



The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

INTRODUCTION

With the 50th Anniversary of D-Day in 1994, the Second World War will be on a lot of peoples' minds, particularly those who were a part of it.

This is the true story of an ordinary soldier in the Green Howards during the Second World War. The story includes, amongst others, my experiences at Dunkirk, D-Day, a voyage on the Queen Mary and being wounded in action.

It should be remembered that many of the events described in these pages have been taken from notes written soon after the events took place. The remainder has been compiled from my memoirs which I set down more than forty years ago while they were still fresh in my mind, and, more recently, I was given the inspiration to write everything down in book form so that other ex-servicemen may share some of the memories I have of that period in our lives.

The 1939-45 Second World War.

Bill Cheall
May 1994

Before you start to read the book read [A Personal Message](#) from the Commander in Chief (this was read out to all the troops).

Index

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | I AM CALLED UP | 13 | SICILY |
| 2 | WE JOIN THE B.E.F. | 14 | OUR RETURN TO ENGLAND |
| 3 | DUNKIRK | 15 | INTENSIVE TRAINING |
| 4 | THE AFTERMATH | 16 | TIME FOR ACTION |
| 5 | WE REORGANISE | 17 | D-5 TO D-DAY |
| 6 | TRAINING BEGINS | 18 | GRIM DETERMINATION |
| 7 | I AM CALLED UP | 19 | D+1 TO D+30 |
| 8 | TO THE MIDDLE EAST | 20 | MY REST CURE |
| 9 | THE DESERT | 21 | BACK TO DUTY |
| 10 | BACK TO THE GREEN HOWARDS | 22 | THE EAST LANCS |
| 11 | INTO BATTLE (AT WADI AKARIT) | 23 | OBERHAUSEN |
| 12 | PREPARING | 24 | THE END OF MY WAR |

[EPILOGUE](#)

[NAMES I WILL NEVER FORGET](#)

[PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE AUTHOR](#)

"Bill Cheall's War" has been provided for use on the Green Howards website by Paul Cheall, his son. If you would like to contact Paul Cheall regarding this document, please e-mail Paul on <paulcheall@yahoo.co.uk>



The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[Index](#)

21 Army Group - A Personal Message from the Commander in Chief

Personal Message from the Commander in Chief. Each troop was given his own personal copy of this very moving speech which was read out to all troops on 5 June, the day before the troops embarked for the Normandy landings on D-day.

21 Army Group A Personal Message from the Commander in Chief (to be read out to all the troops)

- The time has come to deal the enemy a terrific blow in Western Europe. The blow will be struck by the combined Sea, Land and Air Forces of the Allies - together constituting one great allied team under the supreme command of General Eisenhower.
- On the eve of this great adventure I send my best wishes to every soldier in the Allied team. To us is given the honour of striking a blow for freedom which will live in history; and in the better days that lie ahead men will speak with pride of our doings. We have a great and righteous cause. Let us pray that the "Lord Mighty in Battle" will go forth with our armies and that his special providence will aid us in the struggle.
- I want every soldier to know that I have complete confidence in the successful outcome of the operations that are about to begin. With stout hearts and with enthusiasm for the contest let us go forward to victory.
- And as we enter the battle let us recall the words of a famous soldier spoken many years ago:-

"He that fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dare not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all".

- Good luck to each one of you, and good hunting on the mainland of Europe.

B L Montgomery
General C in C
21 Army Group

5th June 1944

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[Index](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

1. I AM CALLED UP

To me it is almost unbelievable that the story I am going to tell started on a lovely Summer day in August 1939 - fifty three years ago - and would not end until almost six and a half years later. My twenties would have gone but on the credit side I would be a much travelled and wiser individual in every way.

At that time I was on a camping holiday with three pals, our site was on lovely farm land at Crediton in Devon. I had never travelled so far South before and it had been my intention to go as far as Lands End.

The twenty second day of August, three days before my 22nd birthday, was to be a day I would never forget.

I was stretched out on the grass under a scorching sun listening to the radio; suddenly I was all ears and my world had shattered out of all recognition from what my plans for the future had been.

The announcement declared that all members of the Territorial Army were to report to their headquarters without delay.

Up I leapt and within the hour we were on our way back to my home three hundred and twenty miles away. Those were the days when sixty mph. was over the top, drivers were not as aggressive as they are today, they loved their cars and it was indeed a joy to drive; nobody was in a hurry to get from A to B.

I reported to my unit, the 6th Green Howards, on the twenty fourth day of August and was not very impressed with the situation which greeted me.

There were khaki-clad figures everywhere, doing nothing but rushing about trying to look important with no serious thought in mind, not knowing what a situation the country had got itself into. Young men of the Territorial Army kept arriving from all over the North Riding.

We drew our rifles from company stores and were issued with whatever webbing equipment was available; clearly there was a shortage of everything. At least being a member of the Territorial Army gave us the privilege of having a genuine rifle rather than a wooden one, though up to that time we had not had the honour of being given any practice with live ammunition - but the time would come.

I then claimed three blankets and selected a bed well away from the door. There would be about fifty of us in the drill hall and it was bedlam - all trying to talk at the same time!

There was a sprinkling of regular soldiers amongst us, I suppose they were present as an aid to morale but it could not have been better as we were all in very high spirits.

These regular servicemen had one track minds, getting home to the wife or somebody else's wife and throughout the War I found that the married men amongst us thought they had the right to seek sexual relief with the first female who came along. Furthermore, they were a bunch of scroungers and layabouts who pretended to know everything; at least the ones who I came into contact with gave me that impression. In the course of time most of these older men were not the soldiers who set an example when confronted by the enemy; they usually schemed to get jobs in the rear areas.

My first pal was a boy named Ivor Castor who was a good down to earth North-East lad from the steelworks nearby and was nineteen years of age. As the

War progressed he volunteered for the paratroops and subsequently lost an arm when he was in action at Arnhem.

Our Regimental Sergeant Major was called Hughes; he was a short man, only about five feet one inch in height and I am sure he was almost as wide as he was tall, that is how I imagined him anyway! He was ill-tempered but I suspect it was only an act. He was of course a regular soldier and conveyed the impression that the whole conduct of the War depended on him - but that misapprehension

had developed in him through his long association with discipline in the army. I can see him now, hear his deep voice; he would bellow "Prade - prade - chow!" which really meant "parade attention!" He was our first experience of real discipline and upon reflection, acknowledging that enforcement of discipline is a firm foundation for becoming a good soldier, this tyrant was doing a thorough job and expected us to respond.

Of course, there was always the man who showed signs of revolt, consequently he had to serve a period of punishment, which usually consisted of being put on a 252 (an army charge sheet), followed by seven days jankers. This meant that he was at the beck and call of the duty N.C.O - doing things like peeling sacks of potatoes - spuds in the Army - which was an unenviable task and, of course, he was also confined to barracks.

It was my experience, as the years passed, that these regular offenders made excellent soldiers - the most dependable in the face of adversity - and always gave of their best under active service conditions.

Our Officers, fortunately, were excellent and performed wonders with great enthusiasm, despite such meagre resources as were available at the time; therefore earning a well deserved respect from their platoons, which responded with extra effort.

For some months after call up I was stationed at Middlesbrough, Redcar, Stockton and Hartlepool doing guard duties which were most boring and not at all rewarding.

Upon reflection there was not a lot of training we could do as weapons other than rifles were non-existent - it was already a most monotonous life. Battle tactics such as section and platoon field exercises were out of the question because no up-to-date training manuals had been made available to us.

When I was called up my pay was two shillings a day and half of this meagre remuneration was made into an allowance for my dependant mother. This fifty-fifty arrangement continued as my pay increased throughout the war. Comparing our reward with American forces we were paupers and as we fought the same war it was most unfair - it was a constant complaint with the men and we were almost always broke. As the saying goes - we just had to grin and bear it!

Before the 24th August 1939 I ran a grocer's shop in conjunction with my mother - this had to be closed down because being a member of the Territorial Army obliged me to serve my country in any emergency - but what an adventurous life confronted me and I was determined to adapt myself accordingly.

It was going to be a new life, perhaps it was good thing at the time that I did not realise what a most exciting, dangerous and traumatic but rewarding experience I had embarked upon. I found no great difficulty in coming to terms with the routine - at times everybody became a little 'browned off'. But as soon as comradeship was firmly embedded into our thoughts and actions, life in the Army really was not so bad, once we had had our little moan amongst ourselves.

