DON GILLATE

With the 8th Rifle Brigade *from* Normandy to the Baltic

JUNE 1944 – MAY 1945

AN ILLUSTRATED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

EDITED BY

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Foreword by The Rt. Hon. Sir Brian Thomas Neill

The great majority of books that have been written by those who were involved in the Second World War have been written by generals and other senior officers or by leading politicians. They are important books and provide an overview of how the War was seen in Whitehall and in Washington and in other capitals, or at various headquarters. But this book is different. It is based on the recollections of someone who served in the front line throughout the progress of the British Liberation Army from the beaches of Normandy to the Baltic.

I had the privilege of being the platoon commander of 13 Platoon in which Don Gillate served with distinction. I was not with him all the time because unfortunately I was wounded on the summit of Hill 112 on 29 June 1944 in the closing stages of Operation Epsom. The sketch map on page 50 shows the position of H company at the southern tip of the salient driven by 29th Armoured Brigade into the German defences. It also shows the wood where Kenneth Mackenzie and I were wounded. Luckily the shell fragment that hit me missed my spine and my heart and lodged safely in my liver where, I am told, it still remains. I was able to return to 13 Platoon later in the year and not long before the amazing German attack in the Ardennes. It was in the Ardennes and in Beauraing (as noted in chapter 25) that Don found his fluency in French to be of particular value.

The photographs in the book remind me of the splendid men Don and I served with in 13 Platoon and of those we lost. It is difficult in peacetime to recreate the atmosphere of a small army unit where days of boredom are interspersed with moments of great danger. Firm friendships are made and then in the twinkling of an eye the friend has gone. It happened to me. I was standing on the bank of the river Weser at Stolzenau talking to Philip May when he was shot dead by a German sniper.

Don has been very skilful in describing how life was lived – the good moments and the bad. He was a sensitive man of high intelligence.

It is very sad that Don Gillate is no longer here to read passages of this book on television or on radio so that the listener could learn more about him. But we are left with this valuable book that demonstrates the courage and the spirit of some of those who liberated Europe.

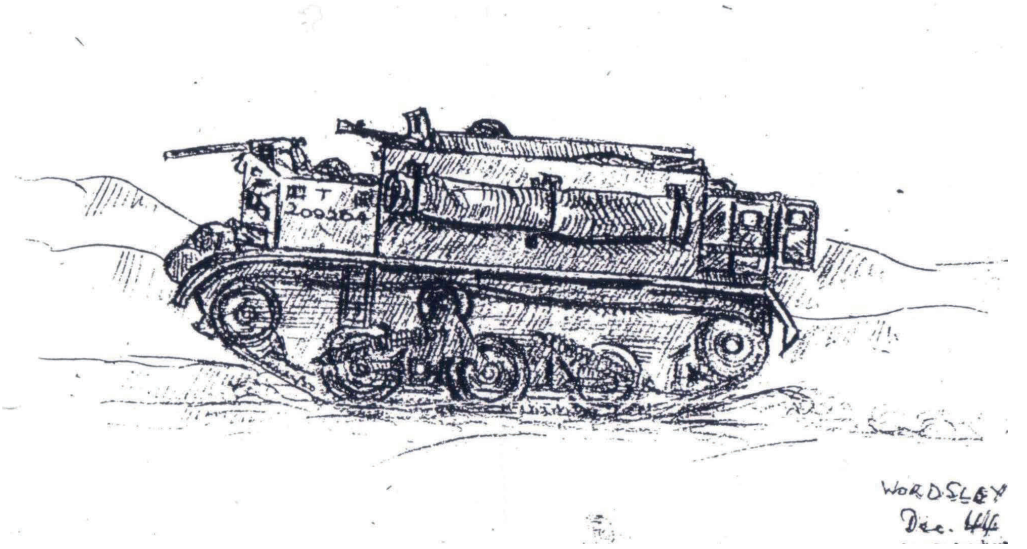
Brian Neill

London, July 2017

Introduction by the Editor

I first met Don Gillate in June 1999, in Normandy in front of Café Gondrée right next to the famous 'Pegasus Bridge'. Like so many others we were there for the 55th anniversary of D-Day, Don Gillate with his good friend 'Dougie' Maber, a retired Major and fellow Rifleman, who had joined the regiment in the 1930s and I together with my brother Bob. We sat together for hours and Don's story has fascinated me ever since.

