

1940

On Friday May 10th, at about noon, I received a message from the vice-consul in Calais saying that I had to report as soon as possible. I went into Calais to see him after lunch and told him to tell the Embassy that I would report at lunchtime Wednesday 15th May at latest.

He could not find the detail of his phone talk with the Embassy, but said that I was to report to the RTO at Amiens as soon as possible and in civilian clothes if necessary. I ordered a uniform from a Calais tailor that afternoon and he promised to do all he could to have it ready by Wednesday.

I spent the next four days trying to put some of my affairs in order. I left on the Wednesday 15th May, with my own car, without uniform.

There, it appeared that they had expected to put me into battle-dress. But I weighed 17 stone 10 lbs and nothing would fit. I was taken round the French barracks rue Jules Barin and at St Rock, but there was no French stuff to fit me. I was arrested in Amiens for trying to buy French uniform in tailor's shop. Then I was sent up to the Q G (?) at GHQ near Arras, but on arrival there found that they were packing up and moving. So it was decided to send a motorcyclist to Calais on Saturday 18th to collect the uniform and arrangements were made by phone with the tailor to deliver the uniform to the RTO at Calais.

On Saturday/Sunday night we got orders to move to Beauvais and I was told I could take my own car. Actually I had two men in the car with me and probably there would have been no room for me otherwise.

We got to Beauvais at daylight and spent all day there waiting about. Then Capt. Morgan came back and we got orders to move to near Béthune. The same two men got into my car and when transports started moving ahead of me said that it was ours, so I followed. Actually it turned out that I had attached myself to the Pruvost Compagnie and that the road control group was behind. We went through Abbeville, Hesdin and St Pôl, particularly at Hesdin, was hellish - no lights, roads blocked with traffic, no relief driver as no one was keen on taking over a left hand drive car at night. About dawn we reached a chateau and I had 2 hours sleep on the floor of one of the downstairs rooms. Then a bath. This run up to the East had given me a fresh heart and I felt that it was a sign that things were going well again.

After breakfast we found that we should not have been here at all and the O. C. and another officer in 2 cars and self and C.S.M. in mine left as advance party for Montreuil.

Traffic hellish again: we got there in early morning, found a billet, had a meal and eventually got to billet and was just getting into bed when the O.C. rang the bell and told me that we were to move again to Desvres and that the German tanks had cut the Abbeville road. I had to ban a valise there for the O.C. had no petrol and I had to be prepared to travel as light as possible and take up as little room as possible also in some other car. Then the French section gave me some petrol; I got my car, which I had had to be prepared to abandon. It was too late to get the blue *valise*¹, so I just left it with a note of my name and my Calais' address.

I was told to lead the convoy and did so: we reached Desvres at dawn and the others soon arrived also.

I went out to the forest to pick out parking places for the transport but the OC decided

¹ In French in the text : suitcase

to stay in Desvres. Then after breakfast, he sent me off in an Army car with a MP driver, to visit G.H.Q at Boulogne.

We got down there and arranged for rations, etc. with the RASC found that the Paymaster had moved to Wimereux - no address given. GHQ was also there as the Imperial had been bombed the night before - I saw the bombing from Etaples-Neufchatel road. Fruitless hunt, after the Paymaster but saw the Movement. Control Officer who sent a message to the OC by me that it would be best if he came fast to Boulogne.

Then having had permission from the OC, we ran on the village and on arrival there found that my wife had left 3 hours earlier for Dieppe by car with another French family. Returned to Wimereux, was pulled up there again on account of my uniform - I got this at Beauvais on the Sunday afternoon and it had no badges, button or indication of rank.

Had another arrest in Boulogne in the afternoon: but was cleared up again at the APM's office in the rue de la Lampe. Then back to Desvres. On arrival I told the OC about the suggestion of the Movement Control Officer but he said that the French Commandant was in command of this Anglo-French group and that we had to follow him and not split up.

We spent the night in a bare *château* outside Desvres and got a meal at a café near by. Capt. Morgan, Vernon, Aston turned up later. I saw the bombing of Montreuil and Samer in the evening and was miserable for the fate of my wife. Slept on floor for a few hours though disturbed by thoughts of her plights.

In the morning of 22nd, we moved off to go to Steenworde. Found the Théroouanne road was blocked by felled trees at Desvres level crossing; so we had to take the St Omer road. I was detached to stay with the Ambulance section of the group on account of my uniform

Eventually reached the Boulogne-St Omer road and we went on towards Lumbres. Then a halt- a long one- we got some bread and coffee in a cottage and opened a tin of bully. Eventually got the order to turn round. Drove back a few kms towards Boulogne; then turned left step down hill. Halt Officers called up to lead the column when OC said that he had been to Hazebrouck, that there were isolated German tanks and bands of infantry about, that we were to go on to join the Théroouanne road again and then turn left there to Steenworde. Personally I would have gone North and then East to Steenworde rather than South and East - particularly as the Germans were moving from the South, but opinions were not invited at all. Went on again.