The Territorial Army was not yet in the category of a fighting arm of the regular army because we had not undertaken any training in respect of action against an aggressive enemy. No manoeuvres or route marches to toughen us up and test our abilities had been done - this was all in the not too distant future.

It may seem incredible to the reader but from call up until March 1940 our days were passed doing drill parades, kit inspections and the usual non-productive activities.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

2. WE JOIN THE B.E.F.

In April 1940 we departed from Stockton railway station bound for Dover where we quickly transferred to ship and thence to Calais, then onward to Irlles.

We were accommodated in farmyard barns, slept on straw and our ablutions were performed in a stream which ran along the bottom of the field.

We were now part of the 23rd division, and together with the 7th Green Howards and the 5th East Yorks, formed the 69th brigade of that division. The 69th had a future which would be outstanding in the British army but at present it was the intention of the War Office that we were in France not to confront the enemy but to prepare landing strips for the Royal Air Force - since we were not in any way equipped for battle as the following lines will show.

We had no weapons other than our rifles, two bren guns and one anti-tank rifle to each company. We had no bren gun carriers or mortars, divisional artillery and almost no signal equipment. Our Officers had no revolvers, binoculars or compass unless they provided their own - what an absolutely ridiculous set up.

Up to now I was not very impressed with what I had seen since I had set foot in France. When stepping ashore at Calais, we were confronted by columns of French soldiers walking aimlessly along the quayside accompanied by hundreds of horses, some pulling antiquated artillery pieces; there was no mechanical transport of any kind.

There was a total lack of discipline, or get-up-and-go as the saying goes. With hindsight that must be one of the reasons for the French collapse when confronted by such a formidable enemy.

After that digression let us return to the purpose of our posting to France. The landing strip job was out of all recognition to what we thought we had put on uniform for; we were now clad in denim overalls, using picks and shovels to level the land. During our digging we unearthed many 1914-18 war relics including mortar bombs which were still lethal and here we had our first experience of the enemy when their aircraft machine-gunned us and caused several casualties.

We had to be on the alert for firth columnists and patrols were sent out every night. One night two civilians were seen using torches when enemy craft were overhead. The French police arrested them and they were shot without any loss of time.

Overnight the scenario was changed and we moved to a place called Sauchy Cauchy where we proceeded to dig slit trenches, this left us in no doubt that our real part in the war was beginning to materialise.

It was May 17th and the Germans had attacked on May 10th when they proceeded to startle the allies with their blitzkrieg tactics. However, this is my war I am writing about not the war of the history books.

Our 6th battalion now took up positions along the Canal Du Nord, a front of seventeen miles and as we had not been supplied with any other weapons with which to do this formidable task it was farcical.

At this time I had been asked if I would take on the job of Company Commander's batman and runner.

In civilian life, [Major Petch](#) was a gentleman farmer and Clerk of Redcar Racecourse, he almost worshipped his 'B' company and looking to his needs gave me much pleasure.

On the 18th May or thereabouts rumours were received of enemy tanks having entered Cambrai; consequently, one of our Company Commanders had to blow up a bridge to deny the enemy use of it - this was done in spite of the fact that refugees refused to stop crossing while the bridge was blown, the result was dreadful and many civilians were killed.

Next day we were withdrawn to Saudimont and took up new positions. This was open country and difficult to defend because it was ideal for tanks to operate.

To make conditions worse we were given notice that rations were to be reduced by half because of the supply situation - we certainly felt the effect of this because after all we were fit young men and we all had a moan even though nobody could do anything about it.

Two days later I had to take a message from our C.O. to another company because of the lack of signals equipment. As I was driving along a lane on the company motorcycle enemy shells were exploding in the fields around. Suddenly I came upon an ambulance which had crashed into the hedge. I approached cautiously only to discover that it had been abandoned after being hit by a shell. Thinking I had better investigate inside the vehicle I saw a sight for sore eyes, on the floor was a full case of Heinz baked beans - I could hardly believe my luck. Putting the box across the petrol tank I delivered the message and returned to my company where the lads were overjoyed. We crushed up some of our hard tack biscuits and mixed them into the beans in a dixie for a feast indeed! It was great but it had to be eaten cold as no fires were allowed in our present position.

On about the 20th of May we were ordered to take up positions on the banks of the river Scarpe at Roveux and were dug in before dawn.

It now came as bad news to us that the Germans had infiltrated through the 70th Brigade lines and overran them using tanks - all the men had been killed or captured.

The enemy facing us were just across the river and were putting down mortar fire so we had to move back to Farbus.

We were now no longer a labour battalion; a few more weapons had been brought up to us so we were now an active service unit and were continually on the move as regular troops took our place.

During the march to Farbus, along the country roads, so that enemy aircraft would not so easily observe our movement, we had to mix with the refugees who crowded the roads everywhere. That was an experience I will remember as long as I live. Old men, women and children pushing anything on wheels - bicycles, prams, barrows, handcarts - anything to save carrying more than they had to. Then there were the poor horses pulling overladen carts. The families had brought with them as many of their possessions as they possibly could. It must have been heartbreaking to leave their homes, possibly for the last time knowing full well that they would be looted by the enemy.

Very suddenly the sound of aircraft would be heard and everybody looked fearfully to the sky. Out of that beautiful blue sky would come death and destruction. The planes made a beeline for the poor folk, dropping their lethal loads, zooming into the sky and then flying the length of the refugee column machine-gunning anything and everything - it was horrifying. Absolute chaos was created among that pathetic humanity; dead bodies and parts of bodies lay everywhere. Children scared to death, not being able to understand, lying across dead mothers, many of whom had their intestines oozing from their stomachs. Horses were going mad and dragging bits of the carts over the bodies spread all across the road. I cannot say any more because it is impossible for words to describe the events clearly enough for anybody to understand - it had to be seen to be believed. I hope the airmen who caused such carnage perished in hell.

By the time it was dusk we found ourselves on the wooded slopes of Vimy Ridge of First World War fame. Many of the lads thought of how their fathers could so easily have been on these same wooded slopes fighting Germans in that war. Our experience was that we were fighting a callous and ruthless German Army - fanatical and armed with vastly superior weaponry to our own.

On Vimy Ridge it was untenable as we were constantly bombed and shelled, causing casualties which we could ill afford. Food was still in very short supply and we slept whenever we could during the hours of darkness.

We were there merely to make the numbers up, not being in a position to be aggressive because we had not sufficient effective weapons to cause the enemy any concern; we were therefore always on the defensive.

Next day, tired and hungry but alive, we were on the march again to a place near Gondcourt. I trust that the reader will bear in mind that we had never undergone any tactical training whatsoever, so could not be expected to perform wonders out of all recognition to our training - but we did well.

Our division had now been placed under the command of G.H.Q. We embussed and were taken to Gravelines, a distance of about seventy miles away right on the coast and some ten miles north of Calais. We dug defensive positions along the banks of the river Aa, this was just before the light of dawn.

I should emphasise at this point that everybody seemed to be in good spirits and determined to give a good account of themselves in any confrontation with the enemy - the only problem as far as we were concerned at that time was food.

We had an excellent commanding officer in Lt. Col. Steel, who was very understanding and considerate, since we were experiencing adverse conditions. During the afternoon three light tanks were approaching our positions and were fired upon by [Lt. Hewson](#), using the Boyes anti-tank rifle - the other ranks had never been given the opportunity to fire the weapon. Tragically, this brave young officer was killed after knocking out one of the tanks and giving his position away - we recovered his body next day and he is now buried at Fort Mardick near Gravelines.

During the journey to Gravelines we passed through Arras. The whole town was a mass of flames after the enemy bombing and it was a risk driving through the place because of the danger of falling brickwork and timbers.

We defended a bridge at Gravelines and suddenly four tanks appeared from the direction of Calais, which was cut off on three sides. Fortunately, they turned out to be British and had made their escape after finding a weak link in the German lines. They joined us willingly in defence of the town.

We lost some good lads here because we were being heavily shelled and also attacked by enemy aircraft. Not realising how near we were to the enemy, some of our other ranks were taken prisoner, as was Captain Kidd, Captain Foster and Lt. Farrand, the latter being already wounded.

All the inhabitants must either have fled or were hiding in cellars because we didn't see a single civilian.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

3. DUNKIRK

For the actions we fought at Gravelines, several of our Officers received decorations (including Colonel Steel who received a bar to his D.S.O) and the battalion was mentioned in despatches by Lord Gort.

