

Diary of Signalman Ray Small SCU (Special Communications Units) MI6 (Section VIII).

Born 20.12.23 in London.

Interest in radio began in 1937, when my father purchased an HMV radiogram which included short wave bands. Both my older brother Don – to become a Merchant Navy ‘sparks’, and later G3ALI – and myself, soon got very interested in listening to broadcast stations around the world, and then found the amateur bands. We both became keen SWLs. I took over the call, G3ALI, following the death of my brother after a hit-and-run in Minnesota in 1958.

Joined Midland Bank 17.2.41.

Called up 17.9.42. Started 6 weeks initial training at Chichester. Of squad of thirty, 28 posted to infantry units, 1 to engineers (ex.railwayman), and self to Royal Corps of Signals because of knowledge of Morse and interest in radio.

November 1942. Posted to 5th. OTB (Operators Training Unit) Slaithwaite, Huddersfield. Due to knowledge of Morse, sat on a side table with ex. Marine Operator bashing away to each other. After 2/3 weeks was posted out. Given railway warrant to Bletchley, Bucks, **“where you will be met”**.

November 1942

Arrived Bletchley station in the afternoon, and found a jeep or 15cwt with driver. After identification and getting on board, I asked “what sort of an outfit is this?”. Received the rather unhelpful reply “we don’t talk about that sort of thing here”. We drove off into the country, and eventually arrived at a camp which I soon learned was called “Gees”. I was interviewed, signed the Official Secrets Act, and then issued with blankets, a palliasse which I filled with straw, and was allotted a bunk in what was obviously a former horse stable, if a rather posh one.

I have remarkably little memory of these early days at Gees. I do not recall any military duties, we went out on exercises in the Packards, and did other training. It was shortly after this that I was introduced to the operating station at Windy Ridge, and joined the watches working on Ultra and other traffic to Stations in the Mediterranean area and elsewhere.

I think I remember 63 London, OCL Constantine, OBK Algiers, and ORF Tripoli. There were many others, and we were quite often given special listening duties for what we called ‘babies’, agents in Europe. Not often successfully, unfortunately.

The operating duties were, of course, right up my street, and the operating standards were first class. I remember one operator in particular whom I later discovered was called Hughie Shields. He was so fast it was almost impossible to write fast enough.

Much later, when I was out in Italy, I used to get him on from Whaddon. When that happened, and there was a fair bit of traffic, I used to borrow a typewriter from SLU as typing was easier than writing. There were frequent dances, and the many pubs in the area did a roaring trade. Our local was The Shoulder of Mutton in Little Horwood, but usually we were down in Bletchley where snacks were always available at the excellent Salvation Army canteen on Bletchley station.

June 19. 43. The sequence of events during this period are no longer clear. Suffice to say that in June, whilst on leave at home, I was sent a telegram asking me to report to 54 Broadway taking with me civilian clothes. A photograph was taken, and other formalities completed. I had to return the next day when they discovered I already had a passport.

25 June 1943. Saw three of us transported to Blackbushe airport where, in the evening, we boarded Dakota G-AGHF, and took off into the night. Several hours later we found ourselves coming in over a fully lit city, an unusual sight, and made a safe landing at Sacavem Airport, Lisbon. All the passengers disembarked, our passports stamped, and we were led through the airport terminal to a coach, passing the Lufthansa office on the way. We were taken to a large hotel where a good breakfast was thoroughly enjoyed by all. After breakfast we were taken back to the airport, re-embarked, and took off. The plane flew over the sea most of the way, and then we crossed a coastline which was obviously desert country.

We finally came into land at a sandy airfield that we discovered was just outside the historic city of Fez in Morocco. On disembarkation I stepped out from under the shadow of the wing, and it was like opening the door of a furnace. It was hot. The three of us were given a tent near the airfield, and the change of scene, after home, was extreme. Nearby was a natural spring or oasis, and at the lower level, women were busy doing the washing. Nearby was a large red stone fort, and perched on the corner turret was a big inhabited storks nest. On the ground there was an almost complete carpet of locusts. I had the impression there was a war between green and brown locusts going on, and you could not avoid walking on them.

A couple of days later we were airborne again, landing at Algiers, and were picked up and transported to the SCU5 station, OBK, which I had regularly contacted from Whaddon.

Algiers. The station, Sybil, was located on the 6th.floor of the King George V Hotel with the SLU office next door. Equipment was the Mark III transmitter and HRO receiver. The aerials were on the roof, and as the hotel was high above the town, the take-off to the UK was excellent. Our sleeping quarters were a nice house nearby.