Later a halt whilst a German reconnaissance plane flew over us. Then forward again. Eventually another halt in a village and sounds of bullets overhead. Saw Capt. Morgan's car turning round in the road ahead of me and he was leaning out shouting orders as the car came down the road. A sergeant with me in my car said the order was: "Disperse".

I told the men to take rifles and one bandoleer each, put on the antitheft device on my car and took a map. I did not bother about the column ahead of me for I knew that there were either 5 or 6 officers ahead of me of whom two had come back (Morgan and Vernon).

Went back about 50 yards and turned left at the Ambulance along a narrow lane with hedges both sides. Then left into a field. Other men were coming up from the rear of the column and turning right into this lane. Probably 40 men or so reached this lane and the fields.

The German reconnaissance plane began to lap round at once and dived down using its machine guns. Also heard what I thought were bombs, but which were probably tank shells, which appeared to come from the village shut.

I took 2 shots at the plane, the first from its rear and the second to my left: the hedge

was too thick to get a shot as he dived. Then the plane having done his job of keeping us in order, whilst a tank was assembling prisoners, left us for good and I heard Germans shouting out "Schweinhunder Engländer". Went out of the field into the lane and found Lt Wilson wounded in throat – two men with him to the Ambulance but other said: "Lets all go; then we'll be together". I let it go at that, feeling helpless in the matter – had bestow any quality of leadership then, more men would have had a chance to run for freedom.

I did not order the men with me to fire at the plane because the CHS on the previous Saturday night when we were packing up to move from Amiens said to Morgan that many- or perhaps most – of the men had no rifle training at all.

I watched the tank, which was on the bank of the far side of the road, assemble his prisoners on the grass on the side of the road nearest to me; I saw also Morgan and Vernon standing close by; eventually the tank began to move; previously he had been keeping order by giving single shots over the prisoners' head from the turret and these shots were coming unpleasantly close to me. When he speeded up his engine and put the men to the double, I crossed the lane and got through a gap in the hedge held open for me by two men. There were 4 or 5 there. I had looked down the lane and saw a crowd of men at the corner where the Ambulance was but am quite certain that there were no wounded laying between me and the ambulance to my right or in the lane to my left.

We went through two fields and came to a third field about 40 yards square with a crop about 18 inches high. There we found the M.D., one wounded man (2 bullets in the ankle) and about 6 others.

I borrowed the stars from the MD for my tunic. He agreed with me that we could do nothing before dusk and insisted that we carry the wounded man.

Soon after I heard the tank moving - it was the first time I had heard a tank, on the move and it sounded to me as if it was in the field between us and the village and coming toward us. I signed to the men to go flat and did so myself: they just kept sitting and evidently knew better than I did what the tank was doing. When it stopped I said: "Let's go over to the far corner of the field" and did so, but only 4 or 5 men followed - those who had been with me in the lane. We went to that corner and sat down and I got the map out and began to study it.

I was about 2 yards from the men, head pointing toward the field we had come, through. I had realised my position and felt that if my uniform was such as to get me arrested by our own troops, as on the previous day, it would probably result in my being shot, at sight if taken prisoner by the Germans: I had an officer's pass but this had I think a note, at the bottom that I was temporarily in civilian clothes. And I was still more anxious and worried about my wife.

Later, looking through the bottom of the hedge about 40 yards away from me, I saw what I took for 2 Germans following each other. I signalled the men behind me to be silent and to lie down, but they took little notice or did not understand. I had seen that the 2 men were not Morgan, and Vernon who were both wearing trousers.

I just got scared stiff, turned round, back to the enemy and went flat with my head level with the men; I told them to get flat and to hide their faces, as I knew that pink faces show up more than anything else. I was definitely scared stiff and showed it - utter cowardice, which has no excuse. Though I think I should have behaved otherwise, if I had not had the fatigue of the time since Saturday and the anxiety about my wife and about my own uniform. The idea of our two boys being left in England helpless and homeless with their father and mother dead was terrifying me.

Nothing happened and either the two Germans cleared off, or it was a cow – I do not think so; if it was, it only makes my position worse.

I ought to have posted the men as sentries round about instead of staying idling as a group. Continued to study the map, and to learn it by heart as much as possible.

The men told me, quite early on that men had been wounded I think in the village. I said that we could do nothing for them as they would be taken prisoners by the Germans at once and looked after by them. I jumped to this conclusion at once and did not think that anything else was possible.