Our position, because of our limited strength and lack of support, was now in danger of being surrounded, so in order to avoid that catastrophe, we were given orders to march to Bergues to join in the defence of Dunkirk.

However, our orders to march to Bergues were no sooner given than they were countermanded, with the result that we had to move into the line at Hague Moelen, protecting the right flank of the main axis of withdrawal to Dunkirk.

We were now decidedly better armed, particularly with the very important Bren guns and anti-tank rifles. Also, ammunition had been accumulated because our lads were constantly retrieving it, together with weapons which had been discarded by the irresponsible soldiers who had previously passed through in their haste to reach Dunkirk as quickly and lightly laden as possible. We were determined to give as good as we got within the limits of our capabilities. We knew that we could not take any aggressive action but felt able to give a damned good account of ourselves and show the jerries that we were not going to be a walkover.

After our brush with the enemy at Gravelines we felt confident that we could put up a sound defence, good North Country lads were not going to be disposed of so easily, even though the enemy had far superior fire power, but we did lose some good boys at this time.

After all is said and done, only three weeks ago most of us had not even fired a rifle, and now here we were, acting as last line of defence on our sector.

After two days of beating off attempted infiltrations by the enemy infantry and killing many of them, the order came for us to retire further towards Dunkirk. The regular army battalion of the Welsh guards were taking over our sector and we had to hand over all weapons, except for our rifles. The Guards had, of course, undergone intensive training and all were a year or two older than us Territorial Army men - they had their traditions to uphold and would give any aggressive intent by the enemy short shrift - until they became exhausted or ran short of ammunition.

By this time we were becoming very tired as sleep had been impossible for some nights - hunger and blistered feet also took their toll, but pep talks by our officers worked wonders with morale - for weeks we had not had our clothes off! After one of these talks our Sergeant came amongst us and said "right lads, who wants a shower", the immediate response was "bugger off Sarg!" It took a bit of a joke and morale was back to normal, they were a grand lot of lads.

Our Company Commander, Major Leslie Petch, amazed me. I was still batman and runner and in his presence I saw the personal side of him, he was a brick and a tower of strength, setting an example to every one of us - more so since he was quite a bit overweight, but he was overflowing with determination and always retained his gentlemanly attitude.

I think what the lads missed most was a good cigarette, in fact any cigarette would have done. I was lucky in that respect because I had never smoked and was never tempted to do so.

Before the battalion could extricate itself a tragedy occurred. The Germans broke through at a point between the Welsh guards and our 'D' Company and twenty men out of a platoon of thirty were run over and killed by enemy tanks, causing the remainder to withdraw.

During the evening of the 29th, orders came through for our final withdrawal towards the coast - the perimeter was being squeezed ever smaller and the front had to be manned so far as was possible by seasoned troops.

Each division was allocated a section of the beach which they had to try and make for.

The whole evacuation beach ran from La Panne to Dunkirk - our sector was near Bray Dunes which was about central.

I thought our Officers were brilliant in guiding us through that nightmarish countryside. There was no chance of using the roads because these were still crowded by refugees, as well as Army vehicles, getting as near as they could to Dunkirk. In any case, it was safer and more direct going across country to reach our objective, even though the Stukas always seemed to be within our hearing and we were sitting targets.

We looked a very sorry sight, covered in dirt and grime with hunger gnawing at our bellies. I lost seven pounds during the time I was in France.

Our aircraft were significant by their absence but we discovered later the reason for this - they had been about as prepared for War as the Army and I am sure that the R.A.F. performed well with the meagre resources available to them. The politicians had a great deal to answer for in ignoring the continuous warnings of the German preparations for armed conflict.

A few miles from the beaches a massive graveyard started. Many thousands of vehicles had been driven as far as they could get towards Dunkirk, then made useless and abandoned. It really is impossible to describe the havoc which had been created. Many of the vehicles had been set ablaze, as were petrol and ammunition dumps spreading smoke and flames over a wide area - but it would deny the enemy the use of it.

I will never forget the necessary waste by destruction or the sight of dead soldiers lying all over the place - nobody had time to bury them and our medics were already doing more than could really be expected of them, taking care of the wounded.

Then there were the cattle - the poor helpless animals running madly about, scared out of their wits. The dead ones, lying on their backs, legs in the air and bloated like balloons.

If the folk at home could have seen all this they would most certainly have thought that the War was already lost. I don't know where the War correspondents were in those days.

We still had our rifles and small packs - our large packs having been lost as they would have gone astray with the company stores. We had no other weapons apart from one Bren gun - this weapon was not going to fall into German hands, mind you a Bren weighs almost twenty three pounds and the Bren gunner and his mate loved that weapon - taking turns to carry it and, despite all the mud and filth we had gone through, it was spotlessly clean. Those two grand lads brought it back to England and there was almost a court martial about it. All weapons brought back from Dunkirk were supposed to be handed in and then redistributed at a later date, however the Bren gunner was adamant that the weapon should remain with his platoon. Eventually a higher ranking Officer agreed with his sentiments and the lad was almost overcome with emotion.

After some hours and twelve miles we sighted a cluster of buildings in the distance. Bray Dunes was a small village and we were very pleased to have sight of it but other troubles were very soon to descend upon us.

Walking down what passed for the main street - it was very sandblown and led to the beach one hundred yards away - we turned left at the end onto a kind of promenade with a wooden rail along the seaward side and there was a six foot drop to the beach.

Oh, that lovely sea with England just on the other side - how simple! We walked to the end of the promenade and onto the beach, then the sand dunes. The sea was out about two hundred yards and the beach was very flat with deep soft sand.

There were thousands, many thousands of khaki-clad figures milling around for as far as we could see. I saw some poor lads crying and others, on their knees, praying. They could not, of course, help behaving like this - it was just because of the trauma they had endured and had at last given way to their feelings.

Our 'B' Company more or less kept together and we made our way into the deeper sand dunes to obtain some protection from the bombing and strafing. We still had nothing to eat except hard tack biscuits and bully beef - we hadn't had a hot meal for God knows how long and the lads who usually shaved looked really haggard.

There was no sign of the 23rd. Divisional assembly area and nobody seemed to know what to do for the best. Then the planes came over again, causing more deaths. Only twenty yards from me some lads had been hit by shrapnel and one of them was in a serious condition - the medics were there - but he would not live.

That night was a nightmare which none of us would ever forget.

How the enemy planes came over, dropping flares then returning to machine gun - flying the length of the beach. It really was a most dreadful, unforgettable experience.

Next morning, Major Petch accompanied by me made his way along the beach and we came upon the Divisional Commander, Major General Herbert, who was forming a column to proceed to Dunkirk which was five miles along the beach. He said that the 6th Green Howards were to join the column and we marched off about two hours later.

The going was very hard, the sand being so soft and deep.

Thousands of men were forming queues leading down to the sea and were in the water up to their shoulders, doing their utmost to get onto one of the small boats, which very often capsized.

Beachmasters had a very difficult task keeping some semblance of order, but by and large the lads just waited patiently for their turn to come until the planes came over.

Those in the water just ignored the bombs - where could they run? And anyway the sea absorbed a lot of the blast. There was always the hot headed lad who thought he had more right to get away, but the Officers only had to withdraw a revolver and they calmed down and accepted the inevitable.

In the prevailing mood of many of the men it was common to see groups of soldiers being led by a Padre, in prayer.

Many of us, when we saw the planes approaching, knelt down and fired our rifles at them but it was highly improbable that we hit any of them.

Overshadowing all the activity on the beach was a huge pall of deep black smoke coming from the burning oil tanks which were not far away from Dunkirk.

We arrived at the East Mole - a kind of wooden jetty - four hours later and saw to our horror dozens of ships which had been sunk in their efforts to get men away - funnels and superstructures sticking out of the water - it was a ships' graveyard.

However, there by the side of the jetty a ship was waiting to be loaded with human cargo. We walked along the wooden pier and back came the planes - it seemed never ending - trying to bomb our ship but without success.

There was a six foot gap in the planking where a bomb had gone through without exploding so we laid more timbers over the gap; another thirty yards and there was a Ship's Officer counting us as we boarded. By this time, regiments were all mixed together.

The ship was called 'The Lady of Man' and was a ferry ship; it was packed with soldiers and God alone knows what would have happened had we been hit by a bomb. I was on deck but could not swim so I tried to get near a float, just in case. As the ship was filling up, a Padre came and stood on a ladder, called for silence and prayed for our deliverance to England - I did not see one atheist.

