Veterans North

Veteran of conflict – an individual who has experience of war and conflict either by service with an armed force at home or abroad or as an eyewitness to its impact.

The Veterans North group was started in 2006 with support from Their Past Your Future, a three year lottery funded project delivered by Imperial War Museum and its branches. Since that time the group has grown to include over 250 members and is for anyone who has experienced or lived through conflict.

The biographies and photographs in this collection were voluntarily contributed by members of the group, as a legacy to the first three years of Veterans North and a written record of a part of their experience. Each member was asked if they would like to include a biography of their time in service or on the home front. Contributions are organised in alphabetical, rather than chronological order.

The stories are faithful to the words of the veteran and edited only where necessary to meet the needs of the project.

Imperial War Museum North would like to thank members of Veterans North for sharing their story with us.

February 2010
My army service started in July 1942 at the age of 18. Before call up I had been in the Home Guard since 1940. I was part of a team trained by a Major Armstrong in scouting and camouflage.

I started my army training at the 55th Training Regiment RAC at Farnborough. I passed out as a Driver/Mechanic. In November 1942, I was posted to the 15/19th Kings Royal Hussars, who were stationed at Nunykirk Hall Northumberland. In 1944, we were posted to Fritton Lake in Norfolk for training in DD tanks (tanks with canvas screens which let them float). From Fritton we went to Claxton on Sea for sea trials off tank landing crafts. Included in our training was the use of Davis escape equipment (in a modified system) in case the tank sank. This practical training was exciting to say the least!

In late July 1944, we sailed for Normandy at very short notice. We were to replace the Northants Yeomanry who had many casualties. We took our place with the 11th Armoured Division and were at the closing of the Falaise Gap. From there we made our way to the River Seine to Vernon. We had casualties when the reconnaissance troop was sent to bring in some prisoners; they were fired on at close range by riflemen who had been concealed lying in the corn stacks. Two troopers were killed and two officers wounded.

On 30 August, Corps Commander General Horrocks gave his famous order ‘It’s moonlight tonight’ and the Division made a big dash through the night to Amiens, where we captured some German Generals and staff, and bridges over the Somme. From there on progress was made through Belgium and Holland. During the Arnhem campaign, our task was to connect up with the 101st American Airborne at Eindhoven. This we did and spent time with them on the flanks of the corridor. As we know Arnhem did not work out and the rest of 1944 was spent near Helmand and the River Maas.

The Ardennes was invaded in December 1944 by the Germans. Though some of the 11th Armoured took part in the action, our regiment stayed in Holland. By March when the entire length of the Rhine banks had been secured, the Division was ordered back to Belgium to prepare for coming battles. In Belgium we changed our Cromwell tanks for the new Comet tank. The Rhine was crossed at Wesel on a 4000 yds Bailey bridge. From here to the end of the war I was attached to the forward delivery squadron delivering new Comet tanks as required.

My war finished near Luneburg Heath. After the celebrations when all my comrades had recovered, I was diagnosed with Diphtheria. The Regiment moved to Kappelin and stayed there until October 1945. We then returned to Belgium and from there went to Palestine/Egypt until February 1947. One of the last actions by the Hussars in Germany was to go with the Cheshire Regiment to Flensburg for the capture of Admiral Donitz.

I returned to the UK and was demobbed at Farnborough some three miles from where I joined up. After the war I joined the Royal Observer Corps and was a member for some 25 years. My last position was Sector Controller at Western Area.
I enlisted in 1938, aged 14 years, as a boy apprentice in the Royal Engineers, signing up for 12 years and 4 in reserve (no buying out then).

I was first at Fort Darland, Chatham, followed by some time at Chepstow Technology College. I volunteered for parachuting in September 1943 and qualified at Ringway (Manchester).

At 19 years old I jumped into the Normandy village of Ranville at 0050 hours near Pegasus Bridge. I landed on the correct drop zone under a little small arms fire. The aircraft was a Stirling Bomber. It was a shambles in the aircraft due to the ack-ack (anti aircraft fire), but I made the exit ok. I jumped with a kitbag containing a Bren gun, ammunition, explosives and a small pack. Unable to fix said kitbag to my leg properly and hence it went straight down so I landed with just a para knife. I was not scared that I had landed in enemy territory, but of how many years I would have to spend in the glass house (prison) for losing my weapon.

Our task on landing was to clear the landing zone of obstruction poles to facilitate a clear path for gliders. For the next three days I worked protecting the area as Infantry 13 Battalion. By then I had a Sten gun.

For the next few weeks, duties included clearing and lifting mines, sometimes under fire, laying mines and night patrolling. For the whole period in this static defence, we were under shell and mortar fire.

I was wounded after approximately five weeks just before Caen was taken. I was flown home, then taken by ambulance train to Queen Elizabeth Hospital and eventually medically discharged in February 1945.
I spent the war years 1939-1945 as a school boy in Swansea during the Blitz, which devastated the whole town. I spent several months of nights in the shelter in the cellar of our house. I remember the Blitz very well – searchlights, the drone of German bombers, and the fire storm that lit up Swansea.

My father came home from Army service in September 1945 and we started to pick up our lives again.

I joined the Buckinghamshire Army Cadets in 1949, transferring to Cheshire in 1952. On going up to Manchester University in 1956, I joined the Officer Training Corps (OTC) from where I was commissioned into 252 (Manchester) Field Regiment Royal Artillery (TA) in 1959.

I served with 252 Regiment for three years before being seconded back to the OTC as a Training Officer for the next 12 years. I ended up as a pharmacist with 207 (Manchester) General Hospital Royal Army Medical Corps (TA) until finally being made to retire at the age of 60 in 1997.

As the electrical artificer for the 100th Landing Craft Tank (LCT) (A) flotilla I took part in the final assault on Sword Beach on D-Day, 6 June 1944. I am still in touch with two of my shipmates from this time, one of which, a signalman from LCT (A) 2191, now lives in New Zealand. He lost his right leg, and had knee amputated in the final half hour of the landing.
I volunteered for the Royal Marines on ‘All Fools Day’, 1 April 1941. I was sent to Infantry Training Centre Lympstone, Devon. At 18 years old I did not drink or smoke. After passing out, we went into Exeter to celebrate. I was so drunk on ‘Scrumpy’ cider that I took my new rifle and bayonet and bayonetted 38 windows in the Officers’ Mess. I paid for that escapade.

D-Day 1944, 6 June, Juno Beach. As an assault coxswain I had a photograph of my assault beach. Leaning on the rail at the rear of the ship, I heard the chain locker (anchor) drop. We knew this was it and I went below to write my French mother the kind of letter I wanted her to read when I did not return home. I gave it to a New Zealander to post after D Day. As we moved through the night I noticed that the huge fleet remained at anchor, so I asked a sailor what was going on. He said ‘they are your back up when you are wiped out in the first wave’.

We dropped anchor seven miles off Normandy, the next seven miles were mined by the Germans. Our first wave went in about 7.35am at Bernieres-sur-Mer (Juno Beach). 1000 yards out I saw the body of an American so I told my boys to grab my legs, as I threw myself over the side, grabbed his arm and yanked him onboard. As I stood there with his arm locked in mine I looked down and the body floated away, leaving me with a muscular arm with a fine wrist watch. I opened my hands and dropped the arm into the sea. My first dead soldier.

Only two LCA’s (Landing Craft Assaults) were fit for purpose and at one point the sea lifted my craft up in the air. As I looked down into the trough I saw my buddy, Cpl Hookey Walker raise his arm and give a thumbs up, with the seawater pouring over his face that had a big grin on it. I tried to return the gesture, but my arm would not move because I could see three Teller mines under his craft. The explosion of the mines threw my craft up in the air, broke its back and landed upside down on the steel girders sticking up in the sand.

As we ran up the beach one of our soldiers pushed the muzzle of his flame thrower into the slit of a German occupied bunker. One lone German surrendered to me and I have never encountered a more frightened human being in my life. He sank to his knees and sobbed. You can’t kill a man in that state.

We eventually got through the Atlantic wall onto the promenade in Bernieres-sur-Mer. We had to climb over bodies of allies to get a foothold. It’s funny but I remember the strangest thing. They lay there in battle dress bloodied but all of the lads had perfect creases in their battle dress trousers as if on parade.

The Regiment de la Chaudière recommended me to the King for my actions on D-Day and I duly received my Gallantry Award from the King.
I served at RAF Wyton, Cambridgeshire, which was a bomber command station. Aircraft flown by the squadrons included Victors and Valiant V bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, plus Canberra twin engine jet bombers.