Went on studying the map and also looking out through the hedges from time to time and I felt certain that there must be men in the village, who would come out, when the Germans were clear.

I decided that, as the German attack was apparently in the direction Arras - St Omer, we ought to follow such a direction towards the coast. The map shown that by going slightly west of north we would get the cover of the forest of Licques and Guines on the way to Calais. I decided on that and found that we would probably have to do 35kms during the night to be sure of being ahead of the Germans.

About dusk we moved back across the field to join the MO and the others. I ordered my men to leave their rifles as I felt that we should travel light as we had a wounded man, to carry. I did not like the men to smash them- another mistake.

We joined the others and I should talk about the direction to follow - 3 or 4 fingers left to the Pole star. I told the MD that we should have a job to carry the wounded man 35km but he insisted on it and it was of course agreed. I had previously counted up my cash with a view to leaving half of it with the RASC men to help out over the few days probably required before the situation straightened out again.

It was then, I think, that the CSM and other men from the village turned up; he reported X men killed and Y men wounded, saying that with our wounded men that made Z men wounded. He went on to say that my car had been taken and all the others, except perhaps one smashed up. I did not gather from his report that wounded men were still lying out. Then I think an ambulance turned up – the MD had sent a man down and the Germans had left one ambulance intact. The MD, two orderlies and the wounded men went off at once in it.

The CSM may have turned up after the ambulance had left: I cannot be sure of this. We went out of the fields on the open ground and there I gave the direction orders: my idea was to lead the party but to give them this direction in case we got split up.

In the middle of this, Capt. Aston turned up. The CSM reported to him again and I told him my idea. He agreed with the idea but said that the men must divide themselves into several groups of two or three and go for it like that. He sent such groups off at short intervals and eventually he and I were left.

Aston had a look round and then he and I left going straight across country. Later we found the men bunching up toward us but Aston said it did not matter, as he wanted to take their names. So later on, in a field on bright moonlight, he took names and sent the men off again.

Within a few hundred yards we came to a road, field on the other side and then a narrow brook. Many men were there. We crossed the brook but found that there was a wider stream fast deep and strong a bit further on with a road and houses just beyond it. Aston decided it was too risky to cross there and he took me upstream along the road; we struck off to our right toward the straw again but touched marshy ground and also got a "Halt"

from some sentry - probably German. Returned again to first field- several small groups still about there and Aston told me to wait while he spoke to them. Then he took me downstream across fields and when we had gone some distance I said "What about those men in the stream? He replied, "I gave them their orders and in any case it is too late to go back now".

We went on and eventually crossed probably some 2 miles from the first place when we reached the stream.

Aston, who got through to England eventually, can tell our subsequent adventures and our plans.

I cannot believe it to be possible that about 22 men (of whom about 12 came from the village) would move off without a protest if they had realised that men were being left behind wounded and needing attention. Aston, I am sure, did not realise it, nor I either - we never even discussed the question during the three weeks or so we were together.

23/2/44

Since writing the foregoing, I have suffered untold misery for the accusation of murder and theft has been taken up by the white men also, who repeat it night after night. So on the 6th, I had an idea and wrote to my mother-in-law at Amiens telling her of this accusation and asking her to get into touch with Arthur Harstrich who would then make enquiries at the Société Générale to find out if there is anything against me. But I doubted if my letter would be allowed to go through by the English M.D.'s or the German censor at Lamsdorf, so I also asked the German doctor here - a lady doctor- if she could get an enquiry put on foot in order to ease my mind. This accusation, so false and unjust, is going to drive me mad. I am put to sleep nightly and then told not to worry about it, but it crops up again the next day from the nigger and again at night before I am put to sleep. I am given "talking medicine" and the details of all my life are so known to all however private they may be.

In January, I had another attempt at suicide by cutting my throat with a Gillette blade but that is not big enough to go as deep as the artery, so I just lost a lot of blood and that was all.

I shall not try again, for I have made three main tries and failed, and also failed twice when I ran my head against the wall- heads are hard to break.

If only I could be free of this accusation I would be a happier man.

For 1940, they will insist on saying that I told the Sgt Major that we would return to the stream. I can not remember even seeing him again after he followed us on our first reconnaissance to the left (upstream); if he also returned to the field, then he would have asked Aston and not me. But they will not accept this story.

There is also a story about Sergt Twizell, whose son is here.

It is said that I left him in the mud when he was wounded in the lung in June 1917 and that he got mustard gas half an hour later and eventually died on 11/11/1919 from it. I have already written to my wife about this at the end of January, for it is said that my father has recognized my responsibility and has paid £100 or £400 to young Twizell.

Questioning goes on nightly by snoring under blankets and they keep contradicting themselves, first of all accusing me of murder and robbery and then telling me they don't