

# World War II. Belsen: Hell on Earth?

ARMY FORM A8022

## ANTI-GAS

### I. Personal Decontamination.

C.O.F.E.D.O.

- Immediate action**—can be done on the move.

**Cotton waste**—Remove free liquid on exposed skin.

**Ointment**—Rub vigorously into exposed skin for 10 minutes.

**Evacuants**—If advised, take, remove and renew.

If possible to be done, doiler cover or on "clean" ground.

**Cycling**—(Not necessary for a few small drops.)

Wipe off free liquid on cape.

Remove or cut away contaminated clothing.

Rub ointment into skin.
- Detectors**—

NAME AND DESCRIPTION OF ATTESTATION

18/33 RAWLINGS  
E. J. JACK

4-1-415

of the town of

County of

at

Place at birth

Number at birth

Profession

On

18-10-38

18-10-17

Supplementary Reserve.

Army Reserve Section D.

Strike out those inapplicable.

years in the Reserve

with the Colours and

former

No.

ment

of

ature of Soldier

*Rawlings*

DESCRIPTION OR ENLISTMENT.

Height 6 ft 3 in. Weight 174 lbs. Feet 11

Maximum Chest 38 in. Complexion *Dark*

Eyes *Blue* Hair *Dark*

Distinctive Marks and Minor Defects

M.M.6

ROYAL ARMY

Found

Defects or

enquired in



Date

Initials of M.O.

Form A 8000 ORIGINAL

## Road Traffic Act

### CERTIFICATE OF PASS OF COMPETENCE

(Military personnel, including Army Reserve)

Army No. 881337

Rank B.S.M.

Name RAWLINGS, E. J.

Unit 2149 / B. P.T. RES. R.A. GROUP I

has been examined and has passed the test of competence to drive mechanically propelled vehicles prescribed for the Road Traffic Act, 1934.

*Rawlings*

An interview with Mr E. J. Rawlings.  
By Hannah Jackson.

# World War II.

## My Grandad's Story.

At three o'clock on the afternoon of September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, when my Grandad was 24, his boss at Morris motors in Cowley Oxford came into the work place and ordered that all of the members of the Territorial Army and the voluntary Reserve should report to their units. In his civilian clothes he went, only to have to return at eight p.m. that night in full army dress. Again he was told to return home as they were unsure what to do with them as there was no where for them to sleep.

Eventually 249 Battery were marched to the Carfax Assembly Rooms in Central Oxford where they were given two blankets and a ground sheet, and spent the night on the floor.

From there they were taken to Walton Hall in Wellborne. By this time war had been declared and the soldiers knew they had a tough time ahead of them. Life was pleasant but soon they were on the move again to <sup>Fawley</sup> Forley to look after oil tanks so they couldn't be sabotaged. They then moved again to Glasgow

and then over to Northern Ireland. By now it was late 1940 and the war had been going on for over a year.



My Granddad's pay book, driving certificate and Gas information sheet.

In late Spring 1942, after two and a half long years in Northern Ireland they returned to England to a little village called Westburg Holt near Colchester.

As the war progressed the regiment found themselves at Tilbury Docks in Camp S1 where they

mounted vehicles onto landing crafts and were responsible for feeding the Polish Refugees who were being sent across from Europe.



above - his bag for  
his mess tin, his  
bag for his  
haversack rations,  
his housewife and  
his dog tags - RAWLINGS  
EJ CE - 887337  
right - his mess tin.



In late September, early October 1944 they were finally sent across to France as reinforcement troops. When they landed at Dieppe at midnight they were greeted by crowds of French women and children crying out 'cigarette pour papa'!

From there they travelled to Weert in Holland where they took over from the Argyle and Southland Highland Royal Artillery. They now had two batteries of tanks drawing 17lb anti-tank guns with 25lbs of limbers and each gun had a quod - a four wheeled drive vehicle which carried the ammunition and about six spare gunners. From there on they became part of 8<sup>th</sup> corp - the 'white knight'.

The column - of which my Grandad was at the tail end of, advanced into Germany. Their first job was to protect the building of the longest Bailey Bridge - which was eighteen hundred yards long at Genep. As soon as the bridge was complete they moved with the British Army to Wesel where they crossed the Rhine.