I ran the station ration stores. I had a staff of two WAAFs (Womens' Auxiliary Air Force) who prepared the food for the flight crews. These meals were 'in-flight' packs with energy foods such as Mars Bars, Fruit Pastilles etc. plus sandwiches which were cut into quarters. This was to enable the crews (who were flying at 48,000 feet plus) to open their oxygen mask, pop in a quarter sandwich, replace the mask and chew away.

During 1958 – during the height of the Cold War – we were called upon on several occasions to do continuous 24 hour duties, which at the time were described as 'NATO manoeuvres'. These, we found out later, were full scale alerts where our aircraft were aloft armed with nuclear weapons to counter any attack on our country.

RAF Wyton was a frontline flying station and would certainly have been subjected to an early missile attack or air strike should hostilities have commenced.

For the final nine months of my service I was posted to RAF Bassingbourn, Hertfordshire. It was an American base during the Second World War. Famously this was where the Memphis Belle flew from. Clark Gable, the Hollywood movie star was also stationed there, and the Glen Miller Orchestra performed there for the American flyers in 1944. When I went there in 1959 it was known as 231 Operational Conversion Unit. Pilots from many countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and even Argentina, came to train on twin engine Canberra bombers after qualifying as pilots on single engine Harvards.

All in all, I enjoyed my national service and made many friends, several of whom I maintain contact with to the present day! I left the RAF in October 1959 with the rank of Senior Aircraftman.
I volunteered for service and was posted to Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) Headquarters at Hilsea Barracks, Portsmouth on 4 October 1939. I was billeted in Lyndhurst Road School, which had been requisitioned for accommodation. The school was about one mile from the main barracks where we took our meals and commenced training. We slept on palliases on the schoolroom wooden floor. We did our square bashing and rifle training in the school playground. Whilst in Portsmouth for training I volunteered for a course and after qualification, I was promoted to Lance Corporal.

Early in March 1941, I found myself detailed for an overseas draft. We travelled overnight to join the large convoy assembling in Liverpool. I joined the troopship SS Duchess of York. The following morning we joined a convoy that included other troopships, cruisers and destroyers – 27 vessels all told. We soon left Liverpool behind, arriving in sweltering heat at Free Town to take on water and supplies. We did not disembark. We then moved to Cape Town, where half the convoy spent about seven days. We were allowed ashore in batches. We then made our way to India (Bombay), again we were allowed to spend some time ashore. After one week in Bombay we were told that we were on our way to Singapore. We asked ourselves “Why Singapore? – there was no war going on there”. Little did we know.

We arrived in the glamorous city of Singapore (Keppel Harbour) early in May 1941 after a journey lasting eight weeks. Here we disembarked to a lovely humid climate. It was a pleasant surprise to arrive in Singapore – a place of no blackouts, no rationing of food. It seemed like a dream come true.

The RAOC Barracks at Alexandra were already occupied by ‘regulars’ so we were accommodated in tents for a couple of months whilst new accommodation – Marlboro Camp – was completed. Initially I was assigned to the ammunition section of the depot where more ammunition was coming in for storage than there was going out. We were on duty from early morning (cooler) to midday (hot and humid), we suffered heat rash and if you were not careful dengue and even malaria, hence we slept under mosquito nets and wore long sleeved shirts after dusk.

After a few months, I was promoted to Staff Sergeant. There was quite a lot of off-duty time and this was spent looking around the city and visiting the Union Jack Club in central Singapore. There were also cinemas showing recent American films that arrived by flying boat. We also had the opportunity to play tennis, cricket and football against other regiments on the island.

The tranquillity of Singapore changed dramatically on 8 December 1941 when, without warning, the Japanese bombed the city. The ack-ack positions around the island were working overtime, but this did not hinder the Japanese. We were staffing the Base Ordinance Depot 24 hours per day now – no more siestas, no more sport.

Reinforcements of troops arrived but they came too late and it was apparent that we stood no chance. Singapore fell on 15 February 1942. We were now Prisoners of War (POW) and were instructed to make our own way to a concentration camp in the Changi area of the island.

After a few months, we were mustered into groups to go to Thailand to build a railway for the Japanese from Siam to Burma. This was September/October 1942, there after life was hellish, miserable, demoralizing, and subject to every humiliation and disease you could imagine. After three and a half years of this troubled existence, we were freed; but many, many lives had been lost. I arrived back in England on 8 October 1945.
I confine myself to a few thoughts about the first weeks in Royal Signals Line Section in North Africa early in 1943.

Our first task was for the RAF who had established a radar station on a remote headland just inside the front line in Tunisia to monitor enemy shipping and aircraft from Sicily. We had to provide teleprinter/telephone links to our main lines of communication, requiring some ten miles of cable across rough country. The weather was appalling and we had no option but to put our tents up in a wood; other troops had secured buildings. I had diarrhoea and it was grim in the night making my way through the mud to where we had dug the latrines.

Rations arrived each evening in ‘compo’ packs – five wooden boxes each containing enough food for fourteen men for one day. Bully, McConochies, dehydrated vegetables, marmalade pudding, army biscuits instead of bread etc. Tea came as a mixture of tea, sugar and dried milk. No question of ‘Does he take sugar?’ Our cook was known as ‘Petrol Tom’, a reflection of his ability to flavour the tea with a hint of petrol.

I still possess a ‘Laissez-Passer’ – leaflets showered on us by a German aircraft inviting us to surrender. It was in French, evidently intended for French troops many miles away. It was comforting to see that the Germans could make cock-ups too!

Each evening, after dark, a water bowser visited all the units. The men crowded round to fill their bottle. The scene reminded me of a sow and her piglets. Local boys would appear, anxious to trade eggs or oranges for cigarettes. A favourite treat was an egg boiled in a bully tin. But cigarettes were precious and so hard bargains were struck.

One night I was talking with a group of NCOs and men at the edge of camp. I think I was sharing the guards’ cocoa. We noticed a light flickering a few hundred yards away in the scrub where there should be nothing at all. Three of us, armed, went cautiously to investigate. As we closed in it turned out to be a candle set on a stone. It was an Arab grave and in addition there were a few francs, some corn and some pottery. We put everything back, trying to leave it as we found it.

We had a lucky escape from a serious accident. We were in a convoy of 15 vehicles driving over a difficult pass in the Atlas Mountains. One driver lost control whilst negotiating a bend and the lorry fell on its side, throwing three men in the back over the edge of a ravine. By incredible good fortune there was at this point a substantial ledge and the men were safe. Our drums of field cable rolled down to the bottom and are probably there to this day, so deep and inaccessible was the ravine.

Did I derive any benefit from service in the Army? Most certainly, a lifelong love affair with Italy and Sicily and friendship with a Neapolitan family, I have returned many times.
I was a driver and operator, part of a crew of three. We landed via landing craft with our Guy wireless van, waterproofed as we drove through the water and onto the beach.

Our unit was holding battalion for tanks and tank crew, we kept communication with a 19 set with the rest of our division.

We moved to various locations, usually in fields (for radio reception). We spent some time outside Eindhoven, and were lucky to escape being cut off with Hitler’s last push through the Ardennes. War ended and my unit was disbanded and I was sent to a Royal Artillery Unit with communications via telephone and teleprinter in a lovely building (signal office) at Nienburg, Germany.

My service up to demob lasted three years.
A selection of my experiences.

I was involved with the rescue of severely wounded British prisoners of war in Tunisia in May 1943. During the Battle of Sidi Mediene, Tunisia, we were rationed with ammunition. We did not know at the time why, but it turned out it was because Jack Jones of the TGWO (Transport and General Workers Union) had instigated a strike of key ammunition depots in Britain.

We did some training in Egypt in preparation for the capture of the Dodecanese islands, but the attempt failed and we got leave so we went to the Cairo museum where we attended a lecture called ‘How the Pyramids were really built’.

I was involved in the battles of Monte Cassino between March and May 1944. I was also witness to the massacre at San Pancrazio, Tuscany, where local men were shot by German soldiers. Sixty years later, in 2004, I had to give evidence to the War Crimes Commission about this event.

I served on the battlefields of the Adriatic coast between September and December 1944, specifically at Coriano Ridge, Savio, River Cesena and Forlì.

In Athens on Boxing Day 1944 (during the Greek Civil War), we were asked to act as bodyguards for some VIPs who were visiting, they turned out to be Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden to name a couple. I was standing next to Churchill when an Elas sniper took a shot. The sniper missed and killed a Greek lady interpreter named Erula.