I am sure we had all prayed silently to ourselves many times during the withdrawal to Dunkirk. The ship started to tremble and at about 0700hrs. pulled away from the Mole.

God answered our prayers and gave us a safe passage back to England - beautiful England.

We landed at Folkestone to a tremendous welcome from the dockside workers but particularly from those good Samaritans of the Women's Voluntary Services and Salvation Army. Everybody was given a mug of hot tea and a sandwich and in no time at all we entrained for - well, who cared ?

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

4. THE AFTERMATH

As the train took us on our way we all slept like logs. There was plenty of time for reflections and recriminations upon what we had been through during the few short weeks since we had left England in early April, supposedly to prepare landing strips for non-existent aircraft. Possibly, on the credit side, was the fact that what we had experienced would be something to think about and be proud of in future years. The poor, haggard refugees, many of whom had lost everything as well as their loved ones during the plane attacks, the helpless animals, the crowded beaches, the huge cloud of smoke from the oil tanks, the graveyards of vehicles and ships - no, I would never forget those things.

There was also time to think about our salvation, because even though Dunkirk was a kind of defeat, in retrospect it was also a victory, in the sense that we had foiled the German attempt to create a catastrophe for England, also that the enemy now knew that the British soldier was a first class fighter and that England was not going to be the same walkover as the continental countries had been.

Because of the stops, it took us about six hours to reach our destination, which turned out to be Cardiff. We detrained and were then taken by coaches to a hutted camp which was about five miles outside of the City.

After we had settled in and had our first hot meal for about two weeks, Officers came round the huts checking our identity discs and our names and regiments because at that time the different units were all mixed up since we had entrained at Folkestone from more than one ship. None of our own Officers were with us and there were only about fifty Green Howards.

After that business had been taken care of, I sat and wrote a letter home to give them the news that I was safe and well.

Two days passed, during which time we had been paid two pounds each from any pay which had accumulated to our credit. Then we were allowed out of camp, even though we only had the clothes we stood up in - everything else had been lost with the company stores; we were really in a sorry state, not even a cap, so we had to go out wearing steel helmets !

I took the opportunity of going into the City and soon became an object of interest. As I stood reading a newspaper which had been posted outside a news office, two ladies came up to me, who would perhaps be in their early fifties. They were so very nice and self assured and enquired if - though it must have been obvious - I was one of the boys from Dunkirk. Upon satisfying their curiosity, their faces lit up and then they asked me if I would like to go to their house for afternoon tea - I jumped at the opportunity.

Their names were Mrs Owens and Mrs Jones - two good Welsh names - and were widows living at Fairwater, which was a suburb of Cardiff. Mrs.Owens who looked the elder was rather keen to take me to her house first, she lived alone in an immaculate semi-detached house, number 147 Bwlch Road.

After tea which was delicious we just sat, they told me how things were in the country and about their own circumstances - they never mentioned Dunkirk, they were such very kind, understanding and sympathetic ladies. I was never to forget them or the way I had met them, to think that two complete strangers could take me under their wing and be so generous towards me.

It was now time for me to be getting back to camp, but before I left both ladies, trying to speak at the same time, asked me if I had any money. After saying that I had just been paid and thanking them profoundly, Mrs.Jones asked me if I could get out of camp the next day and call on her for dinner, she lived with her sister Alice and brother in law Roy, or rather they lived with her, so back I went and they dined me really well.

I was made to feel so much at ease by their kindness and I knew that they must be curious about Dunkirk, so I told them of my experiences in France. They just sat there on the settee spellbound, during which time the ladies - including Mrs Owens who had been sent for - being devout Christians - broke down and wept when I told them about the refugees and when I had said what I knew they wanted to know, they all gave me a most welcome hug and a kiss; it made me feel great.

Over the years that followed I kept in touch with Mrs.Jones particularly and spent two most enjoyable weekends at her house. All the family were so very kind to me. It was Mrs.Jones, or Margaret, who sent me a Methodist hymn book when I was stationed at Southwold

some years later.

Dunkirk was behind us now and consequently we were very much wiser men and more capable soldiers, we had learned a great deal the hard way and endured a rough ordeal but had survived - all for two shillings a day - but upon reflection, under the circumstances money was of little importance.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

5. WE REORGANISE

We were at Cardiff for about two weeks where we had been somewhat molly coddled and fed very well, just allowed to laze about and recover from our ordeal, then once more we were on the move.

We ended up at Launceston in Cornwall on a lovely June day. Quickly things started to get moving. New kit was issued to us all and a roll call was made for obvious reasons. All companies were made up to strength by young soldiers from the regimental depot in Richmond, Yorkshire. It was good to be able to move around and see our old pals again and also remember the poor lads who had been killed - esprit-de-corps is a marvellous feeling.

The company notice board, which was ignored at one's own peril came into its own again.

The battalion now began to be fitted out with all the paraphernalia of War, bren guns, bren carriers, anti-tank guns, fifteen hundred weight trucks - anything we needed to enable us to take offensive action. We were ready for active service.

One more very important thing happened now, we were no longer part of the 23rd. division, but had been amalgamated into the 50th division. It was a North East of England division made up of men who hailed from between the two rivers - Tyne and Tees - hence the divisional sign of TT.

Up to this time, hard training had been out of the question and then, out of the blue, came seven days leave, which was very much appreciated by everyone.

During that leave I don't think I stopped talking because everybody wanted to know about Dunkirk which of course was understandable.

We had not been back from leave very long (during which time we did route marches, general parades and weapon training to keep us occupied) when orders came through for us to be on the move again, this was early in July 1940.

The battalion headquarters were at Hinton Admiral near Bournemouth, the companies being dispersed across different areas near the beaches.

Our 'B' Company came off rather well as we were billeted in the grounds of Highcliffe Castle which was only half a mile from the village of the same name. The Officers had rooms within the castle itself and I, taking up my job as batman, shared a room in the castle with the four other company batmen.

It was a beautiful castle and was still fully furnished to a very high standard. I can see it now, especially the dining room with its long mahogany table, thick carpets, high ceiling and decorated walls. All the other rooms were beautifully furnished too but we were not allowed to use many of these .

It was very sad indeed, when some years later I went for a sentimental holiday with my wife, to discover that the castle was a ruin. Trees and overgrown shrubbery were growing through the whole ground floor and the upper floors were missing totally. My eyes could hardly believe what they were seeing and I never found out how this - to my way of thinking - catastrophe had happened. I can't describe it in any other way. I even had to pay to park the car while I stood and looked at the ruin and what I was really seeing was what I knew it had been like as recently as 1940. I just stood transfixed - carried away by my thoughts.

The grounds of the castle were large and extended, by way of sand dunes and a rather steep slope, down to the beach.

No route marches were done at Highcliffe; the time was taken up erecting barbed wire defences and other obstacles on our stretch of the beach. We also built gun emplacements with sand bags and set up bren guns on fixed lines - this was the period of an expected invasion and we were all full of confidence. We felt that if the enemy did try to land we would give a very good account of ourselves, should any square head try to make a landing on our sector. Our earlier confrontations with the enemy had given us the confidence we might otherwise have lacked.

Major Leslie Petch, to give him his full name, was indeed a very popular Company Commander, he was more like a father figure to us all. Really. for a soldier, he was over generous and sympathetic to our requirements. I recall that one day the bread ration failed to appear, whereupon, to feed the lads he sent men into the village to buy all the bread they could from the village shops and paid for it out of his own pocket. Fortunately he was a rich landowner and well able to afford it; however his response to the shortage of bread was immediate.

Of course, we had to keep ourselves fit so we were given instructions to run up and down the steep sandy banks in full marching order and also to do exercises on the beach. Unfortunately, the sea was inaccessible to us or I might have learned to swim.

The ladies of the village were very tolerant towards us in many ways, asking the lads they met in the village to their houses for tea. I remember, on one occasion, my pal Jack Cargill and I were asked by a lady of substantial means if we would like to go to her house for tea and of course we accepted. What a house, or rather I should say Manor, as that is what it was. There were the ladies accompanied by their husbands, who belonged to some inner wheel of the Rotary Club and they gave us a grand tea, sitting on a lush lawn on beautiful garden furniture. We were then escorted to another lawn to play Croque, and instructions given to us about the finer points of the game which we thoroughly enjoyed. It was a nice little interlude in our Army lives.