Following the 30 corp column which was commanded by General Horrocks they advanced forwards, - pushing the Germans backwards - river to river. The column was lead by the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne division.

As they advanced into Germany my Grandad had to act as troop officer as well as troop sergeant.

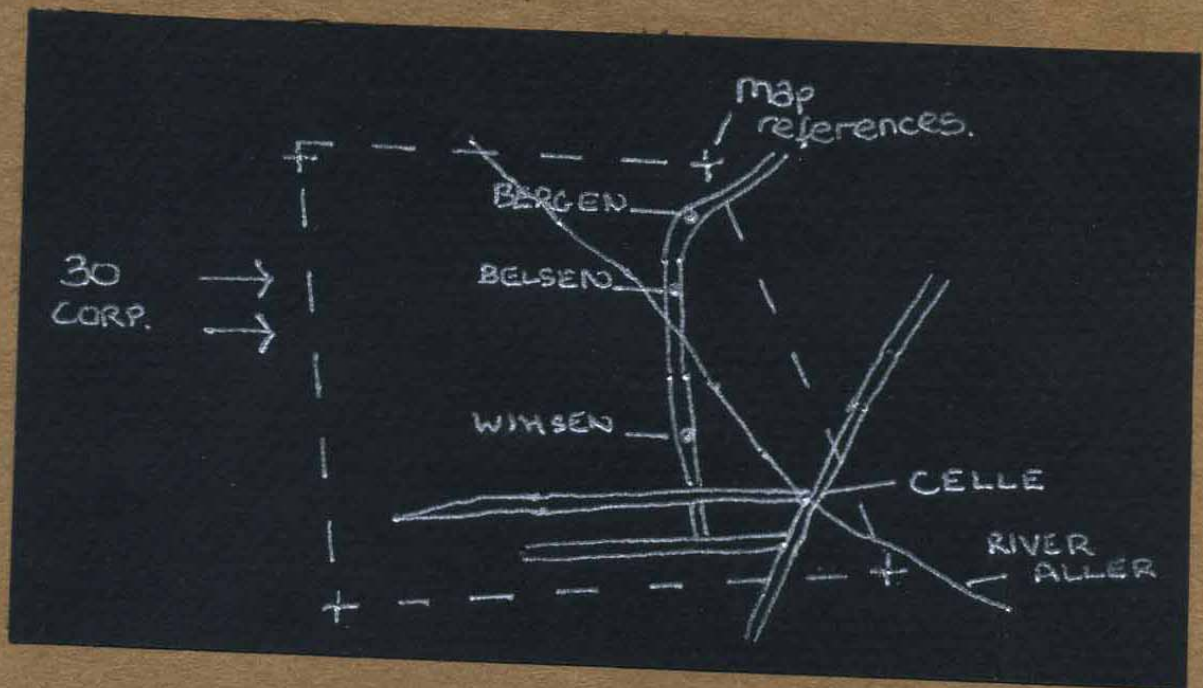
of 'C troop' as their troop officer who was Scottish had been placed in a Scottish Regiment.

This meant that instead of being in the jeep at the back of 'C troop' column he was in the Bren Gun carrier at the front.