I was involved with the Action against the Anparkis, Palestine in 1945 and was in the Gaza strip in October 1945.

In July 1946, I was talking to a News Chronicle reporter outside King David Hotel, Jerusalem when it was attacked by terrorists, killing 98 people. In the November I was outside a Bata shoe shop when it was blown up due to a bomb being planted in one of the shoes. I was wounded and came home on a hospital ship and arrived in Troon for rehabilitation.

In 1972 I founded the Monte Cassino Association and was Honorary Secretary for over 30 years. I have organised many trips to war graves and started the campaign which led to the Heroes Return event in 2004. I was awarded the MBE for my work.

I will be taking a party of Veterans and Widows to the Adriatic coast battlefields 13 June 2010.
As an 18 year old member of our local Territorial Army I was called up for service immediately war was declared in 1939, and as a qualified technician on heavy guns was attached to an anti aircraft regiment, with which I saw plenty of action until the latter part of 1941.

The regiment was then put on draft to be sent to Basra to guard the oil wells and was kitted out for desert warfare, all our equipment and dress being sand coloured. Unfortunately half way on our journey the Japanese had started their attacks on Hong Kong and Malaysia and the powers that be decided we should be sent to Singapore. Sadly by the time we arrived they had already decimated our naval and air forces and taken most of Malaya. We landed in this green place in our bright coloured kit, and were shocked at the total apathy of our existing forces due to their lack of air and naval support. It was inevitable Singapore was doomed. In order to avoid a massacre we were ordered to accept unconditional surrender on 15 February 1942 and spent the next three and a half years suffering brutal and merciless treatment as prisoners of war.

When taken as a prisoner of war, I was a fit 20 year old weighing about 11 stone and when released, somewhere in the Thai jungle, I was, like all my comrades, virtually a walking skeleton just under 7 stone.

I spent at least two years working on the infamous death railway which was approximately 280 miles long and had over a 100 bridges across the River Kwai, not one as the film seems to imply.

I sometimes wonder how I managed to survive when many of my good comrades died so needlessly through lack of medicine and food. Having had most of the diseases, such as dysentery, Beriberi, Malaria, Dengue fever, Pellagra, and Blackwater Fever, I find it hard to believe how I was spared.

On arriving back home most of we former prisoners of war found it hard to adjust to normality, and for a long time nightmares were a regular thing.
A R Gorner

100th Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment
6th Royal Tank Regiment, Second World War

After one year at Manchester University I reported to Wigan Station in April 1943. We were taken to Hadrian's Camp, Carlisle and informed that we were going abroad to Northern Ireland. After six weeks initial training I moved to Congleton, Cheshire for a twelve week wireless operators course. From there to London, two weeks leave, and finally up to Stranraer to sail in a very large, well protected convoy. Our ship was an American Liberty Ship and the American food was very special. We landed in Algiers in late September and then to Salerno, Italy on the 25 November 1943. Here I joined 100th Heavy Anti Aircraft (HAA) Regiment. I was able to visit Pompeii and stay in Amalfi on four days leave. Early March saw us move to north Naples where we had a magnificent view of Vesuvius when it erupted on 20 March 1944. Another move took us to Foggia then to Termoli and finally in early September 1944 we disbanded, as someone realised there were no longer any German aircraft over Southern Italy.

We were given a choice between infantry or tanks, so I chose tanks. After training I joined 6th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) and went in the line near the Senio River but soon came out to be re-equipped with Churchill tanks. That winter was very cold and wet and early spring saw us on the offensive. It was at this stage that I was reported as the first casualty in one action. I must say it was not due to enemy action. After much German fire I was closing the hatch on the turret and trapped my finger, which was split and bleeding badly, so I was thrown out of the tank to be dealt with by the Red Cross.

The German 1st Para Division surrendered on 2 May 1945. At the end of May 1945 we left for Klagenfurt, Southern Austria for occupation duties. We found Tito's army occupying all the main towns and they would not move. We were ordered to put on a show of forces, using over a hundred tanks including flame throwers. They soon withdrew.

I was also involved in the repatriation of the Russian soldiers, mostly Cossacks, who had been fighting for the Germans. We certainly did not know they were going to be murdered when they got home and to my knowledge they went voluntarily.

On the 18 July 1945, I left Austria to join the 8th RTR in the north of Rome. On our way we stayed in Florence for two days. We were coming home to train for the invasion of Japan, but at Rome airport we heard about the dropping of the atomic bomb.

After being demobbed, I went back to university to graduate, get a job, and marry my girlfriend in July 1950, so next year is our sixtieth wedding anniversary.

I loved the army, and saw wonderful sights in Italy – I also grew up, and became a much more responsible person.
I joined the Royal Air Force in Oct 1997, aged 20. I chose the trade supplier, which is now also known as logistics. I qualified from my trade training in March 1998 and I was posted to RAF Wittering for three years, which saw me going to the Falklands for four months on my first Out Of Area (OOA).

In July 2006, I was posted to Cottesmore as a Corporal, where I still serve now. It was here I would experience conflict in Afghanistan. In June 2007, I was given notice to go to Afghanistan. At this point I had a whole world of emotions go through me. My parents had lost their son three years before, although not through conflict, and I was about to embark on a mission that all I had to do was come home to them alive, something I could not promise them. All I could do was tell them I loved them and that this was my job, that I’d trained for, for so long and they knew how bad I wanted it. To make things worse my future wife was already in Iraq and had been dodging bullets for two months, but we knew what we had to do and we were strong. We had good grounding and a massive will to survive. We had the wedding of the year to get back to, we were going to have our big day and we were going to be brides.

When I arrived in Afghanistan the one thing they don’t prepare you for is the amount of dust and sand and the smell. The smell is shocking and it’s there all day and all night. My first day was long and hard work, and that was what it was going to be – four months solid work, days off were few. The work was hard, made harder by the heat and conditions.

This OOA was by far the single most life changing experience I’ve ever had, the things you do to survive and to help others. Something as small as buying someone a iced cappuccino when the day was hard could make someone smile. Everyone worked so hard but they wanted to make a difference, help these people that need help. I have no complaints of the conditions I stayed in. I had a bed, shower and good food and fresh water whenever I needed it. I was able to phone home loads I even managed to speak to my partner in Iraq most days and my parents whilst they were in China.

As the end of my tour got ever closer I was worried about going home. Part of you doesn't want to go, you want to stay and help fight the war and make things better. You know you have to go because you're exhausted and need to rest. You also need to see your loved ones, because they are tired and need a rest from the worry. The one thing that is the hardest, you have to leave everyone behind and you hope they go home just like you do.

It took a good six months to get back on track with family and friends and to stop diving on the floor at every bang thinking we are being attacked. We had come back to civilisation, where bombings and being shot at weren't normal, but they were to us.

We struggled to talk about our experiences and still do, what we did and saw during conflict will stay with us forever. It makes you thankful everyday for what you have and makes you tell those ones you love that you do love them just that little bit more often. I can honestly say my experience of conflict did change me and my life. I am so glad I did it.

I have ten years of service left and look forward to gaining promotion through the ranks and going away again hopefully to conflict, to continue helping those who need it most. If I help one person in my life then my job is done. Until that day comes I will continue to serve for my queen and country with honour and pride.
The family escaped the Blitz in London and retreated to Girvan in Scotland. I followed in a car. Petrol was rationed, but two cab drivers gave me their excess fuel and I got to Greenock. I then helped a national newspaper reporter to cover the Battle of the Atlantic.

Then I was called up and found myself in Redford Barracks, Edinburgh, with the 38th Signal Training Unit of the Royal Artillery. Here I learned to communicate by semaphore and Morse code. Gunner Knott suddenly transformed to Lance Bombardier, but 18 pounder artillery were not for me; they sent me to Sandhurst and Catterick to join the Royal Corps of Signals. I was dispatched up to OSDEF (Orkney and Shetland Defence Force), where life was round the stove in a Nissen hut. Luckily we had a surplus of hen's eggs from the farm and they were taken to Kirkwall where the girls in the American Navy gave us chocolate bars to enhance our static tasteless rations.

We found ourselves in the 227 Independent Brigade which was then moved to the South of England and transported to Arromanche, whence we walked to Bayeux and found ourselves integrated with 44 and 46 Brigades to form the 15th Scottish Division. Crossing the River Odon to capture Caen was difficult and expensive in personnel. The division and the 30 Corps moved north and north and north to just near Lubeck on the Baltic shore and not far from where Field-Marshall Sir Bernard Montgomery and General-Admiral von Freideburg and General Kunzel signed the armistice agreement.

