

Extract from Biography of Edward Oates of Huddersfield (DUNKIRK EXPERIENCE)



RECRUITS FOR THE ORDNANCE CORPS
Men being attested at Albany Hall as soldiers of the 9th Army
Field Workshop Recovery Section of the Royal Army Ordnance
Corps. MAY 1939

XAMINER

I am sitting just above the word
"RECRUITS"

I was employed at the time at Hopkinson's, one of Huddersfield's largest engineering firms. This was in the winter before the Munich scare, early 1938, because it was after then that the firm started to make plans for a possible war. Firefighting and ARP volunteers were called for, so of course we lads volunteered. However, Col. Levesley, one of the directors, and who was in charge of all this, called us into his office and told us that at our age we would be called up into the forces and would not be available. However, he was forming an addition to the 9th Army Field Workshop, RAOC, TA, in Huddersfield and advised us to join that instead, so that at least we could choose to serve with colleagues and not be pushed anywhere. It turned out to be good advice and the unit was known locally as "Hopkinson's Army". The Headquarters of the unit was in Norbury Hall, Sheffield, but we formed up in Albany Hall in Cambridge Road, Huddersfield.

My brother was already in the 5th Duke of Wellingtons Regt. TA, so there were two of us going off each Saturday morning for drill sessions.

He got his uniform before I did, I think mine was issued in July 1939, I was a clerk and, with other volunteers, used to go down to the Albany Hall to deal with recruits in the evenings. In August we were getting quite a lot and at the end of August, I, with one or two others, was virtually already called up. When the order to embody the TA was made, we took all the telegrams calling up our unit down to the Post Office for immediate distribution. Preparing them was what we had been doing that last week before 3rd September. We managed to sleep everybody in the Hall, but there was no provision for meals.

Immediately the T.A. was embodied I was promoted Lance Corporal, along with others of course, and my first venture into the joys of authority was to march, in single file, on the road and not the pavement, six or seven soldiers right through the middle of the town from the Albany Hall to the Co-op (Huddersfield Industrial Society) building three times a day for meals. This went on for the week or so before we moved to Sheffield to join the main unit.

When called up for regular service and all connection with civilian life was finally severed, you had to report, complete with socks, shirt, knife fork and spoon, shaving kit and towel etc., for which you were paid 10/-. In Sheffield we were issued with a tin plate and a tin basin, the basin was for soup and tea, the plate for everything else.

We were billeted in Abbeydale Hall, about two miles outside Beauchief, the tram terminus, and we really knew we were in the Army. All the stories we had been told by old sweats such as using the top of the plate for dinner and then turning it upside down for duff became more credible as this did happen. We also used our basins for soup and then for tea. It wasn't long, however, before we were issued with proper mess tins, first with the old 'D' type and then the new rectangular aluminium ones. The food got better as well. I was told that I was to be in the Quartermaster's office. We had a Lt.QM, an ex-ranker called Halstead and he really knew all the fiddles. He soon taught me how to arrange for petrol for the odd weekend leave and how to get him a special size-roll free battledress (he was outside). Our job, as the 9th Army Field Workshop RAOC, at that time, was to buy 'imprest' vehicles from the public, service them, give them an army number and send them to a vehicle pool for distribution to army units.

This was done by a detachment of the unit up on the moors at a place called Riffa. Most of the lads working there managed to equip themselves with tools from the vehicles being prepared and also most of the car clocks were removed. Capt. Frank Crosland, in charge of the detachment, took the opportunity to have his own car serviced. When he got it back with clock and toolkit missing, the scam was uncovered. All leave was stopped until his car was restored to its former glory and no further questions would be asked so long as a heap of the loot was piled in the centre of the parade ground.

We ourselves had a hired van for collecting rations, stores, etc. and old Halstead used to get a free car from the hirer any weekend he wanted leave. Waterhouse or I drove him to Southowram where he lived, and then we drove back to Paddock and put the car out of sight behind my father's garage until time to return to Sheffield.

At that time, the RASC provided staple rations, i.e. bread, meat and salt and the rest was obtained from the NAAFI, for which there was a cash entitlement for each man on the strength. Cpl. Stone, the storeman fetched the rations for which I usually made out the order. The WO.II Staff QM.Sgt, Norman Benson, and I were both sure that we should draw money in our monthly imprest A/c. to pay the NAAFI, but Halstead refused, on the grounds that if he didn't have the money, he couldn't be accused of fiddling it. Months after the 9th AFW was no more, I, then a Staff Sgt., was summoned from Aldershot to the Army Audit Unit in Fulford Rd. York, to help sort out this enormous debt claimed by the NAAFI. Halstead had been released as unfit; Norman Benson had gone abroad as one of the first Brigade Ordnance W.O.s, so there was only me left!

