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compliments

Thirteen Days on
Service in France after
Dunkirk

By

BRIGADIER R. OGIER WARD,
D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., T.D.



[1958]

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In September, 1911, I became a Section Commander in "B" Battery. At that time I was a House-Surgeon in St. Bartholomew's Hospital. When the Kaiser's war began I mobilised in the "B" and served with them in England, Egypt and in the intense discomforts of the Aden hinterland. Then, after nearly a year as a gunnery instructor in a school for potential officers just outside Cairo, I was sent home with some other H.A.C. officers who were recommended to be Battery Commanders. I was appointed to command the 2/13 West Lancashire Battery. We trained in England and went to the Western Front in 1917 where I commanded it until the end of the war. In 1919 I came home and resumed my profession as a surgeon. For a period I was M.O. to "B" Battery and then resigned my commission, being succeeded by Brigadier Roy Ward, Q.H.S., as he now is.

My next contact with war was on a lovely evening in June, 1939, when fishing in the river Lea just above Hertford. I had caught two trout and about 6 p.m. I was trying to float a fly down to a trout rising steadily under the bank, inaccessible to me by an upstream cast because of overhanging trees; there seemed a good chance of success when I was annoyed to hear someone approaching me along the footpath beside the river. His approach stopped me from making my next cast so I reeled in, and as I looked up I was surprised to see a police sergeant.

"Any luck, sir?"

I was surprised, for this was private water rented by a little fishing club of which I was a member. I then showed him my catch, and as our conversation had warned my trout of our presence, I decided to return to Queen Anne Street.

"But, Sergeant," I said, "how did you know I was here?"

"They told me," he replied, pointing to the high viaduct which crossed the valley about half-a-mile downstream.

In the conversation which followed he told me that there were watchers on the viaduct over which runs the main line from London to Luton and the North. I was still more surprised by this explanation, for though we all knew about Hitler and had not been reassured by Munich, and were definitely mystified by these attempts to save peace, war was still below the horizon. So it was a startling revelation to know that precautions were being taken to watch vulnerable points in our communications, startling but also reassuring.

I was to be reminded of the approach of this police sergeant almost exactly a year later when, as dusk was falling, I was casting for a rising trout—this time not in the Lea, but in a stream fifty miles south of Rouen.

My next contact with uniform was less pleasant, particularly so because I was not wearing one, not even a vest or pants, and the large room was as chilly as a November evening can make it; the unheated Library of R.A.M.C. Headquarters at Millbank seemed pleased to emphasise both the season and the phoney war. I was awaiting a medical examination. When the war started I had been posted by the Emergency Medical Service to a hospital formed in Mill Hill School. After some weeks there it became obvious that it could never be a surgical hospital, so I decided to try for a job in the R.A.M.C., though I knew I was really too old. Fortunately I passed the medical and a few minutes later once more flew my colours in a shirt and tie.

In November, 1939, I became a Lieutenant R.A.M.C., and on the 22nd crossed from Newhaven to Dieppe to become a Surgical Specialist. A few days later I was a Major, the rank in which I had ended the first war, and in December I became a Lieutenant-Colonel, a pleasantly rapid rise in rank, and this was one

in which I was to continue until in 1942 I became a Brigadier as Consulting Surgeon, East Africa Command.

I apologise for these personalities but feel they are necessary, as to many of your readers—and I hope mine—I am, of course, quite unknown.

Before I relate my experiences during thirteen days spent in France after Dunkirk, I want to say a few things about the military planning in France in 1939 in explanation of facts which may well not be familiar to those who have no personal recollection of that period.

The British Army which, with the French, was intended to extend the north-western extremity of the Maginot Line defences to Belgium and the sea, had its main supply bases and its workshops to the south of the Seine, chiefly in the neighbourhood of Nantes, Rennes and Le Mans, the most important harbour being St. Nazaire.

Dieppe was the main medical centre, with cross-channel boats to Newhaven to be the route for the evacuation of sick and wounded to Base Hospitals in the U.K.