My pal Jack became a Methodist preacher after the cessation of hostilities in a village near my home.

During off duty hours we were allowed out of billets and I made several trips into Bournemouth about fourteen miles away. After the war my family made many sentimental journeys to the area.

For readers who are unaware of the duties of a batman I think I should detail them. I did not do guards or fatigues, but took part in all other soldierly activities because, apart from anything else, I was firstly a soldier and I had to keep myself fit; batmen do not win wars.

I was always awakened by the guards at 0530hrs. I would perform my ablutions and then go to the cookhouse for mugs of tea for myself and Major Petch. Next I would go to the Major's room, knock on the door and wait for permission to enter, say "Good morning Sir", pass a remark about the weather, then leave. I would then join my mates for breakfast, after which I went back to my room and made up my bed and kit in the regulation way. It was then time to go to the Major's quarters and ask him if he needed anything special doing other than the normal routine.

After the Company Commander had left to attend to his duties, I tidied the room and made up the bed, unlike other ranks the Major had white sheets when we were in billets. I polished with vigour whatever shoes had been worn, also the spare Sambrown brown belt - I also pressed the spare uniform every day. That routine usually took me most of the morning then, after dinner with the lads, I would join my platoon for normal duties.

The Major's wife came down to visit him for one week and they stayed in a hotel in the village. She was as much a lady as he was a gentleman and she thanked me for looking after her husband.

Very soon after Mrs.Petch left Highcliffe, a most regrettable thing happened. The Company was assembled and our Company Commander informed us that he was leaving us and in fact was being discharged from the Army on medical grounds. We were all stunned because he was so popular with Officers and men alike, and he had always set a very good example of gentlemanly conduct to every one of us.

With hindsight, Major Petch could never have undertaken a Company Commander's duties during the active service which we eventually undertook - he was rather overweight. He shook hands with me before he left.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

6. TRAINING BEGINS

As the Major left his beloved men the Company also vacated our billets for pastures new.

This time it was Swanage - equidistant from Bournemouth as Highcliffe but on the West side. We were billeted in small private hotels which had been requisitioned for the duration of hostilities. Off the main road through the small seaside town, Swanage is very hilly and our billet was half way up a very steep hill - good exercise for our legs as we were constantly on the go. We slept on pallises in the attics.

At Swanage we started to do training, a few fifteen mile route marches and Army manoeuvres - several times we did the march around Corfe Castle and back to Swanage.

As at Highcliffe we were kept occupied with guard duties and beach defences but the normal rifle and kit inspections were also done as it was part of Army discipline. At any time of day or night different platoons would receive an invasion alert - talk about scalded cats - we dressed and armed as fast as we could, then fell in on the street and ran like merry hell down the hill to the sea front to man the defences. Not much fun but a damn sight better than Dunkirk had been!

We were at Swanage for two months before orders came through for another move, during November 1940.

General Montgomery had very definite ideas about training and they were put into practice. Instructors had been sent to train us as we had never been trained before. With that in mind we moved to Frome in Somerset.

The whole battalion was together here and the headquarters was in a very large old mansion with a wide drive across the front and stables at the rear. The property overlooked a very large expanse of parkland with clumps of oak trees. At two o'clock from the building and three hundred yards away there was another building which served as the cookhouse and dining hall. At ten o'clock from battalion headquarters a good many nissen huts had been erected, camouflaged by trees. The ground sloped away from the main building; the whole area was very impressive; it must have been owned by a very wealthy landowner.

These were our winter quarters from where we were to do very intensive training - this had been impressed upon everyone. It was our first experience of nissen huts and I never liked them - too hot in Summer and like refrigerators in winter, stone floored and one stove in the centre which was totally inadequate to heat the place.

We now had a new Company Commander who had brought along his own batman so I joined the lads full time. General Montgomery had stipulated that the Fifth corps., of which the 6th Green Howards were a part, must be prepared by the Spring of the following year, to fight the enemy wherever they were to be found.

We must be able to move many miles in transport, then march twenty five miles and face the enemy, then be prepared to give him more than he bargained for, regardless of the weather conditions. No time was lost in putting orders into action in order to achieve the desired ability to fight as first class soldiers and the Officers were driven just as hard as the men. There was to be no slacking or scrounging, nobody was allowed to go on sick parade unless their condition was serious.

Reveille was at 0530hrs. and dressed in shorts and vest we did a run around the park and finished with exercises. Then we would get washed and dressed, followed by the trek across the park for breakfast, which was always substantial - porridge, bacon and eggs with tea and plenty of bread. We never went hungry, which was just as well because there was no canteen or NAAFI, we were here to work hard.

Frequent route marches were always about twenty five miles in length and we did many of these. On other days we would do weapon training, stripping down bren guns, mortars and anti-tank weapons until we could do it blindfold, naming all parts as we handled them.

Mostly, the weather was atrocious, we never seemed to be dry. When we did marches it was in full marching order and we all took our turns to carry the bren gun, walking for fifty minutes and resting for ten, covering three miles an hour. During the march we

usually had a good sing song; it was no use being miserable because we knew the job had to be done. Arriving back at camp we would take a good hot shower.

I will never forget one three day manoeuvre we did. We were taken by transport to a point on Exmoor; then did a thirty mile forced march followed by a mock battle which lasted through the night; followed by a fifteen mile slog and another exercise. We finished at 1800hrs. when it was dark and, of course, it was winter.

We were given a good hot stew followed by rice - we needed that because it was bitterly cold on Exmoor and the worst weather I had experienced - to make things worse it was snowing.

"Right lads, bed down," came the order - "bed down!" - the ground was covered with snow ! We cleared our own little patch as best we could, put the ground sheet down and using our faithful small packs for a pillow, covered ourselves with two blankets and our gas cape and tried to sleep - our breath was freezing on the edge of the blankets.

We were young, fit and very tired and we slept the sleep of the just until awakened with a hearty breakfast - we all had our own little igloos covering us ! During the night an awful thing had happened a hundred yards away from us. Three lads who had chosen to sleep too near the roadside, which was barely visible anyway, had been run over by a tank while they slept and nobody had heard a sound. The poor kids would not have felt a thing, and only nineteen years of age.

After that incident the manoeuvres were called off and believe me, we had to march the thirty miles back to the transport which took us back to camp. We dumped our kit and made a beeline for the dining hall where once again the cooks came up trumps.

"Come on lads, out of it," came the shout, "stop dreaming of home, it's the man's Army you're in." There was no cross country run that morning, we all had a shower and tended to our sore feet before we went for grub. "I don't know why you are all looking down in the dumps lads, those manoeuvres were a piece of cake." This from our Platoon Commander, who had just walked in immaculately dressed - he had been Duty Officer in camp while we were roughing it on Exmoor ! This kind of comment was always taken in good part by the lads, most of the Officers knew exactly how we felt and were as one with their Platoons.

Our training programme had come to an end, when we all received a shock. We had to assemble in the dining room and were told that our division would be going overseas shortly; no wonder we had been put through the mill. Though, of course, we could not be told where we were going we all felt that we had a good idea, after all who didn't know where the fighting was taking place - the Middle East.

Very soon we saw on the notice board, which everyone read every day, that there was to be a parade at 1100hrs. for us all to be fitted for tropical kit - snow still lay on the ground ! Everybody was given inoculations and stringent medical examinations. That was when I received a shock, my nose had been troubling me for some time, but now I received confirmation concerning the problem. The Medical Officer or M.O. as we called him, said that I had chronic sinusitis and that I would not be going abroad with the battalion. Well, to put it mildly, I was dumb struck, never having thought that I would be leaving the lads under such circumstances, my thoughts and actions had always been loyal to my Battalion. Arrangements were made and I went into Bath hospital for two days for an operation. The last time I had problems with my sinuses was when I was nineteen years of age.

I went back to my unit for three days and passed much time talking to the lads, who were all saying I was a lucky bugger and eventually convinced me that I was - however my own feelings did not cause me to 'jump over the moon.' I went to the orderly room and collected a travel warrant to Richmond in Yorkshire, which was only about thirty miles from my home but I had heard tales about the depot which were not very encouraging.

From the back of a fifteen hundredweight truck I shouted "so long" to all the lads and I felt the wrench having to leave them.

Richmond is a delightful town, full of old world charm with the beautiful river Swale meandering through it and towering above the river there is an ancient castle ruin. The Green Howards museum is there and a chapel dedicated to the regiment is in Richmond Parish church - the residents were proud of their connections with the Green Howards.