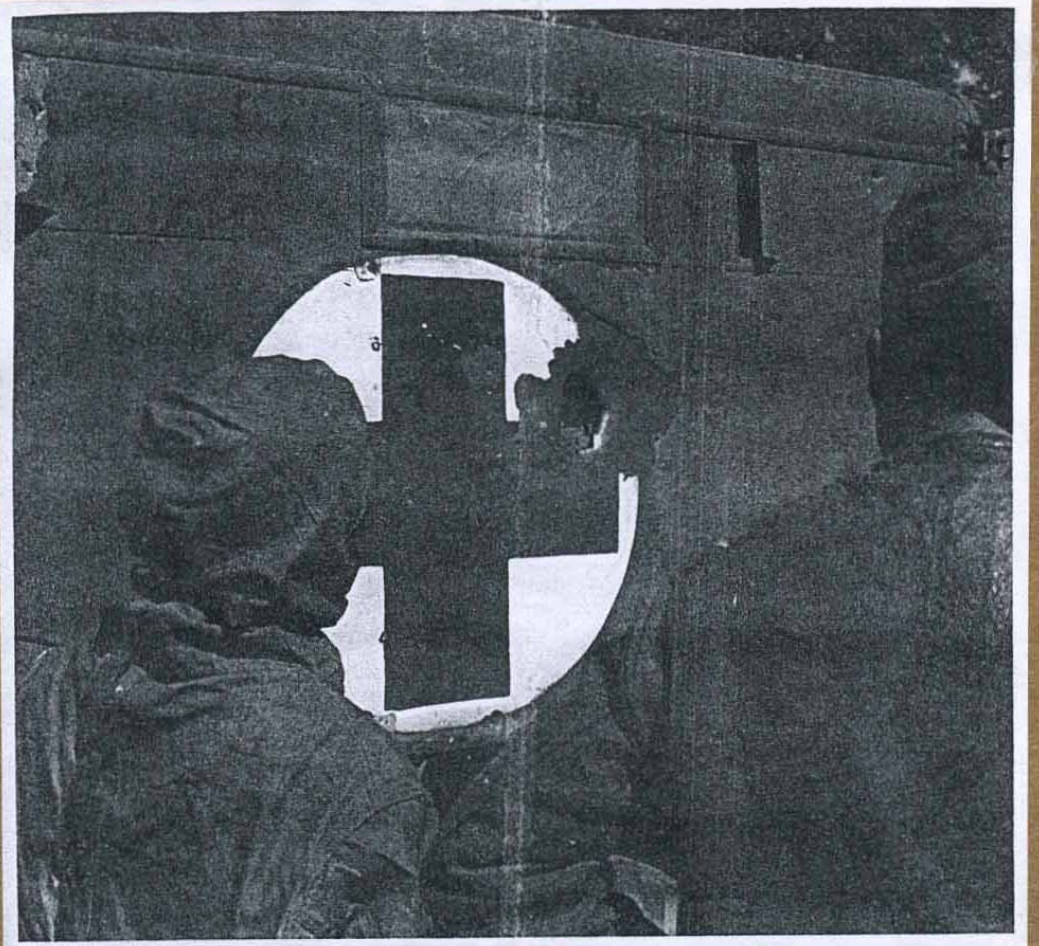
Soon they reached Osnebruk where they protected the bridge there. They then advanced further - pushing the Germans towards the river Auer. By this time it was Spring 1945 and the war would soon be over.

At the River Auer a deputation of German Army Officers came through the German lines carrying a white flag. They explained how they were close to Belsen Concentration Camp which they explained had some 60,000 prisoners of which about 20,000 were already dead. They said that the camp was full of typhus fleas and how if the British let the prisoners free they would spread typhus all over Germany and the rest of Europe therefore the British soldiers would also take it home.

An agreement was negotiated where there would be four map references within which no fighting would take place and so the British could have free passage to Belsen and across to the River Auer where a bridge would be provided by the Germans.



above - a rough  
 map to show  
 the four map  
 references.  
 right -  
 although  
 there was  
 suppose to  
 be no fighting  
 no one told  
 the Luftwaffe!



In the meantime a battalion of 1000 Germans - the Wehrmacht would be left surrounding Belsen camp so no one could escape. They would stay for six days, after which they would move east and prepare to fight the British as soon as they had crossed the two far eastern map references.