We were at Abbeydale, providing, *inter alia*, guards for the Dore and Totley tunnel, until early January 1940 when we moved down to Crondall. This was a cold village with only one pub that I can recall, the Plume of Feathers. We were only there for a few days getting ready to go to France. During that time I slashed the top of my left thumb severely trying to open a tin. It should have had a stitch or two, but I kept it quiet in case I got left behind as unfit to embark. Consequently the scar is still faintly visible even now.

I really don't remember much about this time, I know we went to Southampton in the dark (it was the end of January), got on board a ship and sailed for Le Havre. There was very little heating on the ship, I expect it was overcrowded, so all the food we had consisted of tins of luke-warm MacConochies, World War I staple stew, another tale the old sweats told us which turned out to be true! Actually, I didn't think it tasted too bad and I had several tins of it throughout the voyage. Understandably there were a few people who were off their food so there was no shortage.

The weather was cold and bleak and we travelled by road in convoy. We stopped in a village named Valliqueville near Yvetot, a French prison town. I do recall that it was raining incessantly and we dug latrines in the traditional method, i.e. crossed stakes at each end of an eighteen inch or so wide trench, holding up a stout pole, (I was Corporal in charge of this particular piece of civil engineering). This was very uncomfortable and the officers ordered the carpenters to construct a six-seater wooden edifice with a sloping roof, something like a tram shelter, to straddle the trench. This was portable enough to be loaded onto a Dyson trailer and taken with us wherever we went

We were not there very long and the unit went to St.Pol where the workshops were set up in the town. I remember having an office on the first floor of a building which overlooked a bridge, under which was the river, and on one corner of which was an open French "pissoir" obviously draining straight into the river.



From St.Pol the unit headquarters moved to Brias and we were installed in the Chateau and its grounds. The Quartermaster's office was upstairs and my sleeping quarters were originally right up at the top of the building where it was very very cold. However, when things were a bit more organised we moved into one of the outbuildings where conditions got a bit cosier.

Chateau de Brias as it was in 1940

The unit worked in St.Pol all through the spring and I worked in the QM. Office under Lt. Halstead in the Chateau. Harold Dugdale, Albert Winter, and I were promoted to Sergeant on the same day (8th.March 1940). We decided that we would put up our stripes and start as Sergeants the next day but we received a peremptory order from Sgt.Major Froggatt that he expected us in the Sergeants Mess, properly dressed, that very evening.

The Sergeants' Mess was rather small, a long narrow room in a farm building, so we usually gathered in the "Blacksmith's Café". I had only been out of school for a few years and I could get by fairly well in French. Consequently I was "kitty master" and ordered and paid for the wine etc. out of the kitty we organised. The old blacksmith was a good sort and so long as we provided petrol for his battered old Citroen he took us to Bethune, Lille and even Arras for evening jaunts.



The proprietor's wife and daughter served in the café, the daughter's name was Marta, so inevitably she was greeted with the song "Marta, rambling rose of the wildwoods". Our sergeants' mess signature tune was "Drifting and Dreaming". Sgt. Bex, who had been a spare-time pub entertainer under the stage name of Bert Winters, normally started it off each evening; I think it had been one of his party pieces. Other popular songs, I remember, were "I don't care what you used to be" and "I'm alone because I love you." Sgt. Major Froggatt's party piece was 'The Legion of the Lost' - we all joined in the chorus with great gusto. Norman Benson was a very good "pub" pianist.

As we were attached to the 51st. Highland Division and we had a Chateau with grounds, the Division held a Highland Games there. I remember the Band leader with the staff threw it up in the air and failed to catch it. This took place about Easter, 1940, just before the 51st. Division moved up to the Maginot Line. We were left in 2 Corps. The German Army had started warming up and I was supposed to go on ten days leave early in April.

However all leave was stopped for a while and I did not get away until the end of April. When I got back the Germans had broken through and things were chaotic. I got as far as the railhead at Lillers and while waiting to see the RTO two of our lads also returning from leave, (I don't recall who now) saw me and said they had been detailed to report to the Royal West Kents and could I get them back.

Things at the railhead were a bit confused but I saw the RTO. He was very very busy and when I assured him I knew where my unit was he authorised the rail journey for the two others and me and we got back to Brias. The Chateau was deserted except for one small Austin runabout with Capt. Crosland and a 30cwt. truck and driver on the forecourt.

He was just locking up and making sure all was cleared out before moving off to the unit's new location. We all managed to get on the vehicles - it must have been a nightmare ride all the way to Armentiers. I shudder to think now, what would have happened had we been a day later. As it was we got back to Brias late afternoon on the 13th. May, 1940, the very day the unit left at 07.30 hrs. in convoy for Armentiers. There was quite a bit of German air activity in the Armentiers area, I remember watching them bombing Merville from the workshop we had in Dickson's Factory.