Fifty-five years earlier, from 13 June 1944 until 8 May 1945, Don had fought his way from Normandy to the Baltic with 13 (Scout) Platoon, H Company, 8th Rifle Brigade, part of the 11th Armoured Division. Being a scout platoon they often were the vanguard, not only of their company and regiment but of the whole division. Their fighting vehicle was the Bren gun carrier, a tracked, open top and lightly armoured vehicle with a crew of three. During eleven months of fighting Don saw his own carrier being destroyed or nearly destroyed at least four times, by Tiger tank shells, mines, a Panzer Faust and even sea mines!



Bren gun carrier (drawing by Norman Vicary, December 1944)

During the preparation of this book I was very fortunate to also get to know not only Don's son Simon, with whom I stayed several times while doing research for this book but also Sir Brian Neill, the commanding officer of Don's platoon. Simon and I had the honour of visiting him in 2015 and again in the summer of 2017 and he was kind enough to write the foreword for this book. Sadly Sir Brian passed away some months after our last visit.

For their help and co-operation I would like to thank not only them but also Lord Saye and Sele (Major Nat Fiennes), the family of the late Sergeant George

Whitmarsh, 'Musée 44 La Percée du Bocage' in Saint Martin des Besaces, 'Van Daele foto' in Malines and the 'Archives municipales et communautaires d'Amiens'. Where known, sources of illustrations or archives where they are held have been mentioned in relevant captions.

In May 2000, almost a year after our meeting in Normandy, Don and 'Dougie' came to stay with us in Delft, Holland. Together we paid a visit to the area of Vlierden and De Rips. We went there for a few days to see some places where Don had last been in 1944 and to visit the graves of his comrades 'Binnie' Barnes and Bill Birleson, who were both killed at Vlierden on 23 September 1944. It was shortly before his stay in Holland that Don mentioned he had recorded his autobiography on tape and that he sent me a copy of the 1944-1945 part[1].

This book is based on the tapes I received - 12 hours in all – which Don recorded in the early 1990s. All the main text in this book is a transcript taken directly from the audio recordings with only a minimum amount of editing being required; illustrations, maps, footnotes and appendices I have added myself. In the tapes, in my opinion, Don has left us one of the finest first-hand accounts available of the life of a British front line soldier during the liberation of Western Europe. He describes not only the plain facts but also his private thoughts and emotions, mixed with a good dose of trivia. Don was a gifted storyteller, trained in drama at the Rose Bruford Drama College, with a fabulous memory assisted by the company war diary which was published directly after the war.

Don Gillate was born in South East London in January 1922 in a family of eventually three children, with elder brother Norman and younger sister Beryl. Whereas many boys of his generation left school and went to work at the age of twelve or thirteen, Don managed to win a scholarship and as a consequence from 1933 to 1939 he was able to attend Alleyn's School in Dulwich, South East London. His working life began in 1939 as a clerk with a London insurance company, employment he did not enjoy very much. At the same time he also became a member of 'The Blackheath Harriers', a cross country running club. He was to be found there frequently, for running and for social events. It was also just before the war that he met Marjorie, his future wife. They were to be happily married for over 50 years, from 1945 until her death in 1997, together they had three sons.

Immediately after the war, while still in the army, Don had a brief career with the British Forces Network (radio) in Hamburg, first as an announcer and eventually as head of programmes. While stationed in Germany he married Marjorie, in England, in September 1945. Don was only finally demobbed and

1): The recording 1944-1945 is part of a comprehensive audio recording of Don's lifetime from 1922 to the 1970s.

returned to England one year later, in late 1946. In service life Don was surprised to find many of his fellow soldiers being semi-illiterate, which inspired him to take up studies again after the war and to become an English teacher, first in Deal at the local Secondary Modern and later on in a British Army School in Singapore. In the mid-1950s Don joined the British Council as a contract teacher and later as a full-time member of staff. While in the Council he taught English both to students and adults in such diverse countries as Somalia, Italy, Sudan, Japan and Jordan. Using his drama training he also was a pioneer of the then art of teaching English by television. Don retired in 1982 ending his career in the London head office as Director of the Films Department of the British Council. When not abroad, for most of their married life Don and Marjorie lived together in Kingsdown near Deal, Kent. Don continued living there up to the end of his life in December 2009.

In May 1940, at the time of the German invasion of Holland, Belgium and France, Don joined the Local Defence Volunteers, a part-time job next to his daytime job at the insurance company. In October 1941 he was called up to join The Rifle Brigade at Winchester, where he received his basic training. Eventually he was posted to the 8th Battalion and assigned to E Company. There he at least once escaped transfer to North Africa, when after a 48-hour leave he found all his roommates to have been transferred overnight. Many of their names he only saw again on casualty lists which started to appear not much later.