It was whilst in Algiers, that an unfortunate incident happened. I had taken over the station in the morning when Whaddon came up with a message. On checking the log, I noticed the number did not check. There was one missing. I queried this, but the number was confirmed. I asked when the previous message had been sent, and I was given some time in the small hours.

Enquiries revealed that the missing number had been offered during the night, corrections had been requested, and a receipt (QSL) given. The night operator had no recollection of this, and it was assumed that he must have nodded off during the night and someone, presumably the Germans, had jumped in and accepted the message.

Despite this, when we left in October, we received a letter of congratulations and thanks from Lt. Gen. Sir Terence Sidney Airey Director of Military Intelligence, Middle East Command. My parents must have been rather confused at this time as my mail address was: L/Cpl. R. Small, c/o Squadron Leader Thompson, c/o Brig. Hirsch, G.S.I. (General Staff Intelligence), H.Q. , AAI, CMF.

October 1943. In October, we sadly left Algiers in a 15cwt., accompanied by a three tonner, bound for Tunis. The journey was somewhat eventful. Two of us were riding in the open 15cwt. Our driver lost the three tonner on the outskirts of Algiers, but we pressed on. Some hours later, the route became virtually devoid of traffic and extremely mountainous. We became very concerned and tried to convince the driver that this could not be right as we had been heading South for some time and should have been heading East.

We finally dropped out of the mountains onto a flat desert, and decided to turn back. At that point the engine packed up and would not restart. It was so hot we lay on the ground under the shade of the truck.

There was no traffic until late afternoon when a three tonner hove into sight heading north. It was loaded with about twenty men who looked like a road gang. They were happy to attach a chain and tow us back through the mountains.

The road twisted and turned with sheer drops, and passed through short tunnels cut out of the rock. The truck got faster and faster, egged on by the workers who were banging on the roof of the cab and shouting to the driver. Our driver kept under-steering on the hairpin bends, and the chain just picked us up and dumped us back on the road. Twice we clipped the rocks in the tunnels. I have never been so scared in my life.

However, we somehow survived, and they left us amid much cheering outside a small French army camp. The next day they repaired the 15cwt. and we headed back to the North where we rejoined the road to Tunis.

As all our paperwork was on the 3 tonner, we made our way to the Town Major in Tunis, and after many phone calls he found out where we should be and sent us on our way.

October 1943 to January 1944.

In Tunis, we were attached to Lord Tedder's Desert Air Force. Our station was located in a lovely chalet at La Marsa, just outside the city near Carthage. We slept in tents in an olive grove attached to the chalet, and just fifty yards from a gorgeous sandy beach. Between shifts, or visits to Tunis, we virtually lived on the beach. It was idyllic.

This was, however, a busy period.

In September, the Italians surrendered and the Italian fleet arrived in Malta. I was on the night shift on one occasion, and Whaddon came up and offered half a dozen or so 300 plus group ZZZZZ messages.

I had to dig the SLU officer out of bed although he thought I was pulling his leg. I have always assumed this was in connection with the Italian fleet surrender.

Also, at this time, the fighting in Italy was very tough indeed as the British 8th Army and the American 5th. Army, having firmly established themselves, renewed the offensive.

We had much traffic with other SCU stations. We also contacted our operators on the Anzio beachhead, and they had a very torrid time for a couple of months or so until a concerted break-out, coupled with a major frontal assault finally broke the German defences. Our Anzio station frequently had to close down and move as the German artillery kept apparently targeting them.

27 January 1944. For two of us, the beach life at La Marsa came to an end when, thanks to the U.S.A.F. we flew from Tunis to Naples. Well, we should have, but the plane diverted to Bari for some reason and we were told we would have to make our own way to Naples. This we did, thumbing lifts on a couple of American trucks. From Naples, via the town major again, we made our way to the magnificent Caserta Palace. This was the headquarters of Field Marshal H. R. Alexander Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theatre.

We had established ourselves on the top floor of one of the wings. Although a British HQ, there was an American presence, and we were indeed fortunate to be the only British personnel privileged to eat in the American mess.

The SCU/SLU general headquarters was at Torre del Greco, just South of Naples, but I only spent a few days there on arrival and departure from Italy. Our commanding officer was Lt. Col. K. MacFarlane. There was a Major Lloyd, Capt. 'Jan' Ware, and a Lt. Beardsmore. However, we saw very little of these gentlemen except on occasional fleeting visits.

