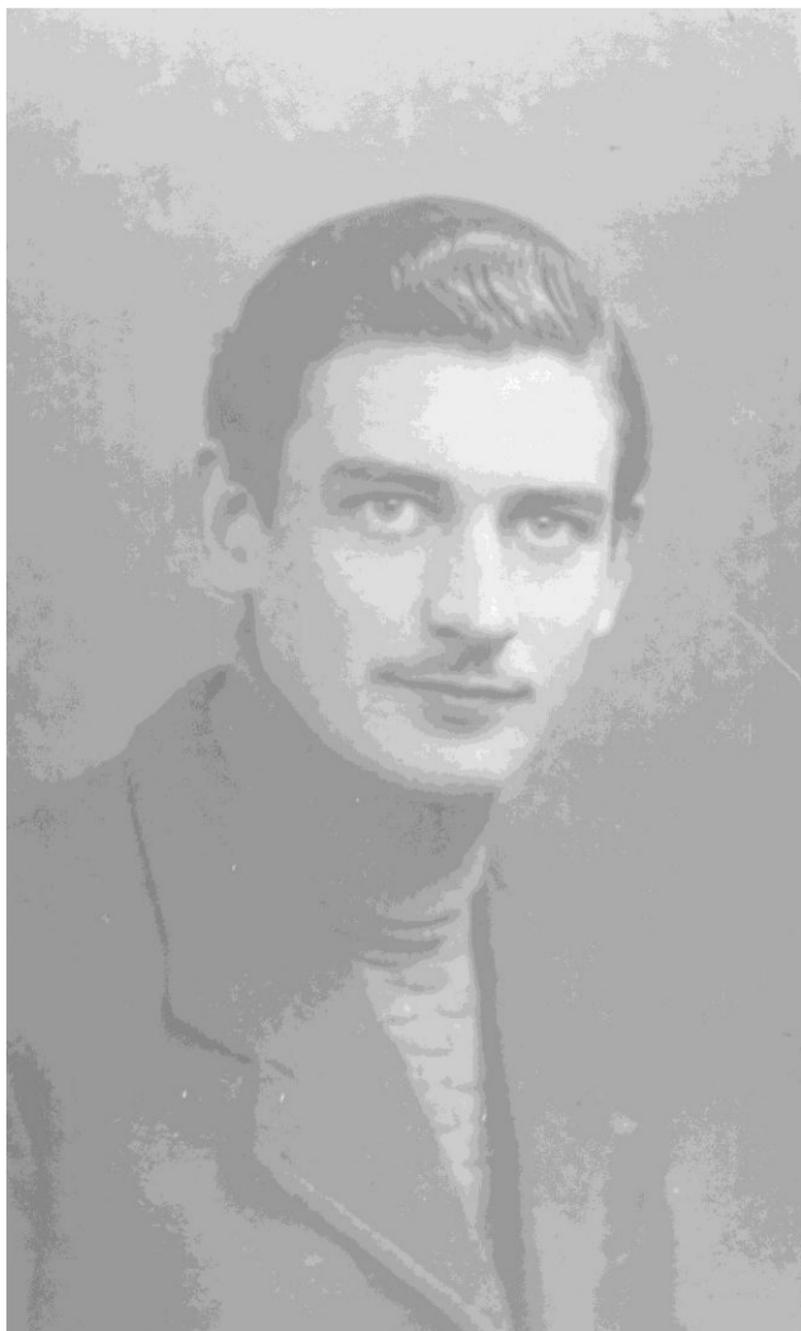


4.5 years

David Taylor

For my children
and their children



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1. *Before the war*

In our house there was a photo of Dad in his Black Watch uniform, complete with kilt and sporran. At the beginning of the First World War, he joined the Black Watch as a private soldier and did his basic training in Catterick but, before he could be sent to France, they recalled all teachers because they were needed at home.

There was a special deal for teachers to go back to University when they were demobbed and another special deal which said that teachers could take a thing called Article 39, which would be recognised as equivalent to a B.Sc, so Dad took this. He was a Headmaster by the time it was our turn, my brother and mine, to go into uniform.

