration of the journey to Liverpool. My job was below deck in the bar, at opening times I had to make sure that the tables were full of pint glasses all ready and filled with orange squash and then take care of orders as they came in. As it turned out I had one of the best jobs on board as I was always busy and the time just seemed to go by really quickly. I think the journey to Liverpool took us about eight to ten days, but I can't remember exactly so if anyone took that same trip and can remember, please let me know.

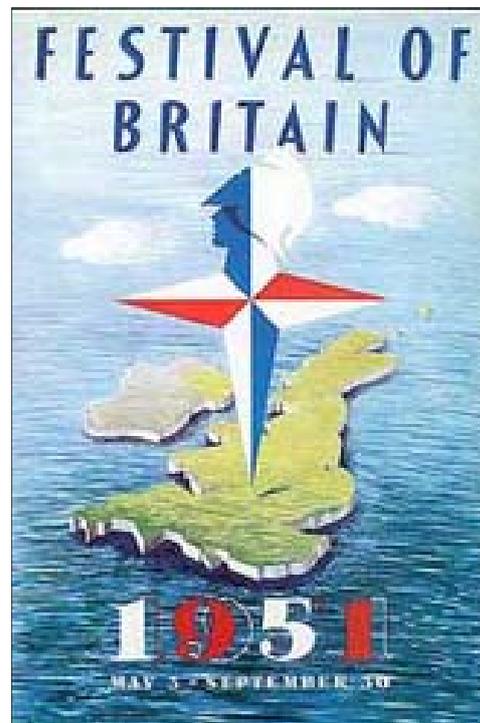
The Mediterranean was very placid and the weather was warm as we made our way past the narrow stretch of water between Sicily and Tunisia, the lights of Algiers were the next landmark to look for on our left. As we approached the Straits of Gibraltar, the weather started to get colder and as we turned right and sailed north up the Atlantic past the Portuguese coast on our right we all started to wonder what the notorious Bay of Biscay would have in store for us. But, surprise surprise, the Bay of Biscay was like the proverbial mill pond, thank the lord for that, I didn't want another dose of the sea-sickness I had in the Adriatic when I was on my way out to Egypt aboard the Westralia.

Our trip home went very smoothly, but what a sight it was when we got our first glimpse of Liverpool, with all the miles of docks and the Liver building. I disembarked with my friend from Pontefract, Roy Towler, BIG MISTAKE, he thought he would have a bit of a joke and told the Custom Official that I had all the contraband and that he had nothing. The official waved him on but pulled me up and told me to empty my kitbag on the table. He wasn't very amused when he found nothing for all his effort, but then again he didn't ask to examine my pouches and water bottle, if he had, Dorothy wouldn't have got her nylons that I had brought home for her from Egypt.

We didn't have anytime to celebrate being back on English soil again as we were quickly whisked away on a train to Woolwich Royal Artillery Barracks, back to where our journey to Egypt had started out from nearly two years ago.

My embarkation leave had been spent in Devon and now my disembarkation leave was starting in London in August 1951, which also just happened to be the 'Festival Of Britain Year' and the main London celebrations were taking place a couple of miles away on the River Thames on the South Bank. The Festival Hall was one of the main attractions as was The Dome of Discovery which was all about evolution, and there was a massive Fairground in Battersea Park.

**"I took a
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**Above - The Festival of Britain - Dome of Discovery
Below - One of the rides at Battersea Park and Fireworks over the Thames**



I visited all these attractions with my mates and count myself very lucky to have been in the right place at the right time as back in those days I could never have afforded a trip to London. The Festival of Britain was in deed a fabulous experience and was a great way to end our long journey back from Egypt. But as fabulous as it was, the best was still yet to come!

When I arrived back in Pontefract the first person I bumped into was Jack Berry, Dorothy's brother, his first words to me were "Dorothy will be very pleased to see you, she's been waiting for you" This really was the icing on my cake, our courtship began, followed by our marriage and a very happy life together.



**So here we are today
56 years of marriage
three children
seven grandchildren
seven great grandchildren**



.. to date!

Watch this space!