Now then, can I say anything complimentary about our depot ? Certainly, it was in total contrast to beautiful Richmond. It was a large barracks situated at the top of a hill - Richmond Hill. There was a very large tarmac parade ground and the whole area looked windswept and inhospitable, which I suppose was natural, because regimental depots are not rest homes by any flight of the imagination. As the name implies, depots are where young, not so fit civilians are transformed - sometimes against their will - into dedicated soldiers, but just as important, loyal Green Howards and they were certainly put through the mill during the process.

These boys usually made pals easily, which was very important for their welfare and they would learn the basics of what Army life was all about from scratch and would probably think that their cosy civilian life had been a luxury. It was a good job that they did not realise then, where their lives as soldiers would take them and that life at the depot was really a piece of cake !

The infantry is no place for weaklings, and for better or for worse, that is where my journey from home took me in June 1941. I had been in the Army for two years so the basic training would not make me a better soldier, just a very bored one. I had only been sent to the depot until I could be posted to another Green Howard Battalion, so I was more or less left to my own devices, which really was of no use to me because I was of an active nature and wanted to be doing things, not just lazing about.

Out of the blue an N.C.O. came up to me and said that the Duty Officer at the Officers Mess wanted to see me. I spruced myself up

and went to see him, whereupon he informed me that I would not be at the depot for long as I was already an experienced soldier and until such time as a posting came through would I take a job as a waiter in the Officers Mess? Since, according to my records, I was already associated with Officers through my job as a batman to Major Petch, I accepted - after all I needed something to occupy my mind.

It - the waiter's job, was most interesting while it lasted. I will never forget one Captain who was a little older than middle age, as were most of the staff, the younger Officers being in the Battalions. He would come into the dining room for breakfast and he always came to me to serve him. He would say "the usual Cheall," and he didn't mean the usual breakfast - he meant the usual drink, Whisky. Every morning was the same, his liver must have been in an awful state; he was a very silly man.

The depot was, of course, run by regular soldiers who were past their 'sell by date', but they did an excellent job in keeping up the regimental traditions and turned out thousands of very fit young men. Once a lad has become fitter than he has ever been and is surrounded by other boys like him, he realises the training has been a good thing for him and has broadened his horizons.

I was only at Richmond for six weeks when my posting came through. I was pleased too, as I was keen to be taking part in more constructive activities.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

7. I AM CALLED UP

This time I travelled a little further North to join the 11th Battalion of the Green Howards which was stationed on Gosforth racecourse. Almost all the other ranks were young conscripts from various parts of the North Riding of Yorkshire. The Battalion had been formed in July 1939, about the same time as was the 6th. It was not an active service unit but trained men to become knowledgeable and qualified enough to be able to go to the Territorial Army Battalions - the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th whenever they needed replacements. Men going to these units were always from the North Riding until the later stages of the war. The 1st Battalion was a regular Army unit and never, to my knowledge, served alongside any of the Territorial Battalions.

The Gosforth routine was fairly humdrum, just performing the usual everyday tasks. It seemed somewhat strange, for a while, being among so many different lads and Officers but young soldiers are usually good mixers. The stay at Gosforth did not last long because really there was nothing constructive to do to keep us occupied.

We had fallen in for some inspection or other and when my Platoon Officer came to me he said "You are Cheall are you not?" so I said "Sir", "The Company Commander would like a word with you, will you drop into the Office in an hour or so?" For the next hour I could not imagine what he wanted to see me for but I soon found out.

The C.O., when I went to his office, said "Cheall, I have been looking at your records and I see you had been your Commanding Officer's batman, not that we are in need of a batman at the moment, but it has occurred to me that you might acquit yourself very well as Company Officer's Cook - how does that appeal to you?" It took me about twenty seconds to decide that it did.

Right away I was told, that of course, he knew it was a responsibility and to ease any doubts in my mind he would arrange for me to go on an Officers' Cooks' course at Fenham barracks, which was not far from Gosforth.

The one stipulation about being cook was that it would only apply whenever the Company was in different billets from any other company. At all other times I would be available for normal soldierly duties, which suited me down to the ground. The experience would be a challenge to me and I looked forward to it with the greatest enthusiasm.

I subsequently went to Fenham and soon realised that there was more to cooking than I had imagined but I came away feeling satisfied about the way I had absorbed the necessary knowledge to do the job entrusted to me.

Returning to Gosforth we were there for only two more days, after which the Battalion moved to do coastal duties where each Company had its allotted stretch of the beach to defend. I soon got the chance to show what I had learned about being Officers' Cook. I regret that I never made any notes about menus (for my memoirs) but that was of no consequence compared to other events.

The Battalion was billeted in nissen huts situated among sand dunes right on the coast from Blyth to Cullercoats and our 'A' company was at Seaton Sluice.

By November 1941 the Battalion had more important areas to defend, so once more we were on the move and ended up in Lincolnshire - guess what? - we were among sand dunes again at Donna Nook, but we covered an area with strange sounding names, North Somercoats, Marshchapel and North Coats; we were constantly on the move. We eventually ended up at a small village called Mareham-le-Fen.

From Mareham our Platoon was detailed to take its turn doing coastal duties on Skegness Pier. Weapon training played a very important part in our activities at Mareham because most of the lads had only ever fired rifles on a firing range. Now they were going to learn all there was to know about any weapon which they were likely to come into contact with and to respond instinctively to commands. Emphasis was also placed on section and platoon training. Another thing which was new to us happened one night, we were taken twenty miles away in transport where section leaders were given a compass and compass bearing, then we had to find our way back across country without cheating - it was a challenge accepted in good heart by us all.

Three days after that episode my platoon leader asked me if I would accept a stripe and become a section leader; this took no thinking about and the deed was done. I took my promotion seriously and got on well, the lads were my pals, anyway, and we all

worked well together. I still have my notebook containing the names of the soldiers in my section, which was number two.

Mareham was only a village. Consequently, during the evenings, there was little we could find to do as a diversion other than going to the local pub and here cash was always the problem. A great deal of time was passed playing cards on our beds - we didn't have a table.

Letter writing, too, was something which was a must to keep our folk happy. One day when our mail arrived, one of the lads who had received a letter from home thought he recognised the writing on the envelope and when he opened it, said a bit of foul language - it was a letter he had written to his mother and he had inadvertently put his own address on the envelope - his leg was pulled for days.

I was on good terms now with the Battalion cook because he knew I had been on a cooks' course and we could talk shop. On occasions, I would scrounge some bread and jam for supper for the boys in my hut - there was no canteen to go to.

I could count the times on one hand when we had access to a canteen or NAAFI during the whole time I was in the Army.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

8. TO THE MIDDLE EAST

It was the first week in December 1942 and rumours were circulating that some of us were being put on overseas draft. Our suspicions were confirmed when a list was put on the notice board giving out the names of those who would be going. My name was among fifty others and we all looked to see if our particular mates were included as, somehow, it didn't seem so bad as long as our pals were also going.

Within a matter of days we were going on nine days' embarkation leave. For relatives this kind of leave was most unwelcome, thinking anxiously if they could be seeing their sons or husbands for the last time. Soldiers, as a rule, were not too concerned about overseas duty; it was all part of the job and accepted with good heart.

Now, back at Mareham, things had moved ahead quite a lot and after we had been given a talk by the Commanding Officer we fell in on the road outside of the camp, it was a wet morning, the 19th December 730hrs. We were on our way, marching along carrying all our kit, to the railway station.

I should say here that I had lost my stripe, since it would not be fair for a Lance Corporal to go overseas and be expected to take command of a section of men who had already seen action in the desert many times. He would be out of his depth, regardless of his confidence.

We all felt certain we were going to the Middle East, though of course no information had been given to us for reasons of security. As all soldiers will know, during train journeys, some played cards, some slept, but almost always a mouth organ would be produced and we would have a good old sing song. Some really good times were had in the Army as well as the very sad times; that is how it had to be and gave us the kind of character we needed to do the job we had been trained for.

I remember travelling via Lincoln, Harrogate, Newcastle and Edinburgh. At each stop we would all pile out onto the platform to get a mess tin full of good strong tea and at Edinburgh, on Waverly station, we had a hot meal as for some reason there was a delay here. We arrived at Glasgow about 0600hrs. on the next morning.