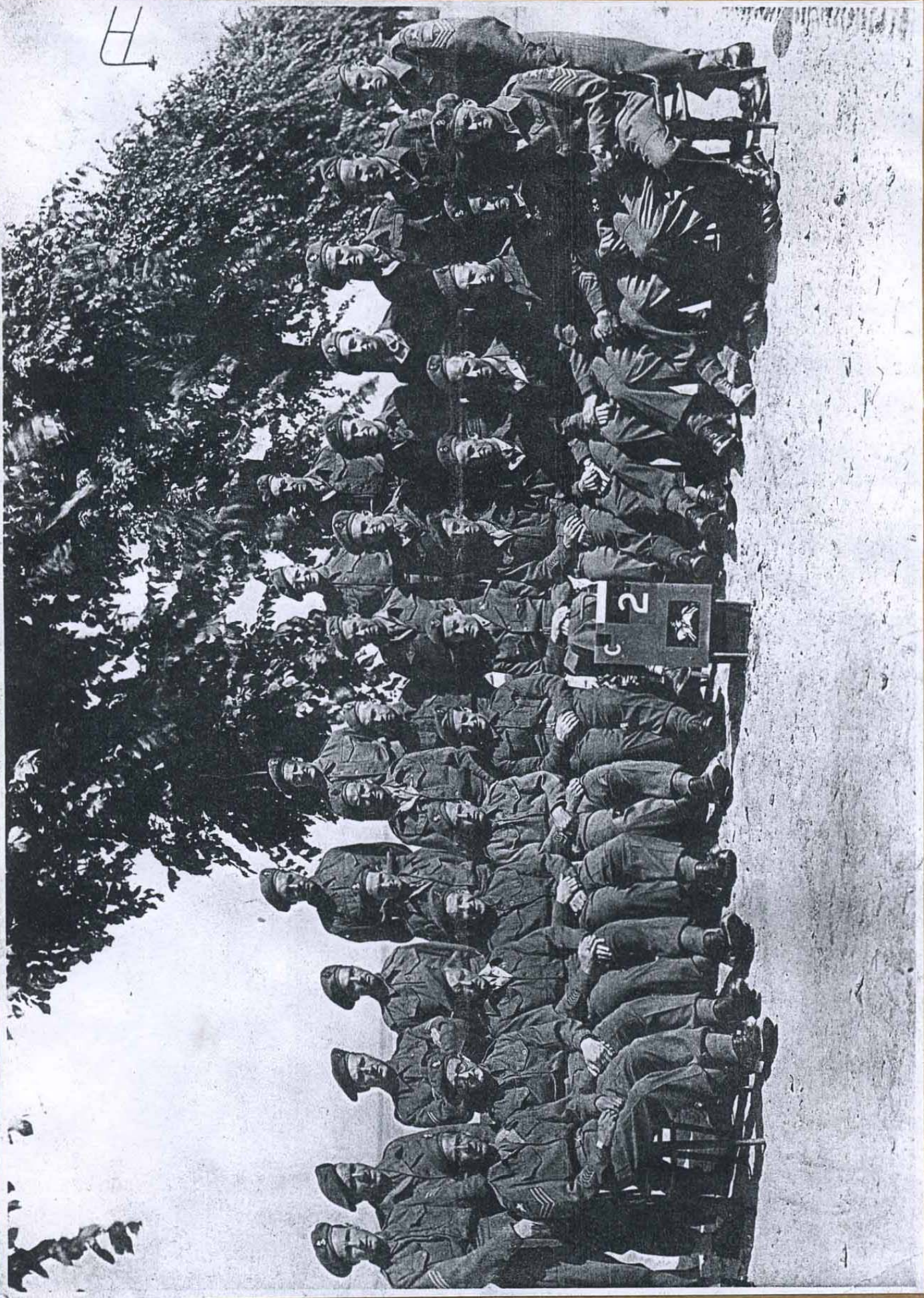
The camp consisted of a number of sheds, a small prison and fields where mangel wurzels - the prisoners only food were grown. When the British arrived, trenches had already been dug for the dead which were being piled up.

In one shed the soldiers found un-opened Red Cross parcels. They couldn't give the contents out as there wasn't enough to go round as it would create a riot. In one of the other sheds was the belongings - suitcases and bags of the prisoners. News soon spread and everyone rushed to find their things. My Grandad fired his hand pistol into the air but they continued to search and so he left them to it.

The smell from the camp was horrible as they entered and apparently it made him feel physically sick. There was no toilet or washing facilities and women washed themselves in black water from a fire tank.

That evening 'A troop' - consisting of 46 men was sent in to Belsen camp to keep the peace





C troop ~ my Grandad is in the centre of the middle row.