This planning was clearly good. Though the hospitals had to be mostly in marquee tents, they were well away from the area where the German armies were to be stopped, and the short sea passage to U.K. would be a great advantage. All serious cases and those unlikely to return soon to their units would be quickly passed to permanent Base Hospitals in U.K. Cross-channel boats were allotted and clearly marked with Red Crosses.

No. 3 General Hospital to which I was posted was in the village of Offranville, seven miles SE. of Dieppe. During the six months which I spent there, there were many admissions, as to all the hospitals. The majority were for mild medical conditions, others for accidental injuries. Thus the evacuation system was tested and found to work well. Two steamers were always kept in the harbour of Dieppe.

For the surgical members of the staff this period, of course, presented little of interest, and for everyone routine and discipline were the daily round. As it seemed that the base might be there for several years, some of the doctors formed a little fishing club, there being some admirable trout streams in Normandy, and when I had ten days' leave in January I collected one of my trout rods and the necessary tackle.

We knew very little about the general military situation. Once I was taken to Arras and visited a village where my battery had been in action in 1917. But I had difficulty in finding any landmarks as it had been rebuilt and looked peaceful and flourishing. Contact with the French was discouraged. Only once did a few of our staff get to Paris to support a British soccer side with their cheers. Conversation about military matters was strictly forbidden, newspapers when they arrived told us little, therefore the evening wireless, though much censored, was always heard with close attention.

There was rarely much of interest until 10th May, 1940. Then we learned that Germany had invaded Holland and Belgium. Now, it seemed, the defences planned and executed by Gort's armies during the exceptionally hard winter would serve to stop the Germans on our left front, the Maginot line being by all reports far too strong to be successfully attacked. We had, however, heard that the troops manning it were inclined to consume too much wine; this was the only piece of military gossip which I heard during those six months, unless one can include the doubtful looks of the owner of a Dieppe garage from whom I had bought a minute Simca for a hundred pounds. As it was very decrepit our contacts were fairly frequent. Whenever I went to see him he always asked about the British Army; naturally, I always showed great confidence and assured him of steadily increasing strength. It may have been the poor quality of my French, but his responses were always accompanied by gloomy shakings of his head which appeared to indicate that he saw little to encourage a cheerful outlook.

I well remember the evening wireless of 10th May. At a late hour some B.B.C. broadcaster was stationed beside the road and we were invited to hear the rumbling of tanks and guns as they moved forward to support the Belgian

armies with whom no contact had been so far permitted. I thought it all very unimpressive. But I woke up about 2 a.m. and began to wonder if this was not exactly what the Germans wanted us to do, to leave our defences and to depend upon lengthened and vulnerable lines and communications. It was a horrible thought, though I did not, of course, know that a quarter of a million troops were thus shortly to be affected. I slept no more that night.

The next few days were very depressing. Through Dieppe passed a stream of large khaki cars, all with mattresses lashed on to the roofs and containing senior Belgian officers. I suppose they were from their War Departments and bases, all were moving south, one could not know what destination they sought or what they would do when they got there, but as the fighting on that country's frontiers had just begun, it was a sad spectacle.

When this procession ceased after two or three days, many civilian refugees followed, and thousands were seen during the next fortnight. It was a tragic sight. In 1912 I was a surgeon, actually only just qualified, in a British Red Cross Unit sent to Constantinople. In those days Turkey was being driven back by Bulgaria, Serbia, Rumania and Greece. We saw the capital crammed with refugees and their transport from Macedonia and Thrace. We saw them bivouacked in the side streets for weeks and months, slowly degenerating, the oxen which were to draw their carts sold from lack of forage. They were waiting for space on the ferry to cross the Bosphorus to seek new homes in Asia. In 1918 I was in the March retreat of the Third Army and that was grim enough. But in Normandy during those last weeks I felt the tragedy was deeper; the huge farmcart drawn by four high-crested horses crammed with household goods; the family walking and pulling hand carts, except perhaps the grandmother who sat on top of the load, dry-eyed but staring fixedly ahead. One felt that she had been through it all before but this time had no hope at all. Motor cars sometimes, being without petrol, were towed by the carts. The discipline was good, these people kept strictly to the right, rarely doubled the traffic except to avoid some abandoned motor car and, when halted, pulled clear. We saw these columns at Dieppe, we saw them on all the roads down to Alençon; but in the last days they were gone and the countryside was emptied of them.