The dock at Gourack was crowded with ships of all kinds - sorry I do not know anything about ships so cannot elaborate. Anyway, we went aboard small boats and were ferried out to a large ship which dwarfed everything around it. The weather was misty as it was early morning and as we drew nearer to the ship we were all dumfounded - it was the Queen Mary - I had never imagined that I would ever see the ship let alone sail on it.

We entered through wide doors in the side of the ship and the size of it astounded me. I was to discover that there were eleven decks from top to bottom, which was really just as well because fifteen thousand of us were packed into it.

Every company, of course, had its own quarters and notices were in the passageways giving directions so that we could not go astray. On those long corridors and staircases one could easily get lost on the ship. We all had a hammock and were rather crowded but really this only applied in our own area; there was plenty of room elsewhere on the ship.

My two pals and I managed to get a space near each other; they were John Bousefield and Arthur Oxley, only nineteen years of age and came from Stockton on Tees, only six miles from my hometown, so we had much in common to talk about - more of them later in my story.

We sailed on 23rd December and without an escort which surprised us. In no time at all we were most miserable. Despite the size of the ship the speed of it was causing it to toss about quite a bit and we were all very seasick. I was right out of sorts for three days and didn't care whether I lived or died - who needed Christmas dinner? My friend John and another lad called Young had the sickness even worse than me, so after recovery I helped them to cope with it.

When we had recovered and were raring to go, we began to explore the ship. The boat deck and the engine room were out of bounds. There were two very large dining rooms one of which was a boarded over swimming pool. We were all given a card to show when collecting our meal from the cafeteria and the food was excellent.

Training was out of the question through lack of space so we usually put on white cotton shorts and walked for hours around the decks, it was a vivid experience I was never to forget. The promenade deck was our usual haunt for much of the time, it was long and wide and had windows along the full length. We would laze around, talking, singing, playing cards or wrestling. Then of course there was the old standby, housy-housy or bingo, which was organised by the canteen - the charge was only one penny. It was a great canteen and everything on sale was American.

One morning after breakfast an Officer came and gave us a talk on the war situation and then he dropped a bombshell; apparently since 30th December we had all been transferred to the East Yorkshire regiment - it was almost like a red rag to a bull! It just gave me the impression that somebody was saying "Right you lot, whether you like it or not, you are transferred to the East Yorks and no moaning."

I had always been a Green Howard and proud of it, a good North Riding regiment and I was deeply disappointed. We were all Yorkshire lads from around the same area and this was very important to us. We were actually told, with great understanding by the Officer, the unavoidable reasons for the decision.

I was always an early riser and would walk for miles exploring the ship while the other lads were asleep. On one of my walks I became acquainted with a crew member and mentioned to him that I must have looked around the whole ship except the engine room, whereupon he said that he would have a word with his superior about me. Consequently he took me to look at the huge engine room and I was fascinated. Everything was spotlessly clean; the engineers would not have been out of place in a cookhouse, they were so clean. They explained some details which, I am afraid, were beyond my comprehension. There was just a deep steady throb; it was an unforgettable experience.

Boat drill was something not to be missed; we would be wandering around the ship when, all of a sudden, the alarm would sound and we had to make our way, without running, to an appointed place. Remember, there were fifteen thousand of us aboard. If any U Boat had been lying in wait for us, well, we did not care to think of the consequences, even though there were many lifeboats and all spare space on boat deck was taken up with Carley floats.

When we arrived at Freetown the natives came out to the side of the ship shouting a welcome and singing their songs to us - the next day we moved on again. The sea was very rough on the way to Capetown where we arrived on 5th January 1943. Looking at Capetown was an unbelievable experience. We were allowed on boat deck in order to get a better, uninterrupted, view of the city. Large properties were built on the lower slopes and were all white stone. In the background, Table Mountain was an inspiring sight and had mountain peaks on each side of it. The liner, Queen Elizabeth, was in the bay and dwarfed everything around it.

The Queen Mary had now been our home for fourteen days and at 0400hrs. on the 7th January the engines started to hum and we were on our way again. I often went to the stern of the ship to gaze down at the sea, looking at the water being churned up by the propellers. It was an unbelievable experience, going out to the Middle East on such a magnificent ship, and to think that in about three months many of the lads would be dead.

Our next sighting of land was Madagascar. I remembered reading about it at school and it had always had a fascination for me. Then, round the Horn of Africa, the weather became very hot and in no time we were dropping anchor at Aden. We were only there twenty four hours before we were on our way again to cover the 1450 miles of the Red Sea and to our destination.

Port Tewfik was a hive of activity with ships of every kind on all sides and it seemed that the Queen Mary had barely stopped when messages came over the tannoy system preparing us for disembarkation. We were soon being transferred onto coal barges to take us to the dockside.

I took my last look at the 'majestic Queen', how impressive. Even now after so many years I get all nostalgic whenever on the very few occasions I hear the ship mentioned, she is a beauty - or should I say was.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

9. THE DESERT

My first impression of Egypt was not very favourable, the Arab natives seemed to be carrying on where their forefathers had left off, they lived in squalid huts and were garbed in what looked like dirty night shirts! Children were everywhere, very unclean, and scrawny animals were roaming around about the dwellings. The built up areas of Egypt were of course totally different, more than acceptable.

Before we could bat our eyelids, or so it seemed, we were on Arab buses taking us to Qassisin camp where, it was alleged, if you hadn't 'jippy tummy' already this was the place you could expect it.

We went via Suez and Ismailia then alongside the Sweetwater canal. On arrival at the camp we had our first meal in Egypt and it was prepared by civilians - it was dreadful and that is another thing I will never forget.

I must mention the flies, I have never in my whole life seen so many flies, swarms of them would descend on everything, even as I was eating they would settle on my lips, it was most revolting. I reckon I must have had an iron constitution - give me good Army grub cooked by good Army cooks.

The huge tented camp was in the desert, the inhospitable desert, no give just take. There was a camp cinema and a canteen, no other amenities whatsoever, still, we made our own fun, there were twenty of us in a large square tent with three foot walls which had to be rolled up every day. Consequently when we returned from our duties everything was covered with sand. A great deal of time was passed writing letters and at a later date, airgraphs, this was a one page letter, which after being photographed, was reduced in size to about 5 x 4 inches because of the bulk of ordinary letters for transit purposes. I still have three airgraphs which I sent home.

Came the day for us to start training to accustom us to the heat of the desert - we would go for twenty mile route marches using water only when instructed by our Platoon leader. Our nearest town was Ismailia on the Suez Canal, not very clean in those far off days. I remember young boys who haunted off duty soldiers to buy obscene post cards. The only post card I have of that town shows me sitting on some railings, where I believe, every soldier had his photograph taken - my photo shows me almost black with the heat.

Talk about a small world, while I was in Ismailia one day I met an old pal, Ernie Booth from Mareham-le-Fen camp, who had come out on the draft after mine, he had also been posted to a different regiment, the Durham Light infantry.

We had been in Egypt about two weeks when the powers that be were calling for volunteers to join the paratroop regiment and a display of their art was laid on to encourage any of the lads to chance their hand. I was impressed sufficiently for it to give me something to think about. With hindsight and the fiasco at Arnhem I think I made the right decision to forget it. On another day an Officer came round amongst us looking for volunteers to take a course in driving Bren gun carriers. I thought about it and slept on it as the saying goes, then decided to give it a try.

To drive a Bren carrier fast across the desert and up and down large sand hills at speed is an unforgettable pleasure, mind you, if there were any German 88mm guns around it would be a different matter altogether.

For a while we had to guard thousands of German prisoners of war, it was not their fault that they had a maniac for a leader. We had to take out small parties for exercise. Two of my prisoners could speak good English and I used to converse with them and they told me about themselves and their families, I very soon came to the conclusion that not all Germans were bad, just as not all English are good - I had met some rare characters among our lads.

One of the German boys was named Helmut Beckermeyer and the other Alfred Decker, both came from Bremen. At a later date I wrote to their parents and told them I had spoken to their sons and said they were well and happy to have been taken prisoner. They were very grateful and wrote back to me - I received a photograph of Alfred as a token of thanks.

By now it would be about the 21st March. We had been in Egypt for two months and were wondering why we had been sent out here to the Middle East only to be messing about. It seemed to us that was all we were doing, but ours was not to reason why. We had certainly become acclimatised and were ready to move on. We had not been forgotten though, things were soon to get moving.