Don began his career in E Company in a scout platoon in Bren gun carriers and later was transferred to an anti-tank platoon, where, as a lance-corporal he commanded a 6-pounder anti-tank gun and crew. While in E Company Don never got on well with his company commander, Major Rowan. After some clashes this resulted in Don losing his stripe and asking for a transfer to H Company where later he regained his stripe and eventually got promoted to sergeant.

To his delight the requested transfer was granted and from late 1943 onwards Don was part of H Company where he soon joined 13 (Scout) Platoon. He was glad to be back serving on Bren gun carriers and even more important he now really felt part of a team, with people like Joe Holgate, Norman Vicary, Norman and Reg Cuff, 'Wog' Turner, Norman Reed, Dickey Connelly, Berty Beaumont, 'Chug' Wilson, 'Binnie' Barnes, Frank Westle, Bob Shannon, Lieutenants Brian Neill and Philip May and company commander Major Kenneth Mackenzie. All of them he liked and trusted. Life with H Company was "much better than it had ever been before." It was with this "very pleasant crowd" that in June 1944 Don would cross the Channel and go into war.

Ronald Jeltes

Westeremden, Holland, January 2019

For more information on the 8th Rifle Brigade in WW2:
www.8thriflebrigade.co.uk

Sleeve patches Don Gillate:
shoulder stripe, divisional badge and corporal stripes

1. Events Before D-Day, March – June 1944

Our battalion and no doubt the entire division, moved from Yorkshire[2] down southwards in March or April 1944. Something was up but we did not know quite what. We moved down to Aldershot in our trucks and vehicles and it was my memory that when we got there we were billeted in huts rather than barrack rooms. Life for us was quite pleasant there. Not only were we down south again where most of us lived but spring was coming on as well and although we knew we would be in something quite grizzly quite soon, we all decided we would make the best of life while we could, which is what soldiers usually do.

One of the disadvantages there was that so strong was this rumour that the second front was about to descend upon us and that we would be part of it, that in their wisdom the high command decided that none of us should be able to go home. We were to be cocooned in Aldershot and district. However, when the army tells soldiers *not* to do something, that is practically a challenge to do it. The rackets on the railways were endless and of course all the stations were stiff with military and civilian police. If you looked about the right age to be in military service a policeman was allowed to approach you and ask to see your pass or leave of absence from your unit. This was true even if you were in civilian dress but if you were in uniform you were a dead duck. Therefore the main element in this new exercise so far as the troops were concerned was to defeat the police, either civilian or military. There also was another element to this. Since the troops had not two brass farthings to rub together and Southern Railways were old fashioned enough to expect you to pay, means had to be devised for fiddling the railway as well and everyone had his favourite way of doing this.

Although Aldershot was quite a way down the league table of the last places that God made on earth, it did come just ahead of Tidworth[3]. In any case Aldershot did have certain advantages that Tidworth did not have. One of them was a lovely country house which had been taken over by the YMCA or YWCA or Church Army or some other well-meaning canteen running organization, which had then recruited a number of delightful young 'gals' from the Surrey and Hants borders, who in the most respectable possible way were entertaining the troops. It was very pleasant to go along there on these warm spring evenings to spend the evening in the grounds or in the house of this lovely residence, in the company of course of the equally lovely 'gals'.

Aldershot was also much better endowed than Tidworth was for theatres, it had at least two. One of them had a respectable name, something like 'The Embassy', where you saw serious drama and one tended to think of 'officers only'. The other

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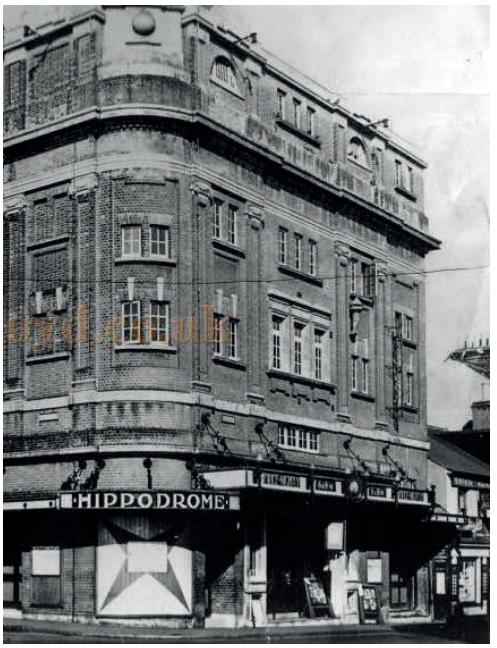
[2]): In Yorkshire H Company had been stationed at Hunmanby.