Now the roads were cleared for the free movements of armies but only the German army made use of them. I passed through Rouen on 2nd June and visited it again twice a few days later. The city was partially empty, but those who remained were trying to carry on. A doctor upon whom I called was holding his private clinic much as usual but he had served in the last war and had no illusions about the future when he bade me farewell. Work was going on at all the bridges over the Seine which were being prepared for demolition. I had been rather concerned lest our retreat from the Dieppe area might be interfered with by the early capture of Rouen and had considered using the ferry at Yvetot about twenty miles to the west, but decided against that, and I heard afterwards that it became so congested that parties had to wait two days to cross. It was in this corner that the 51st Division was afterwards trapped. The Seine seemed a fine defensive line but it was not held for long. Apparently the Germans quickly penetrated into its sinuosities and then effected crossings.

I remained at Offranville for 23 days after the German attack on Belgium had begun, which was at 03.30 on 10th May, 1940. The first indication that things were not going as expected was that on 20th May all Nursing Sisters and a large proportion of Medical and Surgical Specialists were ordered to leave the General Hospitals in the Dieppe area. It was on this day that the Germans captured Abbeville and reached the coast. On 21st May the General Hospitals were ordered to evacuate their patients and to close. On 22nd Arras was lost and on 23rd Boulogne. On 24th I was appointed to command a Casualty Clearing Station now to be formed at Offranville, and in its early days we were able to treat and to operate upon a considerable number of battle casualties which it had so far been practicable to send south from the fighting, and to evacuate these to the United Kingdom. Though the staff were doubtless informed, we were given no news of events in the north, and not till long afterwards did we

know that the evacuation from Dunkirk had been decided upon on 26th and was completed by 4th June.

When not engaged in medical work, our staff was able to load into trains the valuable equipment of the six hospitals; almost all of it was cleared to the south, only to be lost to the enemy later, after France had laid down her arms on 17th June.

The enemy first paid attention to the Dieppe area by a bombing raid on 18th May, and again on 19th May. On 21st May it was again raided and the Hospital-Carrier Maid of Kent lying in an inner basin of the harbour was set on fire. Another raid on the town occurred on 24th May. All the hospitals were clearly marked with the Red Cross in large pattern on the nearby ground and none was bombed. But the Hospital-Carriers were also clearly marked and two were destroyed in daylight raids. At Offranville we could see the aeroplanes diving on to the harbour, and also the bombs, as they were released from them. Certainly the markings on the ships must have been clearly visible. Dieppe at that time had no anti-aircraft defences and the planes were able to come as low as they wished. I visited the harbour shortly after several of these raids. An hour after one of them the remains of the Maid of Kent were a hot mass of metal above the partly-submerged hulk. Some trucks of the ambulance train on the quay close by were still smouldering, having been burnt down to the floor level. The loss of life had fortunately been slight. Only a few were on board the ship when it was hit and I think all got out. The train was only partly loaded at the time and the burning coaches were quickly detached so that it was able to move off into a tunnel. It contained some patients and sisters besides its usual staff. Although some houses were destroyed the actual damage done to the town was not great.

I think it was on 20th May that a field adjoining the site of one of our hospitals accidentally became an aerodrome. One of our fighters crossing to France was attacked by a German plane which the pilot shot down into the sea. This fight had, however, driven him off his course and he landed close to us and we were glad to give him a meal. Soon after his arrival the planes of a French squadron which had been driven from their aerodrome saw his plane on the ground and decided that here was a landing ground. One by one they came down, and presently there must have been ten medium bombers there. The field was only rough grass so the commander asked for help to find an aerodrome which his map clearly showed to be about ten miles further south. I took him there in my little 8 h.p. Simca, which was to prove so valuable to me in the days that followed. We found the place easily enough though the local gendarmerie were very vague about it; a wide expanse of level ploughed field! A small notice board proclaimed that it was reserved for military purposes but the village policeman whom we caught bicycling back to his lunch assured us that it was an aerodrome but, he added, it was not to be ready until the summer of 1941.