Dad could not afford University for both my brother George and me at the same time so I had been working in the tool design office of the National Steel Foundry for a few years, while George went to Dundee University, when it became understood by everyone that a war was coming. My Dad found me at around ten o'clock one night and told me that unless I joined the Territorial Army by midnight I would be conscripted,

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and he asked what I wanted to do. I said I didn't mind if I was conscripted but I wondered whether I was in a reserved occupation. We chased up to my boss's house only to find that he and his family were in bed asleep, so it was left at that, but then, about a week later, my Uncle Willie, who had connections with the local Territorial Branch of the Royal Signals, told my mother that he could get me into this branch rather than taking a chance of being conscripted into an Infantry mob, and that is the way I joined the Signals.

George, who was two years older, would not have been conscripted at this time, but he decided to join up. I was under the impression that University was not for him. Naturally, with his background in Chemistry, he preferred the Medical Corps and he showed up home one week-end to announce that he had joined up for seven years. I said, 'Are you out of your mind?!' Everybody else was joining up for the duration. His answer was, 'It's going to last that long anyway.' As it turned out, he was right on the money.

2. *Home on leave for New Year, Jan, 1940*

George and I both got home for the New Year of 1940, on a week's leave, so Christmas had already passed, mine being spent in Badajos barracks, Aldershot and I would guess that George spent his where I went to visit him once, in Crookham. The men there were in what were known as 'spiders', although I seem to remember they only had four legs, coming from a central hall.

I doubt if I saw him for more than a few minutes at home; he had his girl, Nettie, and I had mine, Gladys, so that accounted for most of the week. I think we only went home to sleep and get breakfast. I can't remember any discussions with either of my parents other than army stuff. I already knew that this would be embarkation leave, and we left for France very shortly after that.

Because I could ride a motor cycle and the officer who was allocated one could not ride, I was given the bike to ride to Southampton and still had that bike up till we left the Maginot Line. After that, I was doing the job I was supposed to be doing, 2nd operator on a wireless truck.

3. *Travelling through France*

Went to France, Le Havre, very cold winter, no water, pipes frozen. We were actually read the riot act outside in the middle of the night for behaving badly when the officer and Sgt Major came into the warehouse to find out why we were not starting our vehicles every two hours. Somebody reached up from the top bunk and jerked out the wiring for the lights, and then every epithet you ever heard and a few extra were shouted in the dark. Of course, they could not identify anyone so we were told to get outside and that was it. The only words I can remember are, 'You can be shot.'

We moved around a bit. The names I remember are Lillers, Bolbec, and then Stienwerk on the Belgian frontier. By that time we were split into our signal sections, 'K' Section and attached to our Brigade, 153 of the 51st Highland division.

Around February or March, we proceeded as a full convoy down to Hagondange, a steel making town in Alsace Lorraine, which was in the Saar, and which was behind the Maginot Line. After a week or so there, we moved up to the Maginot and into the area of international outposts, and did whatever we were

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supposed to do, including learning by the sound where the shells were going. We were in the area known as the Black Forest and German Patrols would infiltrate our positions at night, led by dogs that were trained to avoid human contact.

Then the German army broke through on the Belgian frontier, so we had to high-tail it up to Abbeville where we were doing well and even pushed the Germans back out of Abbeville. Unfortunately, the French retreated on our left flank and we had to back up, and head for Le Havre - Dunkirk was all over by this time. As a radio operator who could also do shorthand, I used to write out the news from the BBC and post it outside the truck. This is what I wrote. 'It is now official that the last of the British Expeditionary has left France'. About two days later, I wrote, 'It is now known that a famous highland fighting regiment is still fighting in the Abbeville area'.

As we withdrew to try to reach Le Havre we were cut off by Rommel's tanks around St. Valery en Caux and that is when I was captured.

4. *Scarpering with Ken*

We marched and marched and marched for three days and I had had enough. None of the Kirkcaldy bunch would ‘scarper’ with me as they all wanted to get somewhere where we would be allowed to send a message home. I did not see it like that and finally got one of our section to agree to go, Ken Coffin, a Dorset lad who had been conscripted and posted to the Signals as our mechanic. The march was terrible, nothing to eat, which I could handle, but thirst was the worst thing.

Anyhow, we took off (a story in itself) and got into a forest nearby where we met up with three French soldiers also on the loose, and we set up a camp hidden in the woods. There was all sorts of equipment nearby from an abandoned French artillery unit. Ken's Father owned a garage in Dorset and Ken knew cars, trucks and motor cycles. We got two motor cycles going and petrol from an abandoned tank and were able to get around the area in search of food. No problem.