My Granddad ~ the troop sergeant is in the middle. Behind him is the  
Scottish troop officer who my Granddad took over from. On either side of  
him are four gun sergeants.

as many of the 'in-mates' were getting excited as they thought that they were soon to be freed.

The next morning 'C troop' (where my Grandad was troop sergeant and un-officially troop officer.) was sent in to calm everyone down. Before entering the death-camp anti-louse powder was pumped down the collars of the British soldiers. It may be due to this that no soldier from this troop died of typhus.

They went in with my Grandad still posing as troop officer in the Bren Gun carrier at the front. They drew to a halt in the middle of the camp and my Grandad had his hand holding to the edge to stabilise himself. Suddenly a French man in the crowd kissed his hand. His immediate reaction was to draw it away but the man asked if he could get a message to his sister in London. Willingly he sent a note to his sister and later received this reply - see next page.

Unfortunately by this time they had left and he couldn't help them so he wrote back commenting on how well and fit they looked and apologising that he couldn't do more.

The letter read:-

Dear sgt Rawleys,  
God bless you for the good news you have sent to us.

We have indeed been exceedingly anxious to hear some news about Joseph and Albert, our brothers. Now you can imagine how overjoyed we were to hear that they are alive. We have informed immediately their wives and children in Paris about same.

Would it be too much to ask you whether it is possible to help them in anyway? They are indeed good and decent men. Can we communicate with them by any means. P.T.O.

If you see them again may we ask you to give them our love and tell them we are longing to see them again.

May we have the pleasure of seeing you whenever you are in London. Thanking you again for your kindness.

If you see them again, may we ask you to give them our love & tell them we are all keeping well & longing to see them again.

May we have the pleasure of seeing you whenever you are in London.?

Thanking you again for your kindness,

Yours sincerely  
M. Weisbart

the letter.

yours sincerely M Weisbart.

PRINROSE  
1950

M. WEISBART  
24, Northways,  
College Crescent,  
London, N.W.3.

Dear Sgt. Rawley,

God bless you for the good news you have sent to us. We have indeed been exceedingly anxious to hear some news about Joseph & Albert, our brothers. Now, you can imagine how overjoyed we are to hear that they are alive. We have informed immediately their wives & children in Paris about same.

Would it be too much to ask you whether it is possible to help them in any way? They are indeed good & decent men. Can we communicate with them by any means?

A.T.O.

As well as the British soldiers walking around the Nazi S.S. - Schultz Staffel ~ the special army were also walking free.



My Granddad assisting in the searching of the S.S.

Joseph Kramer - known as the 'Beast of Belzen' was kept in his office under arrest yet his female equivalent - Irma Grese was kept with the females. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day they were taken prisoner and were put in the brick built prison in the camp which

consisted of a hall and about two small cells. That night, when it was my granddad's job to lock up, one man killed himself by putting his belt around his neck, pushing an eyelet onto the opening catch of the window and sitting down.

The next thing to be done was to return the German battalion of Wehrmacht which surrounded the camp to the German Army so they could start fighting again. The British Army supplied them with transport as 8<sup>th</sup> corp prepared to shoot anyone that tried to desert.