[3]): Before being posted into the 8th Rifle Brigade in Brighton in early 1942, Don saw training in Tidworth in the 2nd Motor Training Battalion, The Rifle Brigade.



...the Hippodrome... (Aldershot)

one was the 'Hippodrome' or 'Palace'. I am not sure what it was called[4] but there you got culture on a rather lower plane: vaudeville, circus, etcetera. Joe Holgate, the lance-corporal on my particular carrier, a very large red faced cockney brick layer by trade, of about 36 to 38 years old, who must be long since dead because he was all that much older than we were, was an amusing character. He had a tremendous wit and he used to tell us all sorts of things about his peace time life as a brick layer and the kind of tricks they used to play on some of their mates. Joe came in early one Saturday evening and found me sitting on my bed and thought I looked rather lonely and in need of company. He said to me, "Hello Gilly, what you're doing mate?" "Oh," I said, "just reading Joe." So he said "Me and the boys are going down the Palace, comin'?"[5] It appeared that quite soon after we had arrived Joe and the boys had cottoned on to this 'Palace' or 'Hippodrome' or whatever it was called as Friday or Saturday evening entertainment. They used to go down regularly and made friends with the staff there as you shall duly hear. Just snooty old me had stood aside from this and had not had anything to do with it up to that point. I did not know about it and I do not know if I would have been instantly attracted even if I had known about it. You can well imagine that the entertainment at the Palace was not of the choicest but most entertainers were already at the war so you did not have much of a choice. It only cost about three pence or four pence to get in and as the boys said, "It was a bit of a lark." So about eight of us went off down there as the boys said, "mob-handed."

Joe had booked our seats and we were welcomed by this lady saying, "I got the seats for you darlin's." Then, once she got us seated safely into the best seats she could find for us, Joe's next ploy was to say "All right Floss, y'know what to do!" and he turned to us "Who wants chips?" and after a show of hands Floss disappeared to find us x bags of fish and chips.

Well, I do not remember much about the show once it started, I simply remember that I nearly wet my rompers. Not so much at what went on at the stage,

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4): Most likely the 'Hippodrome', in existence from 1913 until 1953 and demolished in 1961. During the war in Aldershot there also was the 'Picture Palace Theatre' but that was cinema only.

5): As mentioned in the introduction, all text is based on Don's spoken text on audio tapes. Joe's words on there are all spoken with a heavy cockney accent.

which to some extent was rather boring. It was what came up from the audience, the British troops rarely let go their sense of humour. About the most boring act of the evening and yet the most amusing in retrospect, was a very pretentiously named act called something like 'Miss Gladys and her lions'. Miss Gladys had two lions and we only saw one of them at first. He ambled on to the stage, he was too tired to get there really, gritting his rubber teeth and he walked absolutely bored stiff to the opposite side of the stage, which had a backdrop, a flat painted backdrop of the jungle. Once there he sat down and started to lick himself. Well, you do not do that without incurring a certain challenge amongst the British troops to try and get him to do something. So they started throwing things at him, which did not move him at all, it hit him all over the rump but he did not bother about this. Eventually however Miss Gladys took a hand and got him to get on his feet, walk along the stage, amble through a hoop of some kind and to turn round and walk back to his corner and sit down while she got on with something with the other lion. So there was old Wallace again, sitting in his corner, licking himself and having bits of impedimenta hitting him all over the body and he was still not showing the slightest anger about it. Then, just as we thought that Wallace was a lost cause, suddenly he got up inspired, walked over to the flat backdrop of the painted jungle and weed all over it, which not only brought the house down but it ruined the frangy parny painted thereon. It was one of the funniest evenings I had ever seen, it was the British services at their best.