Caserta Palace is an extraordinary place, but the real magnificence of it was not available to those of us who were there at that time, and I only appreciated what it was really like from various web sites very much later.

However, the gardens were beautiful and extended for about two miles. Down the centre were long lakes, cascaded at the far end. The lower lakes were big enough to take the occasional light seaplane.

We often went for long walks through the gardens, and on one occasion, beyond the gardens and round the side of a hill, we came across a small camp of vans, tents, and aials that screamed 'Bletchley'.

We wandered in and met a couple of guys we knew from home, and others we did not know. They were very surprised to see us, and us them. We had a bit of a chat and a brew, but I have no idea what they were doing there. We didn't ask, and they didn't ask us. That's the way it always was in the Firm.

Our period in Caserta coincided with the worst eruption of Vesuvius for 200 years. I feel privileged to have seen it. At night it was spectacular, with white-hot rocks spewing hundreds of feet into the air, and red channels of lava running down the side of the mountain. By day, the vast, billowing mass of black smoke rising 9,000 feet was awe-inspiring. Even more so on one day when there was a massive explosion and the black clouds of smoke rose to 16,000 feet. Altogether, the most spectacular sight you could see. We took a jeep up the mountain one day, and saw the lava slowly advancing along a village street, burning and swallowing everything in its path.

Mobile 1944. Following the breakout from Anzio, and the breaking of the Gustav Line, based on Monte Casino, we became mobile, following the advance. Our mobile operation consisted of six operators, two radio vans, the SLU RAF officers, their vans, and an MT section to transport our tents and equipment. Power was from Onan generators with Tiny Tims to charge the batteries. The transmitters were the successful MarkIII's, with HRO receivers, and wire aials. When HQ moved up, one radio van went ahead to set up, and the rest followed the next day.

We operated from Frascati, near Bolsena, and on August 8th we moved up to just outside Siena in a vineyard. The weather was very hot, but Siena had many facilities, and is an extremely historic and interesting town. We became friendly with a young Italian policeman and his wife, and spent many enjoyable evenings with them.

Hearing Florence had just been taken, two of us decided to hitch a lift there, and managed to get a lift in the back of an American flour truck going to the A.M.G. in Florence. We succeeded in evading the M.P.s checking the trucks crossing the Bailey bridge over the Arno.

As we wandered around, we were greeted like heroes, and had a good time. We were particularly popular at some market stalls where we were asked the English of the various goods. Managed to get several rolls of film for my camera which had been unobtainable for a long time. We caught the same truck back to Siena late in the afternoon.

The Germans were still fighting in the Northern suburbs, and there was the continuous roar of shellfire.

At this time, very good friends of mine were just outside Florence at General Mark Clark's American 5th. Army HQ. We took the opportunity to visit them up there as often as possible for magnificent meals and the PX shopping.

As summer turned to Autumn the weather changed dramatically. We had a series of the most terrific storms, which turned the camp site into an absolute quagmire, and there was no let up. In the end Squadron Leader Thompson decided we could not operate in conditions like that, and to our very great delight arranged for us to take over a lovely 18 room house in the town.

It was modern, beautifully decorated, hot and cold running water, and a smart tiled bathroom. I had my first hot bath since leaving home. The power suddenly failed one night and I went out to top up the generator. No petrol –someone had stolen two jerry cans full.

Jan.2nd.1945. After several months in Siena, we were on the move again, this time to Florence and the 15th. Army group. We stayed behind while some of the boys went ahead to set up, and we followed the next day.

On arrival, we were more than impressed. We were to be on the 5th floor of the M.A.T.A.F. building in the centre of the town immediately opposite the main railway station. We had a complete suite of WT room, cypher, bathroom, kitchen, and two bedrooms.

Tests had played havoc with the American radio systems, so the transmitters had to be four miles away at an American transmitter site. We now had to split shifts, two at the transmitters, and four at the station, and swap around as we wished. Wonderful Robertson Club in Florence, and plenty of shows, cinemas, etc., so we had everything we could want. As winter set in the advance ground to a halt, and our friends with the American 5th Army found themselves stuck in the Futa Pass, north of Florence, deep in snow for a lot of the time. Enterprising as ever, the PX stocked up with skis, and we availed ourselves of these as often as we could. I had not lost my touch.