The army had disposed of Adolf Hitler and I was in the United Kingdom ready to be demobbed, but some genius had transferred us to 18 Air Formation Signals on the way to Le Lavandou on the Riviera and thence by way of a very hospitable Dutch West Indies cruise ship to Alexandria, from where we found ourselves on the Suez Canal at El Kantara before settling at Maadi close to a club with tennis courts and swimming pool. Luckily my best friend at school was up in the Middle Eastern Headquarters and we escorted two delightful young ladies from the Suez Canal Company to a spanking great dinner in a Cairo hotel.

I often took the army squad down the Nile to Saqqara where we found some more Pyramids. But the day was the usual humid hot sun and we could smell the melons on the truck passing by (one or two melons fell off the truck and saved the lives of several army stalwarts). Sailing on the Nile required dodging the blind feluccas; we took to Lake Timsah and more hospitality of the French in Ismailia, but the pleasures of dining in Cairo, exploring Egypt, and sailing at Ismailia came to an end. We were demobbed.
I was trained to become a searchlight operator on enlistment. I was posted to the 93rd Searchlight Regiment, where I remained until the Second World War hostilities ceased in 1945 and searchlights became redundant. During this period, I was based on the defence of London and saw many a German plane shot down or frightened off, whichever the case may be.

The 93rd Searchlight Regiment was manned entirely by women, except for one soldier based on our camp to ‘Swing the Lister’, because this was a job not to be done by women in case it damaged our child bearing parts.

Our tour of duty was dusk to dawn – we didn’t have a day off because the equipment had to be serviced every day, even if it hadn’t been used the night before. But we did get one 24 hour pass once a week even if we were so far out in the country we couldn’t get anywhere, we didn’t have time. So they gave us a bike. This was wonderful, if you knew how to ride it. Needless to say, we soon learned – which almost started world war three. Wouldn’t you think they would have given us one each? No.

Taking it all into account, it was quite a good life (if you didn’t weaken). It did not do any of us any harm, but I don’t think we would have admitted it at the time.

Elisabeth Lapham (nee Oldham)
Auxiliary Territorial Force, 1942-1945
Derek Leggott
Royal Signals, 1955-1977

In January, 1955, National Service was rearing its ugly head. The government of the day was offering anybody who enlisted as a three year regular extra money, ie. if you chose to spend three years as a regular you would be paid £2.9s a week as opposed to £1.8s as a two year national serviceman, a tempting offer if you consider that my pay as a 17 year old apprentice coppersmith was just under a pound a week for a 48 hour week.

As a result I enlisted into the Royal Signals on 9 January 1955 at the age of 17½ years. I had already lived through the war years and the Manchester Blitz and had spent many a night in the Anderson shelter in our garden. War and the Army seemed a natural way of life to me.

After basic training, which was six weeks at Gallowgate camp in Richmond, North Yorkshire, we went down to Catterick camp for our trade training which took about another 15 to 20 weeks.

I was then posted to Cyprus which was in the grip of a bitter terrorist struggle. During this period I served with 1st Wireless Regiment based in Famagusta.

After the British withdrawal from Egypt. it was decided by Britain, France and Israel to mount a joint operation to safeguard safe passage through the Suez Canal for international shipping. On the morning of 5 November we disembarked via the scramble netting and assault craft upon the seaborne invasion of Port Said, but the fighting was just about over. We met no resistance and landed at Port Said unscathed. We were billeted in the New Shepherds Hotel where we stayed for about three or four weeks when we returned to Cyprus.

I spent a few more years in Cyprus and then to BAOR (British Army of the Rhine) Krefeld, Essen, Dortmund and countless exercises. Then it was off to the Far East, Malaya and Borneo.

Then it was back to the UK for a spell at the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall communications. Next, off to Catterick as a Drill and Weapons Instructor, which I thoroughly enjoyed. In 1972, I was based in Northern Ireland for a two year tour, where we lost several of our squadron in the conflict.

Then back to BAOR, 11th Armoured Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron, Minden, Westfalica, where I took part in endless exercises on the edge of old Eastern Germany. Playing it for real in the event of an Eastern Bloc attack which never came.

I then returned to Catterick camp in North Yorkshire where, years earlier, both my children had been born in the Military Hospital which is now long gone. Also long gone are all the Royal Signals units from Catterick to Blandford in Dorset, which is very nice, but to me not a patch on Catterick.
“Having the horrible feeling of being fastened in a tank landing craft and not being able to get out. If that tank landing craft had gone we'd have all gone with it. That was the most worrying moment to my life, that, but when we got to Normandy they opened the door and let us down. I was like a pigeon being let out of a cage – a breeze of fresh air. I thought; ‘God, it's not so bad after all’. Then I had the trauma of walking for must have been, I don't know how far. I walked in the pouring rain to get to vantage point where we were all put together like sheep. We were herded like sheep and were actually guarded and had a compound kept round us so that we couldn't get away or do anything else like ‘op it. That was another terrible experience. We put up with that because there was a lot of laughter, not necessarily tears, a lot of sadness because of the fact we were all encircled by barbed wire. We didn't know where we were, but we knew inevitably we were going to go up to the front line with the remainder of the soldiers but we didn't know exactly where.

The expectation, the worry of that really got on my nerves because I was terrified of what was going to happen next, now that we'd landed in France. Where were we going to go from here? When they opened the cage and I was posted to another regiment then I began to feel I'd been let out of the cage. Now whatever happened to the other people left in the cage, I hate to suggest what happened – they could have been moved into a forward area and half of them not come back.”

Wally was posted from the beach at Arromanches to another unit to become their cook. He was responsible for finding his way through the huge number of troops in the area to the transport that would take him to the unit. However, he never stayed with one unit for a particularly long period of time, seemingly always being told. “Right Mackenzie, report to the Royal Army Service Corps at such and such a place”. This made it difficult for him, as it meant he was constantly being moved around and so could not build up the level of camaraderie with his fellow soldiers that they had with each other. After several such moves, he found himself with a tank transport company in the middle of Germany, one of 2 cooks for about 30 men. This saw him have the rare opportunity to cook in a real kitchen at a barracks, a luxury compared to the resources he normally had to make do with:

“You had a piece of meat about the size of an Oxo cube, so when you put it in a tin about this big, dehydrated meat, dehydrated cabbage, dehydrated potatoes, everything dehydrated!”

Still, he did the best he could with what he had available, and started to become accustomed to the war; “Sometime it got a bit naughty when the shelling were going on but you just took it in your stride”.

Wally's War ended for him in 1946, when he was near Hamburg. Once he'd returned to England and had his privilege leave, he returned to work in a local bakery shop, using his savings to buy the shop itself in 1947.

*Text written by a friend of Walter (Wally) MacKenzie.*
I enlisted with the Gordon Highlanders TA on 7 March 1939 at the outbreak of war. I was classified as a young soldier. I had cheated my age by two years, so now in the Royal Artillery, trained on searchlights, then Bofors guns.

In 1942, I landed in Africa and was now trained as a driver operator (signaller) on HMS Grebe (dry land battleship) by Royal Marines. I was in the 8th Army, up to Tripoli.

Embarked for Salerno Landings September 1943. After landing and digging in I was ordered by an Officer to go back down to the beach where I boarded an American Landing Ship Tank (LST). I had a 15cwt Bedford wireless vehicle.

We went round to the Bay of Naples and landed in a place called Castle La Mare. I had to get in touch with a gunboat if the Americans required covering fire, they did not use me.

I had to set my wireless up on the roof of a large house and after about a week, the officer gave me a map and reference, I found myself back in Salerno at a transit camp. I then joined different units of artillery, and proceeded up the east coast, through the Gustav Line and so into Austria.

In 1950, I was recalled for Korea. I was taken prisoner by the Chinese after the Battle of Injun River. I was in a party of ten who were sent back to get trucks to carry the wounded. The truck I was allocated was shot up through the radiator. The Chinese officer took me, I was now alone. We went a short distance to where a party of soldiers were gathered around a jeep and trailer, the jeep had a puncture and the officer gestured for me to change the wheel, which I did. Then I found I had become a driver for about a dozen Chinese soldiers. After about an hour's drive we pulled into a farmyard. I was with these Chinese for about ten days and had to drive my jeep across the Injun River every night with wounded sometimes tied in the back, to a Korean clearing area. After a spell with this party, I eventually landed in camp No.1 where I lingered until released in 1953.