On 3rd June I was ordered to move my C.C.S. from Offranville. It was to be much limited in size, and we set out for the Forêt Verte south of Rouen in five ambulances, eight 3-ton lorries and my Simca 8 h.p.

After two nights there we were told to move to Conches, about thirty-five miles south of Rouen. It is a pleasant place with a large green in the middle of the village. Here is a pond in which the frogs make a tremendous din each evening. There are many trees round about it which gave admirable cover. The M.A.C. parked there with ours and many other vehicles. The River Iton flows through Conches and the Garde Champêtre, in whose house I was billeted, showed me where I could get some fine trout fishing. I did well on several evenings while we were waiting for orders to open our C.C.S. in the village school. But the fishing was not at its best, for the stream was in places filled with French troops bathing and netting the fish. There were men who had been embarked from Dunkirk and were now going forward again. They seemed very short of vehicles and of equipment. A day or two later they all moved in the reverse direction and we were left in peace!

Whilst at Conches I went several times in my Simca to the large town of Evreux. This was the headquarters of the Troisième Region. The "Q" staff

were always polite but were obviously extremely depressed. Refugees were moving westwards through the town along the road to Conches. The local inhabitants were placid until after the first raid which was aimed at the railway station. I happened to be just outside the town at the time and saw a French plane trying unsuccessfully to intervene, but the enemy dropped their bombs and then one saw the usual sad spectacle of women searching amongst the ruins of their cottages. The third raid was even more successful, for the railway bridge over the road just outside the station (there are not many bridges in France) was hit and one track entirely demolished and, on my last visit to the town, I saw that a train coming round a bend out of the cutting had just succeeded in pulling up short of the bridge. On that day Evreux was completely empty. I and my driver had it to ourselves.

It was during one of my drives to Evreux that I saw amongst the long columns of refugees the touching spectacle of an elderly and rather stout Mother Superior leading the sisters of her convent in their black habits along the dusty road. The day was blazing with sunshine. Whence they had come and how far they traveled I cannot tell. It was just about the time of day when a rest in the shade and a cup of tea would be so welcome to picknickers.

We had orders to leave Conches on 10th June, and on that day the village was bombed. Subsequently some of the civil population stated that the enemy had dropped leaflets during a machine gun and bombing raid at 05.30 hrs. stating that he would bomb Conches at 14.00 hrs. on that day. He did so at 14.40 hrs. and caused several civil fatalities and wounds. By this time the C.C.S. and its vehicles were almost clear of the village. The remaining ambulances removed the casualties to the south. This bombing was a curious episode for none of our troops saw any leaflets dropped from the aeroplane which passed over in the morning, and I fancy the warning was a benevolent one in some way conveyed for the information of local fifth columnists. After we evacuated the village I paid two visits to it. It had sustained no further damage but was almost entirely uninhabited.

After leaving Conches, about sixteen miles to the south we crossed the railway and here found one of our ambulance trains which had just been bombed whilst standing in the station. Fortunately its staff, including three nursing sisters, almost all escaped injury. This was because the bomb only hit the kitchen coach where one R.A.M.C. orderly was killed. Some refugees had been wounded; we treated them and they were taken to the local civil hospital.