9th.March 1945. Reported sick with jaundice and sent to 21 MFH. My pal, Don Simpson, joined me the following day with the same complaint. Hospital and nurses very nice indeed, and the diet of eggs, chicken, fruit, and ice cream was most acceptable. This RAF hospital became a bit full, so we were both moved to a South African hospital a mile or so away. Again, it was excellent. Overcrowding a problem once more, so on the 22nd we were taken to the airport and flown down to Rome, and then 30 miles to the British 99 General Hospital.

Again, it was excellent, located in the hills with lovely views. April 9th and we were given a fond farewell from the hospital with Sister Winters slipping us a bottle of beer each as we left.

However, after 30 miles, we ended up at 159 Transit Camp, and next day were put on a train to 4CRU at Arezzo. This was a large camp, and very military. Was issued with webbing kit, and found myself guard commander. Had the embarrassing situation of having to ask the guys on the guard, mostly seasoned infantry, how to assemble it all. I don't know what they thought.

April 16th. 1945. Finally rescued by one of the boys picking us up, and taking us to Siena where we were told we would not be going back to Florence. The following day we go up to Florence to pick up our gear and say our farewells, and return to Siena.

April 27th. 1945. Told that I would be taking a radio van and two more operators up to 8th. Army, and spend most of the day getting the van equipped and tested. Just about to leave when the trip was off as 8th Army were on the move again. Next day it was on again, and we set off after lunch. We stopped off at the NAAFI in Florence for a meal, and then embarked on tortuous mountain roads to Forli. Beautiful scenery.

We continued through Faenza to Imola, and at midnight we had to locate the 8th Army HQ, and then the SLU. This was achieved at 0130 when we opened the door of the existing radio van and met the astonished gaze of one of my best mates Geoff Panter.

Got to bed at 3a.m. and up again at 6a.m. as DAF and 8th Army were on the move again. We travelled for 65 miles to a new site about 10 miles South of Ferrara.

May 2nd. 1945. Great news that the German forces in Italy had surrendered and we were on the move again to a location in the region of Padua.

On the morning of the 4th, I was on the night shift and, in the early morning, was brewing up just behind the van when a figure came round the side. I looked up, and saw it was top brass.

I stood up, and he said, “don’t let me disturb you”. He asked if everything was OK, and if I liked it where we were. He wanted to know where I had been, and commented on the rapidly improving situation. We must have chatted for five minutes or more, and I had not even stood to attention. Very pleasant chap, and it was not until afterwards that I realised it was Lt. Gen. Sir Richard Loudon McCreery G.O.C. 8th Army Italy.

May 6th saw us on the move again to a village about 10 miles from Venice. People cheering us all the way, and we passed many truckloads of German prisoners. On May 7th we went into Venice sightseeing – what a wonderful city – and in the evening heard that all German forces in Europe had surrendered. We went down to the local village where the Vino shop was dishing out free drinks to all and there was much celebrating into the night. There was also a massive ‘firework’ display as the troops everywhere were firing off everything they could lay their hands on.

May 8th. 1945. VE DAY.

Several of us went into Venice again, and it was 3 o’clock in the afternoon, in the Piazza San Marco, that we heard a relay of Churchill’s victory speech. An Italian police band gave a concert, and there was much celebrating. In the evening we went to Mestre, and they already had the streetlights on the first we had seen for many months.

May 13th. 1945. On our way again for a 90 mile trip to Udine, North of Venice, and close to the Yugoslav border. Station and billets in a very large and smart suburban villa.

May 18th. 1945. This was a wonderful day. With another operator, two RAF Flight Lieutenants from the SLU and a driver, we took the staff car for a visit to Klagenfurt in Austria, a round trip of about 240 miles

through absolutely beautiful mountain scenery.

As soon as we crossed the frontier from Italy, the contrast was startling. Instead of dust and general chaos, everything was colourful and spotless. The houses were freshly painted in bright Tyrolean colours, the streets clean and tidy, and the people well fed, and nearly all dressed in the traditional Tyrolean dress, or in one uniform or another.

German troops were everywhere, driving trucks, and with no supervision. The route follows a lovely lake for about 25 miles, and, as it was very hot, everyone was in swimsuits, boating, and thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Klagenfurt, on the other hand, was a different story. The shops were all shut, and the town was firmly under the control of the Yugoslav forces. Sentries, both men and women, were on every street corner, armed to the teeth and swathed in bandoleers of cartridges. A formidable looking lot. The only newspapers were Yugoslav with ‘orders of the day’ from the town Kommandant. These were also posted all over the town.