M Mair
Gordon Highlander, 1939-1953
I arrived in Egypt for training via the Air Crew Receiving Centre, London, in April 1943. Initial Training Wing, Number 2 Radio School at Yatesbury; Number 8 Gunnery School at Evanton, the ‘Monarch of Bermuda’ to Port Said, and pre-OTU in Jerusalem.

On arrival at Shandur I and nine other Wireless Operators/Air Gunners were taken to a hangar and told to find South African Air Force (SAAF) crews who needed one. The good news was that my captain was a 29-year-old married man with a family, that he had been instructing in South Africa, and that the observer was an ex-infantry soldier who had survived Tobruk before volunteering for aircrew. With such maturity and experience we had great assets in the survival stakes.

It appears that some crew members were a bit hair-raising. I remember well, whilst at OTU, having to squeeze through the bomb bay between two bomb racks when approaching the target. This meant carrying my chest parachute whilst manoeuvring along a nine-inch wide cat-walk, holding on to a two-rope handrail. When I was right in the middle, at 12,000 feet, the bomb doors were suddenly opened, a ‘special treat’ for me planned by the rest of the crew.

I recall the 5.30am calls for 6am PT sessions, arranged for that time because of the high day-time temperatures in Egypt. After a while we conspired to give it a miss. At 6.15am all of us still abed had our names taken. On Sunday, our “day off”, we were lectured on keeping fit and detailed to walk the two-mile runway picking up empty cartridge cases and ammo belt gun links which had dropped out of landing aircraft. Eventually, we thought the job was completed. The South African CO inspected the runway in his jeep and sent us back again. Nor was that all. After a walk right across a desert airfield for lunch we were presented with overalls, 45-gallon drums of paraffin and long brushes and told to wash and clean our Marauders – in the heat of the blazing afternoon sun. No one missed PT again!

My last flying duty as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner was with the Flight Commander, transporting passengers to Rome and Naples. In July 1945 I returned from the SAAF to the RAF.

I and many of my colleagues were transferred from flying to ground duties. I became a Motor Transport driver, tackling anything from a 15 cwt pickup to a 10-ton diesel, transporting equipment from Naples to Rome, Bari etc.

In March 1946 this was relieved by a three-week home leave in the UK. When I got back to Italy I was greeted by “Don’t unpack – your early class B release has come through”. This was to allow me to return to the building trade, 12 to 18 months before my release group.

Taken from BBC People’s War website contribution
F J C Morris
Royal Air Force, 1943-1945
No.2 Armoured Car Company, RAF, 1945-1947

I volunteered for aircrew in July 1943 at the age of 17. I was selected for pilot, navigator or bomb-aimer training. This was conditional on passing the pre-aircrew training course at a civilian college to raise educational standards due to war and evacuation.

I joined the RAF at Lord’s Cricket Ground 20 December 1943. Posted to RAF Heaton Park January 1944 and did PACT course at Royal Salford Technical College, Peel Park Salford. Passed out in July 1944. To London, Babbacombe and Torquay for more training, ending in final assessment as a bomb-aimer.

A period of waiting followed and so I picked potatoes near Chorley, Lancashire. I spent 6 months in stores at RAF Andreas, Isle of Man. I was made redundant in June 1945. Re-mustered to driver mechanical transport. More waiting, this time in Paignton, helping in a Knights of St Columbus Forces Club.

Driving course in November 1945 at RAF Weeton, Lancashire. Passed out. Christmas leave, and then posted to Egypt.

I volunteered for armoured car crew in Palestine and spent the rest of service life escorting convoys and VIPs, patrols, Tel Aviv and Jaffa. I searched for Terrorists and worked with Palestine Police. I also visited Jordan and Iraq. Demobilised in December 1947.
Henry A Mottershead  
Royal Navy (Fleet Air Arm), Second World War

I enlisted in the Fleet Air Arm (FAA) of the Royal Navy in July 1939 as an Ordinance Artificer on a seven plus five year engagement. I spent my first two months training at Royal Navy Barracks Devonport followed by a further two months at a Royal Air Force station as the Navy had no facilities for training on aircraft weaponry.

My first ship was a heavy cruiser. Our first action was to land a battalion of British troops in the Norwegian Campaign expedition force in February 1940, to support those French troops we had landed earlier. To do this we had to sail much further north into the Arctic to avoid stronger German Forces at Narvik. Unfortunately we were spotted by German aircraft and though we were able to save our British troops we were damaged and eventually sunk. Luckily I was picked up and along with others of the ship's company we eventually got back to Britain. Although I had suffered a spinal injury and was sent home on survivors leave I was unfortunately recalled within nine hours and sent to Dover for the Dunkirk evacuation of our own forces. This was quite a shattering start for my service career and the start of what was to follow.

I was flown from the FAA base at Lee-on-Solent to join the aircraft carrier HMS Victorious. We were then at sea in the attack and eventual sinking of the German battleship Bismarck and then joined the battle fleet in the North Atlantic to cover the big Russian Convoys through to Arkhangelsk (Arkangel), Russia. Once again I was back in the Arctic, where life became very hectic once again, and I was lucky not to have a repeat my previous experiences.

I was with the large convoy supporting the relief of Malta during which the Cruiser HMS Manchester was sunk along with other ships, then back again to the Arctic.

Though I seemed never to get leave home I was courting my present wife-to-be, mainly by mail. I did, eventually, manage to get one week leave, and so we decided to get married, but the following week I was on my way once again. This time I was headed to Canada and to the Pacific where I served on special operations with a mixed crew of British and Americans, covering countries including Africa, India, Sumatra, Burma, New Zealand and even Australia, as well as several of the Pacific Islands, over the next two years. So after one week of being married I did not see my wife again until January 1945.

During this time I was in charge of armed escorts on various missions, I even gave the bride away at a shipmate's wedding amongst many other duties. To write the events of my naval service would fill a book. Looking back I feel lucky to live to my age of 90 and look at my service medals and the stories they tell. I hold the 1939-45 Star, Atlantic Medal, Africa Star, and Pacific Star with Burma Bar, Defence Medal, 1939-45 Medal, Russian Medal, Dunkirk Medal, Malta Cross and Norwegian Campaign Medal.

Further to my war service, I should also state that I rejoined the services in the 1960s Cold War period as a member of the Royal Observer Corps as part of a unit manning an Underground Atomic Fallout Bunker.
I joined the RAF in 1940 as air crew under training and completed my flying training in South Africa, winning my wings and going onto operational training in the Middle East.

I joined the 274 Squadron Desert Air Force flying Hurricane IIC & IID’s (light tank busters). Following my service with 274 Squadron, I joined the 229 Squadron based in Malta and converted onto Spitfires. I eventually returned to the UK prior to D-Day 1944 after taking part in fighter sweeps (an aerial formation) over Europe. On D-Day I was privileged to take part in the fighter cover for the invasion fleet.

I will always remember the night of the invasion, the fleet mirrored on the moon reflected waters of the English Channel, heading for the coast of France not knowing what fate awaited them.

I was fortunate in surviving 83 sorties in total during the war which has left me with a lifetime of memories.

Thomas O’Reilly
Royal Air Force Fighter Command, Second World War

Tom O'Reilly, 2005 (front, seated)
I joined the Royal Navy on 2 June 1943 at HMS Royal Arthur, a few days after my 18th birthday. I was trained to be proficient in sending and receiving messages by Morse code.

In early February 1944, I spent two weeks learning to read German U-Boat radio messages, to operate direction finding equipment and to pinpoint the position of the U-Boat. I was then rated as a Telegraphist (Special). I was sent to Leydene, Petersfield, where we were told that we would train on an experimental and secret task and to forget all we had done previously. Security was very tight.

After a period in Dover, we returned to Leydene for more training and on the 12 May 1944 we were shown, on a film, the sets we were to operate. We were to combat a German secret weapon, a ‘Glider Bomb’, which was released from a bomber, some 20 miles distant and guided by a radio beam operated by the bomber pilot to the target ship. We listened for the radio beam and ‘jammed’ it to send it off course.

On the 13 May 1944 I was posted to Combined Operations Landing Ship (Headquarters). Our team boarded HMS Largs, the Headquarters’ ship for the 3rd British Infantry Division, which was to make the initial landing in Sword area on D-Day. Our equipment came on board three days before we left harbour at 11.45am on 5 June 1944. The ship was constantly on the move at the slow rate of 4 knots to avoid shells and to avoid exploding mines. Eventually our luck ran out when we hit a mine and later a large shell hit us so we had to leave the beach head for repairs.