Shortly after this an order arrived telling me to reconnoitre a place to establish a C.C.S. at Sees. When we arrived at Sees it was dark. I knew that a blackout was ordered but I could also see that many of the cars hurrying through the town had lights on. I wanted to study the exits from the place so turned on my headlights to examine my map. A French officer, a lieutenant, asked me brusquely what I was doing and, when my replies did not seem to satisfy him, told me to come to the police station. I did so and was submitted to a cross-examination by the gendarmerie. In contrast they were studiously polite and my limited French was just adequate to give the explanation which they required. It became more fluent when I told the lieutenant how much I resented his manner. Just as I was leaving my liaison officer came in search of me and after some further parley between him and the gendarmerie we departed. When we got outside he told me that the lieutenant was deeply disappointed as he was sure that he had captured a parachutist. Sees was bombed later and so were all the surrounding towns and considerable damage was done, for the solitary planes which came over were entirely unopposed either in the air or from the ground and could manoeuvre just as they wished before dropping their bombs.

Only one night was spent at Sees. On 11th June I reconnoitred the surrounding country. Two horse-breeding establishments and a chateau were examined. I choose the first of these, Bois Roussel (where the Derby winner of 1939 was bred), and we established ourselves there on that day. When we left on 15th June the Germans could not have been more than a day's march distant but exercise, grooming and mucking-out continued as usual. The stud groom had

sent away two of his stallions to the South of France, one remained and also all the brood mares, foals and fillies. His chief anxiety appeared to be not for himself and his family or for his staff of French and Irish grooms and their families, but for the safety of his stud books.

I remember how the Comtesse in whose house we were billeted came back one afternoon from a hurried visit to her husband who was on the general staff at Nantes. She told us with unfeigned grief and shame that they feared France would soon make a separate peace. Paris fell on 14 June. All my interpreter's business interests and his hundred employees in the capital were involved. He had joined the artillery of the French Army in 1918 by juggling with his age, for he was only seventeen, and had been given the Croix de Guerre. He was a splendid officer and no one could have been more whole-heartedly out to win the war. Indeed I formed the opinion and strongly held to it that the people of France were willing to go on fighting. I did not see many troops and anyhow troops quickly lose confidence when, because staff arrangements break down, they are left without orders; but the civil population was full of spirit. The refugees were orderly and when, during our final march from Bois Roussel to Rennes, we came to any village we found the entrance to it strongly barricaded, the old men all on duty armed with shot guns. Their eyes lit up as they saw us; the British Army was at hand! Alas! it was not so, and presently each of these villages, upon which in France the roads so characteristically converge and through which all traffic must pass, were to be abandoned by order and without a fight.

Whilst at Bois Roussel I had made several journeys, either with my interpreter in his Citroën or in my Simca, to the north or to the north-east. In the earlier days these villages were still in part occupied and one could easily make purchases at well-stocked groceries. Later the villages were completely empty. Telephone exchanges became silent, the inhabitants left everything and the life of the countryside died. It was a curious experience to move about in those days. The cattle remained unattended in the pastures; the farms and the fields were deserted; for miles there was no one to be seen, no civilians, no soldiers and no enemy, though one could not help wondering if an hostile armoured car might not swing round the corner. One felt secure when travelling north of the line from Conches to the coast for the British force covered that area, but there was an unpleasant feeling of exposure when more to the south, for I had seen the French infantry retire through at Conches and it seemed likely that a wide gap existed. Subsequently, we learned that the Germans entered Rouen on 10th June. We did not know this, nor, of course, was Rommel's reputation at that time so well established as in later years.

On one of these expeditions I found what I feel sure was a fifth columnist job. The Simca was following a country lane and we were approaching the main road from Paris to Cherbourg. About a mile from this another lane, running parallel to the main road, crossed ours at right angles. An enemy plane had just flown over this. When we came to the intersection of these lanes we found two large heaps of dried grass on the track; one had burnt out, the other was still smoking. No one was to be seen, the countryside for miles round was utterly deserted. It must have been some signal and the man who lit it was doubtless hiding nearby. But I believe the great majority of the French people were loyal to the cause for which they had entered the war.

During our retirement we were never short of petrol, being able to fill up at various points, nor without rations, for as we retired the number of casualties in our care became fewer and fewer and ultimately we had only ourselves to feed. Despite the difficulties of communications, signals and orders reached me with regularity and only one was in some degree obscure.