This was all in the British control zone, and became a major incident. In the end, under dire threats from Britain and America, they withdrew late on the 20th. Back in Udine on the 28th we went to see the fly-past of the Desert Air Force. We had been attached to them, on and off, since the days in Tunis. Thirty squadrons took part, and it was a magnificent sight.

May 28th. 1945. On returning, I received the bad news that four drivers and I were to return to Naples. We packed, said our farewells, and left the following morning. The first night we made it to near Ferrara and pulled into a farm where we hoped to stay the night.

They welcomed us, and gave us a meal, for which we paid in kind. In the evening, we were enjoying ourselves in the small village, when there was uproar. Our driver had backed the truck into a barn, and decided to make a brew under the tailboard.

At the same time he decided to top up the tank from a jerry can. He stumbled, spilled petrol over the stove, and onto the floor of the barn that was covered in straw. A real blaze started. The driver jumped into the truck and extricated that, but the whole contents of the barn were ablaze in minutes.

The whole village turned out and we all worked like hell until 2 a.m. carrying water from the well and dragging bales of burning straw from the barn. I have never worked so hard in all my life. The barn was quite badly scorched, but saved. In the middle of all this, a girl in the house was having a very difficult birth, and when we were resting and having a drink in the kitchen, a baby girl was brought down weighing no less than 10lbs.

May 30th. 1945. Advising the farmer to make a claim for the damage we had caused, we set off again. We passed through Bologna, and made it to the old TAF station in Florence for lunch and more farewells to the boys. Much joking about our future in the Far East, which seems likely. On to Siena where we found that four other operators, all of whom I knew well, and ten others, would head for Rome in the morning. We arrived in Rome and stayed over in an R.A.F. transit camp, leaving the next morning for Naples. We arrived at our base in Torre del Greco that evening to be told that thirty of us would be flying home in the next day or two in three groups of ten. Much packing, parcels home, sharing things out, and we were then confined to camp as flights come up at very short notice.

June 6th. 1945. I received my ticket for one-way passage on an R.A.F. aircraft from Naples to Blackbushe, and we waved goodbye to Italy until many years later as a tourist. The trip was uneventful, except that crossing the English coast, looking down on the vivid green of the countryside with red busses winding through the villages, was an impressive sight.

June/July 1945. Back to Bletchley, and leave. After a few weeks, more leave prior to embarking on a ship bound for India. Arrived in Bombay, and took a train to Delhi, to join SCU11/12.

It was a three-day trip – and very interesting. On to our station on a cantonment just outside Delhi where we took up operating duties to Whaddon and many other places in the Far East. Later, we moved to a large station at Dhakuria Lakes, Calcutta.

This was the main station in the Far East, and we handled all manner of traffic with our out-stations, embassies, and missions in the area, and, of course, back to Whaddon. The transmitters were out at a place called Dum Dum.

We had about ten operating positions using AR88 receivers, and there was a large aerial farm.

Dates elude me, but after some considerable time in Calcutta, some of us were embarked for Singapore. However, the bombs had now been dropped, and Japan surrendered.

Our reason for going to Singapore no longer held, and we never even got to see the station there although we were sleeping within walking distance of it.

We therefore had no duties, and spent most of our time in Singapore itself, frequently availing ourselves of the excellent facilities of the Raffles Club. It was an enjoyable interlude, and we learned that we would shortly be going home for demob.

Our journey home was on the famous liner Mauretania, a magnificent ship, but, big as it was, the seas still crashed over the top when we hit a major storm in the Indian Ocean.

Back in the U.K. and on leave again. Then a posting to a signals unit in Harrogate where we were doing nothing in particular until demobilisation on April 12th. 1947.

There is no doubt I had a ‘cushy’ war, and was extremely lucky. However, I was part of the hugely successful code breaking operations at Bletchley Park.

Geoffrey Pidgeon, in his brilliant book 'The Secret Wireless War', describes in great detail the story of MI6 Communications 1939-1945 under the guidance of the great Brigadier Sir Richard Gambier-Parry KCMG.

How intelligence was gathered together from many sources including intercepted German radio traffic, brave agents, and many other ways – at Bletchley Park.

And, how brilliant work broke the Enigma coding system used by the Germans and provided invaluable intelligence for the armed forces, and helped shorten the war by many months.

I was just a small part of the final link in the chain that enabled the intelligence to be passed directly to the various allied commanders in the field. I am still a very active radio amateur.

Ray Small.

Thursday, March 11, 2004

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