I arrived at Greenock with four days leave and was at home by around 5.00pm. One hour later I received a priority telegram ordering immediate return to the ship. In Plymouth I was given inoculations and vaccinations, issued with tropical gear and put on a train to Southampton to join a Canadian Assault Landing Ship. We arrived in Naples, Italy for the Southern France landings in mid-August 1944. For the next three months, our team led a nomadic life by travelling on various ships from Naples to Malta. Our equipment was still on HMS Largs with that ship following us around.

Eventually, around November 1944, I think, we moved to Egypt and were told that we were on standby to help in the retaking of the two Greek islands. Whilst waiting we returned to reading German radio messages. Several weeks later we rested for three days before boarding a ship to Colombo, Sri Lanka and the large ‘Y’ station, HMS Anderson.

I trained for two weeks in reading Japanese radio messages. After only a few days I was told to pack gear for two week’s stay on an Indian sloop, HMIS Kistna at Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, to train Indian Telegraphists in reading Japanese radio messages. The Indian ship had an all-Indian crew of some two hundred plus and we were the only ‘whites’. I had my first smell and taste of curry.

In June and July 1945 I was preparing for a seaborne landing on the Malaysian coast at Port Swettenham. However the ‘A’ bombs were dropped before we left Anderson. Our party boarded the landing ship, HMS Glengyle, stayed for one day off-shore near Port Swettenham, before moving on to Singapore. We took over Gilman Barracks, but the buildings were so filthy that we slept under the stars. We lived on ‘compo rations’ and used a hole in the ground as a toilet. We had no electricity and a water shortage, until a few weeks later we moved to reopen the ‘Y’ station at Kranji on the island.

The war was over, but we had problems. Twice our station was attacked, but we managed to fight them off, although we had a store burnt down and the searchlight on the guard house shot out. During this time at least two of our party were killed with a Japanese booby trap.
I was born in Oldham in 1923. When war broke out I was working as a junior clerk with the grocers Burgons Ltd. As a very young man of 17, I volunteered to join the British army, under-age, in 1940, unable to wait any longer to fight against the Germans and Italians. Little did I realise at that time that I would one day marry an Italian girl and that I would eventually be fighting on the Italian side, helping to drive the German Nazis out of Italy.

I volunteered for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in early 1942 and was accepted and trained as a radio-operator. After serving in North Africa and Sicily I became part of No.1 Special Force and was selected as an operator on the Anzio beach-head landing where we tried to get through the German lines. Unfortunately our mission had to be evacuated due to death, injury and illness among our small group and I found myself in Monopoli helping to run the SOE base signal station there.

Shortly afterwards I acted as radio operator for Max Salvadori on a mission that included being parachuted into the Piedmont area early in 1945. Everything went smoothly and our group of six made a safe landing. Here we made contact with a group of local partisans. I was impressed by the way they handled our arrival and the quick movement of our group along with a large quantity of arms and ammunition dropped with us. These supplies were well hidden in church vaults before the German SS came looking for us.

I was hidden by a farmer and his wife, sleeping in the house overnight and moving to a small wooden shed about 200 metres from the house where the farmer's wife would cover us with dry leaves. She would then come twice a day bringing us food, almost in sight of the German garrison, taking terrible risks to make sure we were well looked after. In the evenings we would transmit messages from a radio in her attic.

After a few nights, the six of us started our journey to Cisterna d'Asti. One of the group was our guide and he led us to the River Tanaro, about 100 metres from the bridge at Alba where a group of partisans had organised a regular boat crossing by the use of ropes to pull the boats across under the noses of the German sentries on the bridge. We crossed the river where we met with a further group of enthusiastic partisans. After spending a couple of days my friend, John Kearney and I dressed as peasants and took a horse and cart to cross the country to Milan to meet up with another group of partisans. After 24 hours we found ourselves under attack from German SS troops and unfortunately John was killed.

After this episode I made my way back to Cisterna where I was to witness the tremendous efforts of a very active partisan group harassing German and Italian Republican troops. As the end of April 1945 arrived, I received a message that the partisans were to wait for the Allies to arrive and not occupy any towns or cities. After the successes we had had this fell on deaf ears and they were not going to be deprived of liberating their own towns and cities, chasing out their enemy themselves. I felt very proud to have taken part in a small way in this reawakening of the Italian spirit and I will be forever grateful for the experience and for the many lasting friendships I made amongst my Italian comrades in their moment of glory.

After the war, when SOE disbanded, I returned to the Signals Regiment and was based in Florence where one New Year's Eve I met my wife Rosanna.

*Taken from speech given to Partisan Reunion, Bologna University, 1987*
As Jean Young in Edinburgh 1938, where I had been resident for some time, I visited the council offices to join the Women's Land Army (WLA). As I was English, my name was transferred to England. I was sent as a trainee to a farm in Warwickshire near Stratford upon Avon called Aston Cantlow. It was here I learned to hand milk, and other activities, including in the first ten days carting pig manure into the fields for spreading. I also went on to learn many other farming activities, I looked after a flock of sheep, watching out for foot rot, cutting it out, and then applying ‘stockholm tar’, looking out for maggots on the fleeces and picking them off. There was arable work growing vegetables and fruit for the cannery, all the vegetables and fruit were taken to the cannery on a flat horse drawn lorry.

When war broke out I had to return to my own home town as I was under 21 years and did not have parental permission. I was then sent to a farm in Romiley, Stockport, Cheshire, which was a Dairy Farm. It had two large milk rounds and these took until lunchtime to deliver. In the afternoon the churns, cans and bottles were sterilized. Then after milking again in the afternoon the milk was bottled up for the next day delivery.

The last placement was at three farms owned by the farmer who had two farms and the son and his wife had one. Here there were not many cows, there were a mere handful of milk customers on the round, and the main bulk of the milk was sent away in churns. These farms carried out many activities. The son owned a tractor, when we were not working at home, we were sent out on contract, various jobs such as corn and grass cutting. I remember I harrowed a field at night with special dimmed headlights. When corn cutting I would work the levers, the son would drive the tractor, later he bought a small combine harvester which completed all the work. Whilst at this farm I was sent to learn hedge lying by the National Champion, Mr Thellwall. I have since relaid quite a few myself, I also learnt stone walling. We grew rye which grew six feet and was very difficult to handle. I learnt how to thatch and many other kinds of work and I was here until the war ended. Whilst at this farm the son, Alec Swindells, I, and another farmer Tony Adam, formed the Farmer's Club. We arranged a show, which later became later an annual show and big gymkhana and still continues to this day. Eventually this became part of the Young Farmers Club.

I finally left to be married, having earlier gained my WLA proficiency badge and completing seven years service in the Women's Land Army.

As we received no recognition after the war, I formed the British Women's Land Army Society in 1963. At the first Reunion Campaign meeting at the Royal Albert Hall, London, over 5000 were present. The Society had many representatives and representation at many Civic Events. I received the MBE for my services to the Land Army. Then final recognition in 2000, when 200 ex Women's Land Army and Women's Timber Corps (WLA/WTC) marched past the Cenotaph at London in November in their own right.

In 2008, 34000 WLA/WTC received a commemoration badge which was awarded by the government. In 2009 the government arranged a luncheon at the Royal Opera House, London and followed by tea at Buckingham Palace with HRH The Queen and members of the Royal Household. Recognition mission completed.
I joined the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) at Aldershot in July 1949 to begin my National Service. After completing basic training I was posted to the RASC Training Battalion at Blackdown for a further six weeks of trade training, this was a mixture of drill, field activities and clerical training. Whilst nearly at the end of the training period, we were asked to volunteer for the Far East, I volunteered and together with a squad of others making a total of 20 we were told that we were to stay at Blackdown for a further six weeks training. At completion we were transferred to the RASC Depot Battalion at Dover and immediately sent on embarkation leave of 14 days.

On return to Dover we were held for about five days doing nothing but parading with full kit. We were called to parade one evening and told the draft was moving to the Far East. All the names of the people were called out except another guy and I, we had been selected as waiting men. The draft moved off and we were left at Dover. In usual Army manner I looked around to find something to do which would get me off the parades, fortunately I made contact with the sergeants who were looking after us and was offered the job of being their batman, this I accepted and worked for them for the next week until they told me I was on a draft for the Middle East.