During the next few days the population of Armentiers got on the move. We gave some of them food and tended their blisters and bruises.

We left Armentiers on 22nd May at 10 p.m. and went up into Belgium. We arrived at Oostvleteren in the morning after travelling overnight. When a new location was occupied we had to find the pay and ration points. SQMS Richardson and I set off to do this. Richardson had served in the First War so he was happy to take me to Ypres and Poperinghe. As we went through the Menin Gate we saw an Ice-cream cart and he decided he would treat us to an ice-cream on our way back. When we came back, the cart was not there and we learned that the Germans had just made a bomb attack. We found a fresh crater at the side of the Cathedral; it was still warm and I picked up a sliver of German bomb. I got it home and had it for years though I don't know what happened to it since. I later learned that SQMS Richardson did not escape, and his name is among those on the Dunkirk memorial, one of two from our unit with no known grave.

At the end of the week Oostvleteren was bombed and the civilian population of the village packed up and left. There was a constant stream of refugees passing through the streets. Where they thought they would end up I don't know - no place to go in which they could find safe sanctuary. By Sunday we moved to Bergues, smashing up and leaving unserviceable vehicles behind. We eventually landed at a farm in a village called Warham just outside Bergues. Early the next morning I saw two German aeroplanes flying at hedge height. We could see the black smoke from the oil tanks in Dunkirk in the distance.

That evening (Monday 27th.May) we were told to destroy all stores and equipment and vehicles. My job was to tip all our petrol into the pond. Groups started moving off in the few vehicles needed. I was in the last party to go, led by Capt. Richards. Sgt.Dugdale and Sgt. Len Broadley (the Sgt. cook) were in the party, so were Alwyn Ward, (who wrote a book of his experiences) and Ken Baldwin, I remember. We took the last serviceable lorry as far as the canal at Bergues.

The bridge was destroyed and I have a faint memory that we crossed the canal by climbing over submerged lorries, though it was very dark (We left Warham at midnight). From there we continued on foot. During the march, Len Broadley handed me the rum jar to carry. It was a stoneware gallon jar and soon got very heavy. I filled my water bottle with rum and ditched the jar, the idea being that I would be given water and in return I would give rum when needed.

Of course I had no idea where we were supposed to be going, but Harold Dugdale, who had been in the Orderly Room told me later that when Capt. Richards took the road to Bray Dunes, Harold mentioned to him that we should have gone towards La Panne. Harold said that Richards insisted we follow the Guards battalion as they would know better than us, and that was why we landed up on the wrong beach.

We were unrecognised and not in any party logged for evacuation from there. We were machine gunned from the air every day and had no food. We kept queuing up into the sea; we even tried to float a beached boat. I sent Baldwin off to try and find some food. He came back with a tin of peas, which we shared as far as we could. The rum came in very useful and my water bottle was passed round until it was empty. It must have kept some spirits up! By then there was also some shelling, which was getting more frequent.

Richards kept very quiet and it seemed as if he was at a loss. We could see that the situation was getting worse so we Senior NCOs had a conference and decided to make for the port of Dunkirk as rumour had it that it would be easier to get on a boat there. We told Capt. Richards what we proposed and he tagged along with us, to my knowledge making no attempt to take command of the party. The date was 31st.May and we set off from Bray Dunes towards the thick dark smoke plumes from the blazing oil tanks, which darkened the sky over Dunkirk.

Eventually we arrived within sight of the Mole. There was a fairly large open patch of beach to cross, which was being constantly shelled. A Traffic Officer shouted across it to us to wait until the shells were going in our direction and then to start off, taking cover under or behind derelict vehicles when the shells started coming towards us until they were landing behind us again, when we could move on. As we got nearer the Mole we could see piles of dead soldiers neatly laid out in rows and calls were being made for volunteers to carry wounded on stretchers onto a Hospital Ship. Harold and I took one; it meant stacking our rifles, carefully negotiating the stretcher over the shell holes in the planking of the Mole and onto the ship. We then had to pick up our rifles and make our way onto the destroyer further up the Mole. Harold Dugdale told me later that it was HMS Dundalk.

When I got on, with about six of our lads, we were led across the destroyer and down into a much smaller boat to the seaward side of it. This little ship had open holds and was carrying rations. I remember the captain (I think it was) telling us to help ourselves as he was not going to unload. I also remember we were throwing tins of food and cigarettes up to people on the destroyer.

My overcoat was wet through from many sojourns in the sea water and I recall being told to lay it on the grid over the engine room so the heat could dry it. I then sought out as comfortable a niche in the hold as I could and proceeded to demolish a tin of fruit, pears I think, or something like that.