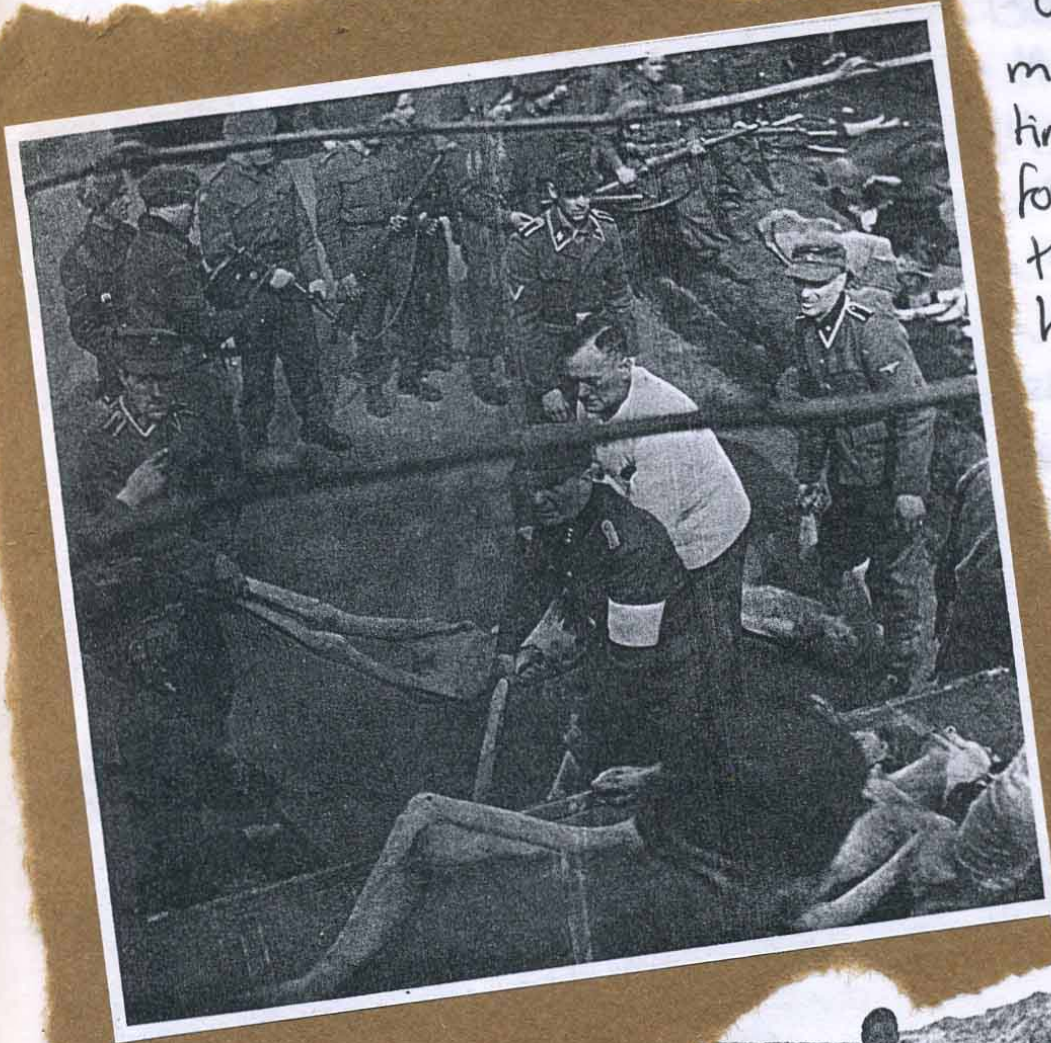
The prisoners begin to smile.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> day a shipment of tins of American food arrived. There were three types - one containing meat and vegetables, one had biscuits yet no one ever found out what was in the third! These tins were handed out three tins to every pair. The thing that still puzzles grandad is how they opened the tins as the soldiers had tin openers on their army knives but no one asked to borrow a tin opener yet they still managed to open the tins.

'B troop' had to start burying the dead and so using a trailer provided by the British Army the male S.S had to bury them for two days in



The  
dead  
bodies.



in large trenches. This made them extremely tired and so for the following two days the female S.S. guards had to do the same. Eventually they all died of Typhus

above - the bodies being loaded onto the trailers. right - a mass grave.





By this time they had been in Belzen for ten days and it had been decided that they were needed to guard the bridge over the river Elbe so the British could continue advancing Eastward, to cut off Schteswig Holstein. But Grandad now thinks that this was to stop the Russians who, even though they were allies had taken countries like Finland and would have continued to take Denmark and Norway as part of Russia. In this way he felt that they were worse than the Nazis.