We embarked at Liverpool in early December 1949 on the troopship Empire Pride and had a fairly rough passage through the Bay of Biscay and on leaving Gibraltar in the Mediterranean Sea. It was calmer as we got to Malta where we stopped for half a day. We arrived at Port Said, disembarked and got on a train to Ismailia where we boarded trucks which took us to Gebel Maryam where we stayed overnight in the transit camp. I was allocated a unit, 824 Army/Air Liaison Group and together with another soldier we were taken by lorry to our new unit, miles away from anywhere. We finally arrived at our destination, RAF Fayid and found our billet, collected our bedding and settled down for the night.

In January 1950, I was transferred to Deversoir to join our training section. It was a very relaxed station and we worked from 0800 until 1300 with the rest of the day free, except for those on guard duties, which was very infrequent due to there being sufficient RAF personnel to man the duties. Each afternoon from April to October we went to Deversoir Point at the start of the Great Bitter Lake to sunbathe and swim and watch ships passing up or down the Suez Canal. We would call out at the boats taking the people to Australia on the assisted passage scheme and of course, the troops going to the Far East, no comments were made to those going home!

I was promoted to Lance Corporal and roundabout September time transferred back to RAF Fayid to take over as Chief Clerk of the unit. I had to start again to make friends as most of the lads had gone home. At this time we had the additional six months service time added due to Korea which made it two years instead of eighteen months. Life was good at RAF Fayid, I was given another stripe and as a Corporal I did not qualify for any duties.

During my time in the Canal Zone, there was some activity by the Egyptians and when travelling at night in a vehicle you had to draw weapons for the journey. Towards the end of my time there, the Abadan crisis was brewing and I had a number of wake up calls in the night to take top secret messages down to the Commanding Officer in his married quarters at Fayid.

I don’t regret National Service at all, it did me good and has created a bond with others who had to do their bit.
B Raynes
1st Engineer Assault Brigade, Second World War

I enlisted in 1942 and served for four years in France and Germany during the Second World War. I was a driver with the Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers.

We took part in the invasion on 6 June 1944 (D-Day) at Bernieres-sur-Mer after a 24 hour delay at Gosport, Hampshire. I was part of the 5th Regiment of the 1st Assault Brigade.

Alan Rigby
Royal Engineers, 1947-1949
Royal Observer Corps, 1975-1991

In September 1947, I was called to do National Service. After six weeks basic training at Chester I was posted to No.1 TRRE at Malvern. 13 weeks later I was put on a draft to Egypt. I was then posted to Palestine until the end of the British Mandate. I returned back to Egypt and then on to Benghazi in Cyrenaica. I was then sent to Wadi Al Kuf for seven months building the longest Bailey bridge in Africa, 300ft in span and over a 90ft drop. Then I returned to Benghazi with trips to Derna, Tobruk, and Sirte.

I came back to the UK in October 1949.

I joined the Royal Observer Corps in 1975 and served for 16 years until it was disbanded.
On the 11 June 1962 I walked into the RAF recruiting office in Manchester. I was asked what I fancied trade wise. 'A pilot' I said. The Sergeant said 'we are all full up with pilots. Have you heard of the Royal Air Force Regiment?' I answered 'No'. He said 'great, sign here'. So a few days later I was at Bridgnorth, Shropshire doing my square bashing and that was a shock to the system. I then went to sunny Catterick, North Yorkshire to spend months of crawling through mud, running five miles each morning and learning how to be a soldier.

In November, I arrived at RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) Butterworth in Malaya and joined the 1 Field Squadron. We were innocents when we arrived. A week later we were not so innocent. Our job was defence of the airfield and also doing a lot of jungle warfare training and jungle rescue work. That all changed when Indonesia started to invade Borneo. We were turned into an anti aircraft unit, issued with Bofors L40/70s and along with 111 Battery of the Australian Army we were tasked with the defence of the Butterworth and Penang area.

I left Singapore for the UK in May 1965 with a lot of pleasant memories. In the United Kingdom I was posted onto a new reformed 51 squadron. We did the usual training and exercises etc. but in November that year it all changed. Ian Smith declared UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) in Rhodesia. Within 24 hours we were en-route to El Adem in Libya where we sat for five days until we finally flew into Zambia. I went into Ndola where the whole lot of us were put into the old agricultural show grounds. We had no water at first. I remember it rained and as there were no proper washing facilities we all stripped off and showered in the rain. It was unfortunate that as we were doing so the powers that be allowed the British expatriates to drive in and introduce themselves to us. I am sure the wives and daughters enjoyed the sights.

I then went to Livingstone at the Victoria Falls where eight of us did 24 hours on and 24 off for three months. The last two months I spent at Lusaka, Zambia. In June 1967 the Squadron was posted home.

In July 1967, twenty of my Squadron including myself were posted on to 37 Squadron and moved to Aden, Yemen. We were doing security duties 24 hours on and 24 hours off for four months. On 29 November I was one of the last people out of Aden as that was pull out day. I don’t think anyone would have fond memories of that place.

In July 1968 I was posted to Cyprus and spent three wonderful years swanning all over Cyprus and going to various other countries.

On return in 1971 I was posted to 15 Squadron and did two detachments in Dhofar, Oman. I also did other detachments in Malta and other places some good, some awful.

I left the RAF Regiment in 1974 after serving for 12 years with an awful lot of good memories. Would I do it again? You bet I would.
Derek T Stott
Royal Air Force, 1943-1947

I joined the RAF in December 1943 at Cardington, Bedfordshire. The two months initial training was done in Skegness and I was then selected for technical service.

I attended Birmingham Technical College between March and August 1944, where I learned about wireless technology. Between September and November 1944 I completed a radar course at RAF Cosford and was then posted overseas in December 1944 as an Airborne Radar Mechanic.

I sailed on RMS Orontes from Greenock in January 1945 arriving in Bombay at the RAF Worli Transit Camp. I was posted to RAF Squadron No.194 at Imphal in February. We moved to Akyab with a squadron who were supply dropping (by parachute, free dropping and cargo transport to airfields) to 14th Army in Burma, for the South East Asian theatre of operations.

As the war finished we moved to Rangoon. During preparations for assault on Malaya, the squadron was due to fly to Penang and then Singapore, but this operation was cancelled as a result of the dropping of the atomic bomb.

I was posted to Batvia at the end of 1945, where I joined the 904 Expeditionary Air Wing at Kemayoran Airport in Dutch East Indies.

British Forces were withdrawn from Java, so we were next posted to Kuala Lumpur and sent on detachment to Kota Bharu in North East Malaya where a staging post was set up on route from Siam to Singapore to act as an emergency landing airstrip with basic facilities. I was posted back to UK in February 1947.

Before being discharged in November 1947, one month short of a four year service, I was posted to Night Fighter Squadron No.609 at Church Fenton and Yeadon, Yorkshire, flying Mosquito's fitted with A1 radar. I was awarded the Burma Star, 1939-1945 War Medal, and the Defence medal ending my service with the rank of Corporal.
As we approached Gold beach we transferred to tank landing craft. I had to climb down the ropes slung over the side of the ship with a small pack on my back, a tin helmet on my head and a rifle slung over my shoulder. It was not an easy manoeuvre. The ship was bobbing up and down and I knew that if I fell into the sea I had no chance of survival.

My vehicle was only lowered onto the landing craft once the crew were assured I had managed to get on to the landing craft. The men were always more expendable than the vehicles. The trucks were placed on a turntable and pushed to the back of the landing craft ready to drive off. The trucks with their drivers were moved close to shore by the landing craft. The battleship HMS Warspite was firing 15 inch shells over our heads. The noise was horrendous it sounded like a train thundering through a station, what it was like for their target, I shudder to think. We started our engines and waited for the order to start off.

The front of the landing craft was lowered five feet from the beach and then we were ordered to drive off. Our only instruction was to keep our foot hard down on the accelerator in first gear and four wheel drive. The first truck was to go to the left, the second to the right. If the vehicle in front disappeared we were to ignore it.

As I drove off the landing craft I was in five feet of water. The sea flooded in to the cab and reached my waist. I started to get concerned about a watery death but as instructed I kept my foot hard on the accelerator and hoped for the best. Eventually the troop carrier started to go uphill and the water drained from the cab. I had made it to ‘Gold Beach’. It was 15 June 1944. I was 19 years old and I was part of the Normandy landings that would end the Second World War.

On 3 September 1944 the Guards Armoured Division entered Brussels. We were the first troops to enter and liberate the city. Our welcome was tremendous. We were treated like conquering heroes. We were showered with Champagne, kissed by men and women and had flowers strewn around our necks. In the morning I drove a platoon of guardsmen behind two Sherman tanks to Waterloo. There we set up a road block at the main crossroads to intercept any vehicles trying to escape from Brussels. We caught a few and shot them up.