When the Luftwaffe came over, the ship's gunner asked for any ammunition we had for his Lewis gun (the only armament). I suddenly remembered I had a couple of clips in my overcoat pocket and I dashed up to the grid to get them. They were piping hot, but went into his magazine with the rest - I'm certain that they went off really well.

I was feeling a little bit sick, probably through eating a lot after a few days with nothing, so I must have gone off to sleep, as I don't recall the ship leaving Dunkirk. I do recall that in the grey light of early morning we were approaching the cliffs of the South coast and we disembarked at Folkestone. We were loaded into a train and set off. I had no idea where we were going; we stopped at one or two stations, all south of London. One of them I recall was Guildford. At each station there were people handing out food, cigarettes, sweets, and telegraph forms for us to tell our folks we were back. The train went on and on always westward. Rumours as to our destination were rife but as each possibility was passed we waited for the next one. It got dark and we were still travelling. Eventually, at about midnight, we left the train, and walked up to a village hall. This was all set out with tables and food. We learned that we were in Pembroke (we couldn't have gone any further westwards), and all the inhabitants had collected food and towels and soap. Each of us was handed a piece of soap and a towel and we were fed and filled with tea. We were also each given a slip of paper with an address at which we would be billeted for the night. After a speech of welcome and explanation we were taken to our billet.

I and one or two others were in London House, the High Street I think. The following morning after breakfast we went to the pub, I don't remember for sure but I believe it was next door or nearly so. The landlord told us he had applied for a dispensation to open that day (it was a Sunday) but was refused. He said therefore that although he could not sell us any drink, we could all have one free.

After that we were handed another slip of paper with an address where we could go and have a bath. Mine was to a modern house of a young couple called Wrench. In conversation with them I learned that Mrs. W. had been a nurse in the Royal Bucks Hospital, Aylesbury, near my grandparents' home and she remembered their friend, Myrtle Hole, when she was almoner there.

It was a long time ago of course, so I am not sure of details. Somewhere between Folkestone and leaving Pembroke we had our names and Regiments recorded and had been given some money (£2-10-0d I think). After a few days we of the 9th AFW were given train warrants and sent off to Nottingham to report to the rest of the unit. Those of Richards's contingent who sailed on the destroyer were already there and we were the missing few, now reunited.

I, together with another lad, (I forget who it was) were billeted on a young couple near Woollerton Park. They were forced to have us but nevertheless treated us very well and made us comfortable. They suggested places to visit and supplied us with packed lunches. As soon as I found the unit office and Harold Dugdale, we wanted some leave.

There appeared to be no provision for this so I managed to get blank leave passes, stamped and signed them and we cleared off one weekend as we didn't have to report again until the Monday.

I think we had to go by bus to Sheffield, then a bus to Penistone and from there one of the County Bus Co.'s buses to Huddersfield. We had dirty uniforms of course, no hats, and not much money left. We were each 2d. short of the fare to the centre of Huddersfield, having only enough to get us to Waterloo, about two miles from town. The conductor refused to allow us to travel beyond Waterloo, but a woman sitting near and seeing our dishevelled state realised that we had probably just returned from France and when we nodded, she said to the conductor, "I shall pay their fares", and provided the 4d needed. Once in town, Harold went to Dugdale Bros. place and got some money. He lent me 2/-. We only had a few hours, but it was worth it and we didn't get caught.

The next week, when we were lounging in the sun in Woollerton Park two girls came and sat near. They asked if we would care to share their sandwiches. We did and found both the girls and the food quite pleasant. One of them told us her father was a local parson. Anyway, we arranged to meet them in the same place the next day at the same time.

It was not to be, when we reported we were told to get our kit packed and parade very early the next morning, as we were moving. There was no time to leave any messages and I wonder what those girls thought of us, especially as they would have gone to the trouble of preparing a picnic. Perhaps they learned that we had been suddenly moved, and understood.

7600249 Sgt. E. J. Oates
No. 9 A.F.W. R.A.F.C.
London House
Pembroke.

June 1st 1940.

Dear Mother & all,

You will be
glad to hear we are in England
& ok. at least I am, the mail
has got mixed up a bit some how.
I hope you got my card
sent yesterday. I had no stamps
but I expect they will send it.

I don't know whether we shall
get any leave or not, we hope
so & we have had it as bad
as Norway lot & they got leave.

We had a marvellous reception here
& it seems as if we are heroes or
something, I don't know very much
about all this.

Well, I will tell you all the

7600249 Sgt. E. J. Oates
No. 9 A.F.W. R.A.F.C.
London House
Pembroke.

June 1st 1940.

Woodruff St. E. / Cor. 2
No. 127
Knox House

P.S.

Even I could not get
anything for Mother's birthday
but all the people were
refugees & shops were shut.
Also there were no post
office working.

Woodruff St. E. / Cor. 2
No. 127
Knox House

P.S.