Another advantage in Aldershot was that I was able to regain acquaintance with the noble game of cricket. There were several splendid sports grounds around there. We were out at Farnborough for a game, either against another company or another battalion, when I managed to get myself a game. It was one of those games when you would have supposed that our side after the end of the first innings had made the great mistake of playing somebody else greatly above their class. In fact however, we won it in the second innings, thanks to a magnificent marathon of an innings by Keith Slatford, a kind of Trevor Bailey, who played for us and was absolutely undefeated right the way through. I had never been looked upon as a cricketer because I never had an opportunity of demonstrating that I had handled a bat before. Never the less on that first innings I was put in as a sort of unknown quantity, round about number eight, might-be-able-to-bat sort of thing and after a number of noughts, threes, fives, sevens and so on, which did not leave us many in the bag, I managed to make thirty one - not out quite quickly. The fact was that we were all out for about sixty four and I had made quite a few of them. I did not come off so well in the second innings but then I did not need to because this other chap did so well. It was a beautiful and memorable day and as ever on the occasion of cricket matches and similar kinds of manifestations the army did the thing absolutely perfectly, you would never have thought it was wartime. I do not suppose we actually had strawberries and cream Wimbledon or Ascot style but it certainly seemed as if we did because they absolutely laid everything on perfectly.

So there we were, in a way living something of a fool's paradise existence. June 1944 was coming up but we did not know that was going to be the magic month. We did not know what we were going to be asked to do, the size of it. For all we knew we were going to sail straight into the Kiel Canal. We simply had no idea. Only in retrospect do we know how things panned out, that there was to be a D-Day on 6 June and that the landing would be in Normandy. Alongside this of course, if you do not have the vision to see what is going to happen you do not have the vision either to be afraid of it, so we took everything in our stride. Each day as it came we tried to enjoy and the devil could look after the future.

Living our lives like this it came about that from sometime in May we began to prepare for a big athletics encounter. We began at company level and had company athletics, from that we had a selection of inter-company athletics events, then we began to take on other battalions in the brigade and finally into the division athletics. Now these athletics were an interesting piece of planning because as the crescendo developed from first of all inter-platoon, then company, then battalion and then finally up to the division, it so happened that the divisional sports themselves were to coincide with 6 June, D-Day. This becomes relevant later on but for the moment let me say that in distance running our battalion was supreme in the brigade at any rate. There were about four of us, me included, who could always clean up at any distance between one mile and six miles or more. It was just a question of bookies' choice on the day which one of us would win a race within the battalion and any one of us had a sporting chance of winning it out of the battalion, so we had high promise at that level. My mentioning the bookies was not accidental, there really always were bookies on hand who studied your form and gave odds on you on the day. On occasions I was the favourite myself and let the punters down, sometimes I came home.

All together we had about a fortnight of these athletic meetings, culminating in 6 June, the divisional sports. On that day it so happened that I was on some kind of early morning fatigue. I know I had to get up early and go off and do something or other, with the result that I was the first person to learn from the radio that landings had actually taken place. I will not pretend that it did not turn my stomach over but I was quite agog to get back to the barrack room and tell the rest of the chaps, there was some sort of comfort in that. In fact of course there had been a lot of aircraft activity the previous evening, it had been really quite noisy. That however was by no means unusual because 1,000 bomber raids over Germany at that time were quite common. What we did not know and could not have told even if we had looked upwards, was that a large number of these planes were carrying parachutists and others were towing gliders for the airborne invasion, the 6th Airborne Division and others. So I made my way back to the hut and woke everybody up and told them. They promptly threw boots at me and told me to bugger off. So I said "No, wait a minute, this is serious!" and I turned the

radio on and of course the radio was full of it and they immediately sat bolt upright in their beds and more or less in union said “Christ!” and they sat there with their ears flapping until somebody suddenly said “Well, what about the athletics?” So somebody else said “Well we won’t have that, that’s for sure.” Well, he was quite wrong, I mean you just do not stop an athletics meeting because there happens to be an invasion on. Amazingly we went ahead with it, there was no reason not to, we had not had any orders and so we were not on the move.

So, although we still knew we were in for it sooner or later, within the next couple of days we had nothing in hand yet but to tool off to the sports grounds and run our little hearts out and incongruous as it may seem, there we were running along in our shorts down on the grounds, while overhead still there were aircraft towing troops in gliders and carrying parachutists to land in Normandy. This time for once our battalion came out as well as it was expected to do. In distance running we were absolutely supreme, I do remember running in on the straight in the three miles and the RSM[6], called Harry Edwards, who knew me by name, was yelling out “Go on bloody Gillate, go on bloody Gillate, go on bloody Gillate, run!” I think this athletics meeting probably took a couple of days. By the end of the following day, 7 June, we were already beginning to pack up and be on the move. We knew what we had to do.

[6]): RSM: Regimental Sergeant Major.