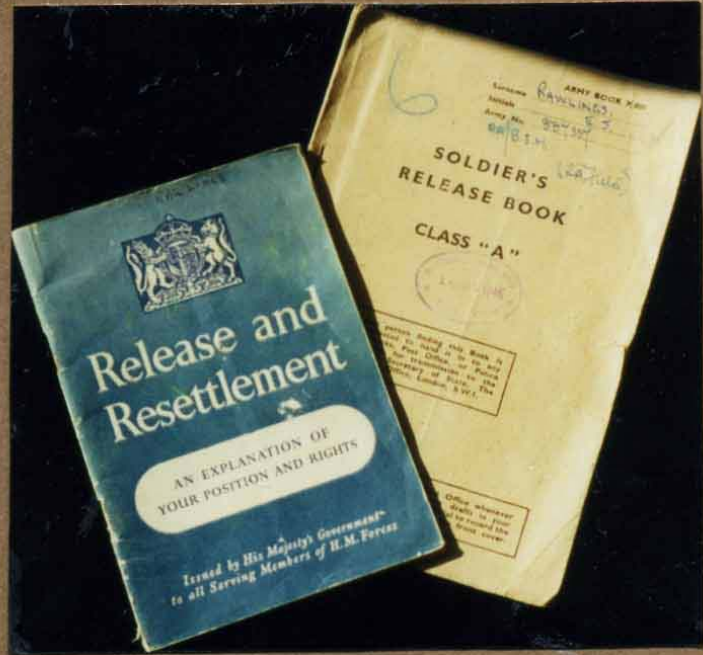
The command of Belzen was passed to an Anti-aircraft regiment of 600 men. When the S.S were handed over to the regimental sergeant major he asked Grandad for the guard report. He graciously pointed out that they were at war and not in England anymore!

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1945 the war against Germany ended. Although we were still fighting Japan until September the war for my Grandad was over and it was time to head home. In December 1945 he finally arrived home and immediately quit the army after two months of being a paid acting Battery Sergeant Major.



Left - A Battery sergeant major's badges for the left arm.

Below - release book and release and resettlement rights booklet.



Left - thanks - giving service booklet and letter of thanks from field Marshal Montgomery.

# Medals and Badges.



above - medal ribbon worn after the war and an oak leaf which should be sewn to the ribbon.

Right - top - France and Germany Star.

middle left -

defence medal

middle right -

1939-45 war

medal bottom - 1939-45

star.

Left - TA medal for 6 years of efficient service in wartime service engraved 881337 SJT

E. J. Rawlings. And a TA lapel worn when in civilian clothes.





Left-top badge was worn by my Grandma throughout the war and a larger version was worn on the cap before the introduction of the beret. It reads 'everywhere' 'where right and glory lead'.  
-bottom badge was worn on a magenta diamond on Grandad's cap when he was a Battery

Sergeant Major.

Remembering.

### Were you in 249 Battery?

ON April 15, 1945 there happened one of the most extraordinary and in the event traumatic events that can ever have happened in the history of the Oxfordshire Yeomanry.

On that day, the first unit to enter the Nazi concentration camp at Belsen, Germany, and take control from the camp's CO, Von Kramer and his SS troops, was 249 Battery, Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars (Oxfordshire Yeomanry) known also as 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, RA TA.

The Battery's strength was about 200 and as a result of the 249 intervention at Belsen, the Battery Commander, Major B Barnett was made an OBE.

Major Barnett, now retired, would like anyone who was in 249 Battery, to get in touch with him.

The reason for this is that a French general who was incarcerated in Belsen is organising the building of a memorial to those who died in the notorious camp.

It is planned to have a ceremony in Paris on March 23, 1994 and Major Barnett together with anyone who was in his Battery at the time are invited to attend. The general is prepared to meet some of the costs of anyone going to Paris such as meals and accommodation.

Surviving members of 249 (largely recruited from the Oxford and Banbury areas) who took part in the camp's liberation are asked to contact me urgently.

T E Nicholls  
Hon Sec, Oxf-Yeo CCA  
2 Juniper Close  
Banbury, Oxon

Thursday  
January 13<sup>th</sup>  
1994  
Oxford  
Journal.

Some people can't forget the horrors, others choose not to as it was such a major part of their lives. One thing is for sure ~ Grandad hasn't stopped talking about it!



'for the first time during the war I felt I  
was doing something good'

*E. J. Rawlings*

Mr E. J. Rawlings  
15<sup>th</sup> June 1946.