I took Merlin (one of the French Guys) on the back of the bike to a field where there were cows, which he knew how to milk, and there were lots of wild strawberries around. This was a daily occurrence and

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naturally we had strawberries and cream whenever we wanted. We got to know a youth from the village and he would bring us food, and that's where I learned to kill and pluck a goose. There was also quite a bit of dry goods beside the artillery unit stores - rice, potatoes and a barrel of French issue wine.

The time frame for this would be:- captured, I think June 12th 1940, three days later escaped, lived in the woods about a week then were warned by the kid that the Germans were coming to salvage the French equipment, and we moved all our gear that we had collected, to another forest not very far away. Two trips on the bikes to move every thing, including tents etc. By this time, the young guy had spoken to two daughters of the farm in the village and he brought them to our camp, complete with baked goods for us poor guys, and a duck. Merlin was the typical country boy who knew how to cook anything, so he and I were good friends because I was also brought up in the country and we made a good team. The two girls invited Pierre to come to the farm and he returned and said we were all going to live at the farm.

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Pierre went back and the next day the farmer came to our camp with a horse and wagon, loaded all our stuff and covered it up and we rode the wagon back to the farm. It so happens that there was a Yugoslavian woman driving a yellow Salmson sports car, who was bringing dry goods from Paris to the farm and taking back butter and eggs and chickens, (early black market). She carried a message to Pierre's wife in Paris, who showed up with her father at the farm.

After a day or two, Pierre, his wife and father-in-law took off for Paris along with Bobbie (the third member of our group). Somehow or other, by searching some of the bodies that were still lying around, they had papers that stated that they were unfit medically or what is known as 'prestataires'. That left Ken and me around the farm to eat some marvellous meals, and drink cognac in the evening, some of the other villagers bringing goodies for the poor Anglais.

Then the Yugoslavian lady showed up again (Madam Cheret, whose husband was Fred Cheret, a well known jockey) and it was decided we were all going to Paris in her car, except that we were going to make it

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appear that she had picked us up, so we left the farm on bicycles that Ken and I fixed up, and headed on the way.

Then along came Madam Cheret and we tied the bicycles on the back of the car and squeezed in. We did not get very far when we were stopped by a German patrol. Madam Cheret stopped as fast as she could, a good way behind the patrol car, got out and walked to meet the German officer. Then she produced the papers which she carried, signed by a high-ranking officer saying that as a Yugoslavian she could go wherever she wanted and had a petrol allowance to do it. He read the paper, stepped back and saluted, Madam Cheret walked back to the car and we drove on, reaching Paris that same evening and going to Bobbie's parents home. They moved us into a flat for the night and the next day Madam Cheret took us to her home.

A few days later, she found out where her husband was and had to go and see him and take some food and clothes, so she moved us to a friend's house. The friend was shacking up with an American, who was driving an ambulance for the American hospital.

During this time we visited the British Legion H.Q and scared them out of their wits. They expected

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German soldiers to walk in right behind us (we were in civvies since the farm). We then crossed the road to the American Embassy and the only help we got was advice to get to a seaport, hit a sailor over the head and steal his papers (assholes). Two years older, I might have done that. Then we had to move again and went to live with Bobbie's sister (Madame Bordes) who worked in an imprimerie, a print-shop, right opposite Notre Dame. Ken and I went in the Metro to the imprimerie where she worked, given instructions from Bobbie who did not want his parents to know. She then took us to her apartment and we lived there for a week or more.

We did some wiring jobs around the house, and that is the first time I ate horse meat from the butcher; it is very good when it is from a horse reared for meat. Sunday off, she showed us around the west bank where the artists are and up through Montmartre to the Eglise du Sacre Coeur, so we were standing there with German officers all around taking pictures - remember that Paris was an open city. Being able to read and speak French, I was able to read the posters going up all over that stated that anybody caught harboring British soldiers could be shot, so I told Ken that we had to get out of there, and

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Bobbie's sister agreed. By this time, we knew there was an un-occupied France and also that there was a zone 'non-occupé' (un-occupied) in the Pas de Calais, then a zone interdit (unauthorized) north of that on the channel, so we decided to go south.

Bobbie's sister's husband was in the navy and was in un-occupied France trying to get north and we were in Paris trying to get south. With some food from the sister, and a few instructions, we took the metro as far as we could go south, then walked and walked and walked. Middle of July, I would estimate.