Later in December just after entering Germany we came under mortar fire, and on the command to evacuate the troop carrier, two guardsmen, George Ward and I took cover in a ditch by the side of road where we took a direct hit by a mortar bomb.

One of the Irish Guards with me was hit in a main artery and died very quickly. The blood spurted from him like a fountain several inches high, and we couldn't stop it. The other guardsman was badly wounded and George had the back of his heel blown away. I was the lucky one, a piece of shrapnel shot through the side of my face. I could feel it on the inside of my mouth. I was covered in blood and completely deafened, so could not hear what was going on. It was all very confusing.

Early in May 1945 I found myself in Berlin and I was selected as one of 54 men from different units to act as guards at Operation Terminal, this was the name given to the Potsdam conference between Winston Churchill, Harry S Truman, and Joseph Stalin. It was a wonderful feeling to be part of all this. To see the start of peace, being a part of history. I still have my Green Pass for this operation, without which you were not allowed to be in the area.
Having had my service deferred so I could complete my apprenticeship at Metropolitan Vickers, I was called up to do my National Service, in the RAF, in April 1958.

I was sent to do my basic training (square bashing) at RAF Wilmslow. From there I was sent to RAF Locking to do my trade training as a Line Telegraph Mechanic. Then I moved to Innsworth to prepare for embarkation to the Far East Air Force.

In November 1958, I arrived at RAF Changi only to be sent on to RAF Seletar. I was rebranded as a Cryptographic Mechanic, top secret work on machines which were the latest type derived from the Enigma machines. My work involved repair and service of machines in Singapore and Labuan in Borneo. I did this until I was discharged in April 1960 and put on ‘H’ reserve.

John P T Williams
Royal Air Force, 1958-1960
Being a territorial meant an immediate 1939 call-up to the barracks of the 42nd East Lancashire Signals Regiment in Manchester. Most of the regular senior NCO's (Non Commissioned Officer) were drafted in and being a supercilious shower, addressed we joskins as ‘Saturday afternoon soldiers’ – our response was to state that the country was needing, not just feeding.

Our training began with the basics of Morse code, electrics, and driving amongst other things. We then moved to Yorkshire to meet our mother unit, the 24th Armoured Brigade. Our prime function was to provide communication through battalion to brigade to division.

Early in 1942, we arrived in Egypt and in September we took up our allotted positions in readiness for Alamein. My particular chore was to provide contact from battalion to brigade in a Sherman tank, acting as a link back to brigade Headquarters.

Early in the battle we took a hit and lost our commander. The link tank was withdrawn and having become a spare dogsbody I joined an undamaged tank company. This also had the tank commander taken out when a shell removed our turret cupola. I then transferred to a third tank, acting as a loader for the 75mm.

From what information I learned (and later read about), our particular task was to assist a forward anti-tank unit in an operation entitled Snipe. Some confusion took place in the mistaken rendezvous positions and we came under heavy fire, our mixed group of twelve Crusaders and Sherman's withdrew, losing half the unit to what appeared to be an 88mm.

The losses sustained resulted in our remaining tanks being transferred to 7th Division Hussars, who had much more desert experience. Our unit was disbanded and as our particular group of territorial soldiers would be split amongst other outfits, we volunteered to join the 4th Division Parachute Regiment (4 Para) which was then forming in Egypt and later joined the 1st Airborne Division.

After training in the Canal Zone in Kabrit and Ismalia, we moved to Palestine and then followed the African coast to Tunisia. After a short stay in Tunisia we moved to Taranto in Italy, thankfully missing the Sicilian enterprise. For a while, I was attached to Popski's Private Army as the radio link, which was never utilised. The Adriatic was quiet as the Germans were retreating and 4 Para was then moved back to the UK for the job in Europe.

After several aborted plans for drops in France, we finally took off for Holland for Market Garden, at which point I was wounded (a bullet in the knee). After treatment I was transported by train to Stalag 11B as prisoner of war.

Eventual retirement gave me more time to make a number of sentimental journeys to those places I had found interesting during my time abroad in the war.
R L F Woodhouse
Royal Engineers Transport, 1937-1945

My wartime experience consists of periods of relative inactivity, training of various kinds, interspersed with shorter periods of activity involving the enemy – Italians, Libyans, Eritreans.

I enlisted in the Royal Engineers (Transport) in 1937 and was called up in September 1939. Commissioned in January 1940 as Second Lieutenant, I eventually arrived in Dabaa, Western Desert as part of reinforcement for a regular 10th Royal Engineer Company in November 1940.

The enemy, Italians and Libyans, were stationed at Sidi Barrani, the front line for our troops being Mersa Matruh. Our job was to ensure as best we could, the regular supplies by railway, of food, water and ammunition to the front. We were subject to some bombings, very heavy at Mersa Matruh, but it was a relatively quiet period.

In December, we were transferred to Derudeb in the Sudan to join the 4th and 5th Indian Army Divisions, prior to the attack on Kassala held by the Italians, and the on to Eritrea, Mussolini’s Italian colony.

While at Derudeb, my detachment was sent to deal with some unexploded bombs. I set off, more in hope than expectation, as I had no experience whatsoever of this. Fortunately the Regimental Sergeant Major, a regular, with some regular soldiers in my detachment showed the rest of us how it should be done. My one and only wartime experience of dealing with unexploded bombs!

In January the attack on Kassala occurred, fell quickly, and the troops were in Eritrea. There was fierce fighting at Agordat, and the Italians and Eritreans retreated to the hills before Keren (5000 feet).

There were only two routes into the hills, a narrow gauge railway, and a mountainous road which was unfortunately blown up in parts and would take time to clear.

My detachment was given the job of finding some railway wagons and locomotives, and moving wagons of supplies up to Cameron Tunnel near the front, to bring back as many wounded as possible. We found with difficulty a small number of wagons, and two narrow gauge locomotives.

Every night we would take the 12 wagons of supplies up into the mountain area, squeaking and groaning on the curves and severe gradients, and bring back up to 200 wounded under heavy enemy artillery fire.

The fighting was desultory at first, until an all out push commenced on 13 March. Resistance by the enemy Italians and Eritreans was fierce, and it was not until 27 March, that the breakthrough to Keren was achieved. The Italian Army surrendered and the Indian Army Divisions pushed on to Asmara, the capital, a very pleasant place.

For several months I was part of a railway team (the Italians were very cooperative) to ensure regular supplies of all essentials for both the Army and civilian population.

In 1943, I was transferred firstly to Palestine for several months, and subsequently to General Headquarters (Movements and Transport) Cairo.

Eventually, in October 1944, I went to Greece as part of the expeditionary force to the German Army out of Greece. Apart from some minor clashes there was no real conflict, and we arrived in Athens to be warmly welcomed. However the signs of the Civil War about to break out were already evident and I was about to enter the most uncomfortable period of my wartime service.
James Derek Wright
2nd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment
1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers, Second World War

Aged 18, after time in the Home Guard, I started my initial training in Blackpool in February 1942 and in May was posted to 2nd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment and trained throughout the south of England. After a spell in hospital, I was returned to Gallowgate Camp, Richmond, Yorkshire and volunteered for an overseas posting.

In late summer 1943, I sailed from Liverpool. The convoy was attacked and dispersed in the Mediterranean and our ship docked in Philippeville, Algeria. Sent to Italy I joined 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers in Lanciano on the eastern side of Italy. The private became a fusilier in Platoon D Company. As part of the 8th Indian Division our infantry comrades were Ghurkas and Frontier Force Rifles with whom there was a close affinity.

Winter 1943-1944 was cold and wet with no progress until Spring 1944. The division was part of the breakthrough at Cassino and continued up the centre of Italy and entering Florence. We then crossed the River Arno into the foothills of the Appennines eventually finishing a few miles short of Bologna and the plains beyond. We wintered in the high mountains. Snow and rain and mud. With the better weather, the 8th Army finally reached the Gothic line. 8th Indian Division, adept at crossing rivers, had several more to breach before we crossed the River Po and the 1st Battalion, Royal Fusiliers finished the campaign at Padua and celebrated in the little town of Este.

The younger element of the battalion returned more or less immediately to the UK to re-equip and rejoin the Indians for the assault on Japan. Luckily VJ Day intervened and with all new equipment we finished up in Germany. I returned home after six years, I was very lucky, I'm glad I did it.