2. Up to Tilbury Docks, Early June 1944

We had over several weeks been waterproofing the carriers and we had been schooled in knowing what we had to pack up and where it had to be put. All vehicles had to be waterproofed to get through the sea landing and in the case of the Bren gun carriers the procedure was this way. First you built up the sides of the carrier with metal plates about three feet high. The plates were put on all the way around so that instead of having a shape like a trailer that you pull behind a car, the carrier began to look cube shaped. The extension plates, which by the way were not armoured like the bottom part of it was, were welded together with a Bostik waterproofing preparation at the corners. Bearing in mind of course that the intention of this was to keep the water out when you went down into the water, it followed that you had to lift up the exhaust pipe above the level of the waves. For this we had a kind of snake like metal framed rubber tubing that ran from the exhaust pipe right up to the top of the new waterproofing metal plates. Once we landed of course all this would be knocked off and we should be back to our normal fighting rig. Otherwise on the carrier we packed everything that we possibly could. We had to draw ammunition and get on to a complete war footing, camouflage nets and absolutely everything, not to mention our personal gear and emergency rations. The object of the exercise was to have enough on board to be able to fight the first battle on landing and survive it. A lot of these items you never

...We had... been waterproofing the carriers... (waterproofed carriers, D-Day) – IWM B5244

saw in normal barrack life or home service life. Live ammunition, grenades and so on we hardly ever saw. We were never so lethal in our lives, certainly not in the U.K. In fact it was somewhat disappointing that we were not going to drive with this lot through to the London docks, it went separately. The drivers stayed behind and took our vehicles by themselves, or they might have gone part of the way by train. We had to go up in lorries and when I say 'up', up eventually proved to be Tilbury docks. The trip was a very moving experience. Of course we were not alone, there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of vehicles making for the docks. The whole of the south of England had been a fortress for quite a long time and all the chaps had been gathered together, not just in Aldershot but all over the southern part of England. They had been waiting for this day and they all converged on the docks at the same time. It also effected the civilian population very deeply. We were not only British but also Americans and Canadians and Free French and Poles, everybody heading for the ports. I suppose we must have set off on this adventure on either 8 or 9 June.

After having crossed the Channel the general idea as far as we were concerned was that the 11th Armoured Division would work in concert with the 15th Scottish Infantry Division. Whichever division managed to make a hole in the enemy line, then the other one would go through it and fan out. If they punched a hole first then we would go through and take over, next stop Paris and the one after that Berlin. Mark you, it did not work out that way. On the other hand if we punched a hole first they would go through and consolidate so that we regrouped to go on yet again. That however was all in the future and for the moment the brunt of the fighting was being done by the initial landing divisions who were trying to get inland from the beaches.

For the time being we were heading towards Tilbury docks and meanwhile it rained and it rained and it rained and it rained. Still, no amount of rain could exceed the torrent of tears from the women who came to their front doors to wave their handkerchiefs at us in this emotional send-off, after all they had years when their loved ones had been abroad, at sea, in the air. At long last it did look as if we were all going over there to finish it off and they might see their husband, sons, brothers back quite soon, back from Italy, back from Africa, back from the Far East and other parts of Asia. Meanwhile, while they wept the troops sang. Every lorry sang a different song and the streets re-echoed to these shouting songs, I suppose it was whistling in the dark rather, people do this. The nearer to death you get the more you whistle in the dark and so far as the troops were concerned it seemed as if they were going to a party in a brewery rather than a war. The whole thing was an extremely moving experience, it really was, so far as I suppose both the civilians and the soldiers were concerned, the climax of a long hard war. We were going over the top.

Then, believe it or not, when we got to Tilbury docks there had been a dock strike on 5 and 6 June. Even while we were there, their mobile canteen came round and quite suddenly there was a shout of "Mobile!"[7] and everybody downed tools and while they were winging carriers and boxes of ammunition and bits and bobs for tanks and guns on the cranes on to the ships, well suddenly they dropped everything and rushed off for their tea and wads, leaving these vehicles swaying in the breeze. We could not believe our eyes! Well, naturally we could not because we took this all rather seriously. We did not fancy our chances of getting to the other side of the Channel without our weapons and our vehicles and armaments and ammunition and everything. The idea was abhorrent to us, so we took it very seriously indeed that they should be walking out on the job and not applying themselves with the kind of diligence and expedition that we thought they should. It is all a matter of point of view, what was an invaluable half hour off for a cup of tea for them was life and death for us. Anyway, we were on the job all that day and then had some two filthy wet nights under canvas still at Tilbury. We might even have had a third but finally, after what may have been about 36 hours in the thick mud, our turn in the queue came and we got aboard and eventually set off down the Thames in two ships.

[7]): Cockney voice.