On 13th June I went forward in the Simca to H.Q. 157 Infantry Brigade 52nd Division and made contact with Brigadier Lowrie, 157 Brigade, and Brigadier Crocker, 3rd Armoured Division who happened to be there. From them I learned the line which Beauforce was trying to hold. An R.E. officer who was also present was making plans to destroy all bridges over the River Iton west of Evreux, that afternoon. On 14th June I visited a Collecting Post

which we had established to serve 157 Brigade and I sent three ambulances forward to it when a signal was received which indicated a further retirement.

Close to Bois Roussel was a pleasant trout stream and there, in the late evening of our last day, I was casting a fly when I heard someone coming along the path, a very quick step, so different from the steady advance of the police sergeant beside the Lea. I looked up and saw my quartermaster approaching. I put my finger to my lips, for a trout was rising. He saluted and said in a soft voice, "Orders to retire at once, sir." It was a strange experience, the spirit of Sir Francis Drake at Plymouth seemed to envelope me. Had my hands not been occupied with rod and landing-net I felt I might almost have touched the gorget hanging from my neck. "Wait, Quartermaster," I replied, "until I have caught this trout." Two more casts and I had him. He was just over 1 lb., the best I had taken in France that Spring.

We walked to the C.C.S. and as soon as loading was completed, moved to Rennes. The next day was Sunday and we had orders to move to St. Malo for embarkation in the early afternoon. My poor little Simca and I must now part. Despite a self-starter which rarely worked and the most remarkable steering wobble which sometimes developed, I was very fond of her. She had served me and my unit well. Sunday is not a good day to sell a motor car and when a disastrous campaign is ending it is probably at its worst. But I found a garage owner who gave me the equivalent of £50 in francs, which I easily exchanged in England, and it had cost me only twice that in Dieppe six months earlier.

We drove to St. Malo in our ambulances to embark on s.s. St. Briare. The ship was crammed with troops. As we got out of our ambulances, which we had to leave on the quay, about a dozen men arrived, panting and sweating in that hot afternoon, for from some distance they had carried an anti-aircraft gun predictor down to the quay, and I imagined it weighed a good deal. The troops on the decks gave them a well-deserved cheer. When, soon afterwards, my turn came to mount the gangway, I had a great desire to appear as insignificant as possible to the hundreds of pairs of eyes watching me, for in my left hand I carried a small case of valuable optical surgical instruments—call them my predictors if you wish—but the troops could not know this, and they could see clearly that in my right hand I carried a fishing rod.

We did not sail until 19.20 hrs. on 16th June, 1940. All through that lovely afternoon we lay in the harbour, a perfect target for an aeroplane, but none came. We were fortunate, for the next day the *Lancastria* leaving St. Nazaire was sunk and more than six thousand were lost.

On Monday, 17th June, at a quarter to eight, we landed at Southampton after an uneventful night voyage, and presently a train bore us to the north. I went to sleep and woke up just as we were passing through Oxford. It was about 3 p.m. After the station there are several college grounds close to the railway. On each of these cricket was in full swing, everyone in nice white flannels, everything just as it was when I was an undergraduate. I wonder if this is one of the reasons why we win wars.

To The Librarian
The Royal Society of
Medicine

Dear Sir

1 April

1958

W.E.

The enclosed pamphlet is largely a personal story wound round a fishing rod. But it has perhaps a slight medical historical interest because it attempts to portray some phases in the evacuation of the large medical centre which had been built around Dieppe in 1939, and it tries to describe something of the sufferings of the French

the phoney war. I was awaiting a medical examination. When the war started I had been posted by the Emergency Medical Service to a hospital formed in Mill Hill School. After some weeks there it became obvious that it could never be a surgical hospital, so I decided to try for a job in the R.A.M.C., though I knew I was really too old. Fortunately I passed the medical and a few minutes later once more flew my colours in a shirt and tie.

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people in the early part of
1940.

Clyton, I read it with
my compliments

Yours sincerely

R. Dyer Board

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