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

10. BACK TO THE GREEN HOWARDS

Our Platoon Sergeant came into the tent with orders for us to pack our kit and be prepared to move within twenty four hours, so we knew that we would soon be going into action.

For most of the lads, this would be their first confrontation with the enemy. I had been with the B.E.F. in France and had not forgotten all the why's and wherefore's and knew when to keep my head down and when to be aggressive, however these young men of nineteen had plenty of confidence and I felt certain that they would give a good account of themselves when the time came.

We climbed onto our three tonners and were soon on the way - our destination - Cairo airport. Travelling through Cairo was a bit of a nightmare for the drivers, simply masses of people and vehicles and there did not appear to be many rules of the road. At the airport we were all weighed with our kit, there would be about one hundred of us on the draft and we were counted into groups of twenty, each group being directed to a waiting Dakota aircraft. Ten men were sat on a bench on each side of the plane.

We were soon airborne and the plane passed over the pyramids and the sphinx which was really some sight to behold. We were on our way to join the 8th Army. The flight was uneventful as our Royal Air force had at this time mastery of the air. Landing at Benghazi to refuel, stretch our legs and to be given a meal, we saw there were burnt out vehicles and tanks everywhere and heaps of rubble which were once buildings.

Back onto the plane and our destination - Tripoli. The landing was a bit of nightmare because there were shell craters all over the runway as the fighting had passed that way only recently. The pilot, good as he was, could not avoid one of the craters with the result that the plane tipped up to an angle of forty five degrees throwing us all forward and yet none of us were hurt - it was a shock for the lads who were asleep - what a rude awakening! The air was blue with foul language. We crawled out and made our way to a hangar where we were to stay for the night and next morning marched to a tented camp just outside the city where we stayed for two days.

We were allowed to go into Tripoli to see the destruction which had been caused and the harbour area naturally had suffered the most, a great deal of demolition had taken place.

Once more embussing we went closer to the front, going over the very ground that a fierce battle had so recently taken place - the Mareth line. My old 6th Battalion had played a very significant part in the fighting for Mareth and had suffered many casualties, together with the other units of the 69th brigade.

We had now traversed the whole of Libya and were entering Tunisia after about sixty miles, passing through Medenine and Gabes we came to a standstill and debussed. After marching about ten miles we came to rest in a clearing among sand dunes and just stood around waiting for orders. Eventually an Officer arrived and I recognised him at once, but it held no significance for me at the time.

You will recall that I was my Company Commanders batman early in the war, consequently there were not many Officers in the Battalion I did not know. Coming closer, the Officer looked us all over, thinking his own thoughts, probably along the lines "poor lads, more common fodder" because he would realise that most of the new draft had never seen any action. I know he had a reputation for being a very good understanding man who was popular among those working alongside him. He was the motor transport Officer in the 6th Green Howards, Captain Carmichael. He came over to me and said "Well Cheall, you have caught up with us at last, good to see you". I replied that I was afraid I hadn't really caught up with them as I was now in the East Yorkshire Regiment. "Oh", he said "I can do something about that, just stand over there Cheall", and to the N.C.O. who accompanied him he said "transfer this man from the East Yorks to the Green Howards with immediate effect" - just as easy as that. My record card shows that it actually happened on 29th March 1943.

To say that I was dumbstruck would be putting it mildly. I could not very well jump for joy but I felt like it, I just said "thank you Sir, very much", but I knew he could sense that I was pleased to be once more a Green Howard. I looked forward to the prospect of meeting some of my old pals but I regretfully had to part company with the friends I had made in the 11th Battalion, that is what the Army does for you - no room for sentiment.

John Bousefield remained in the East Yorks, together with Norman Young; Arthur Oxley was transferred to the 6th G.H. although he too had always been in the 11th Battalion - the three of them were fated to be killed within days, but more of that later.

I had been a member of the East Yorks for only three months and now the esprit-de-corps of the British Army had cropped up again and it was a great feeling to be a Green Howard once again. We who had become part of the 6th departed the spot and walked about three miles, when we arrived at the rest area of the Battalion. They had no cover whatsoever and were just sitting or laying around resting and looked dead beat.

What I expected to see and what greeted me were two entirely different things - we didn't know at the time what hard battles the 50th division had fought or that the 6th had taken such a battering, as had all other units. The bitter confrontations with the enemy had caused devastation in their numbers.

Looking over the faces of the men lying around I recognised only one, mind you, this was 'C' company and I had always been in 'B', anyway the lad remembered me because he also used to be Company Commanders batman. The story I heard from Harry stopped me dead, he was most depressed and gave me the impression that nothing mattered now. He told me what the 6th had been through and I hope it will be of interest if I mention some of their exploits in my story.

In August 1941 they landed at Farmagusta in Cyprus and did some intensive training on the mountains. Early November found them in Palestine. At the end of the month they moved again to Persia, followed by Syria and Iraq - all the time preparing defences. Early in February they were at Alexandria in Egypt and almost at once moved again to positions near Tobruk - now comes the really hard part.

From these defensive positions recce. patrols were sent out seeking the enemy for three days at a time and losing men in the process. They were constantly on the move in the desert and conditions were dreadful. After a while they took up defensive positions in what were then called boxes, so that all sides could be defended.

Owing to the way the war was going at the time and the enemy being far superior in weapons, the box was surrounded and to cut a long story short, before they surrendered many had been killed, the remainder, apart from those who managed to escape were taken prisoner. That is the story I was told by Harry, so no wonder I didn't see any faces I recognised.

After talking to that poor lad I made my way over to 'B' company and didn't see anybody I knew except Company Commander Captain Hull who I knew had joined the 6th Battalion as a Subaltern in September 1939 and was a very brave Officer who would go through hell for his company of lads.

After being put into number fifteen Platoon I began getting to know the other lads and finding out that my section leader was a young man named Lance Corporal Coughlan. I had tiffin (lunch) with them then sat aside, my brain in a turmoil, remembering all the old names and faces I had known since August 24th 1939, but in the infantry one had to learn to come to terms with sudden death and changing circumstances and get on with life. I did just this and soon became involved in what we had to do, getting to know that most of the lads belonging to the new 6th were just as good soldiers as those I had known in the past.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

11. INTO BATTLE (AT WADI AKARIT)

While we were in the spot at which I joined the company the mobile showers came up and gave us a treat, it was the height of luxury to us and we were all raring to go.

Within twenty four hours we were told that we were going into action and to prepare ourselves. I will never forget the 6th April 1943.

The enemy were dug in at a place called Wadi Akarit in Tunisia and "had to be sent packing" to use General Montgomery's words. The day dawned and we embussed and were taken at about 1600 hrs to a clearing which was screened from the enemy by trees. It was getting dusk and we were assembled and told in no uncertain terms what was expected of us; also the method to be used to dislodge the enemy.

Unlike years ago, we were treated not as a number but as human beings by our Officers and the lads responded accordingly, by showing more interest than had previously been the case simply because we had been put in the picture.

It started at 0400hrs. on a lovely moonlit night, or should I say morning, when we began to move.

The enemy were ensconced on hills four miles away and the situation was as follows. The hills were, on the left, Jebel Fatnassa - Jebel is the Arabic for hill - reaching a height of about 80 metres; and on the right was Jebel Romana about the same height. These hills were joined by the Hachana ridge.

The two hills were rather steep at the front and our battalion was to attack a spot just right of centre where the ground was lower. In the background there was a whole range of hills which stretched away into the distance for as far as we could see and running along the whole front was a deep anti tank ditch. It was about six feet deep and eight feet wide. We were to attack as follows.

On our far left was the battalion of Gurkhas. To the right of them and to our left were the 5th East Yorks; then came us, with the 7th Green Howards on our right; then came the first class fighters of the 51st. Highland division who would attack Jebel Romana

We were given all that information at the outset also that it was up to us to 'give the buggers hell!'

As I said, it was 0400hrs. when we were led by our officers onto a flat plain keeping a distance of four or five yards apart. We advanced at a steady walking pace, into the unknown and had gone about one mile when the enemy let us know that he was expecting us and was responding. The shells began to come across accordingly but were falling short at this time - he was still finding his range. After another half mile it was a totally different story and the shelling became more accurate with the result that some of our lads began to fall wounded, killed and at times blown to smithereens. We were also being mortared now. Then the enemy put flares into the sky making it as light as day. Hell, I felt vulnerable but never afraid - we had other things to think about!

I will now digress, for a moment, because by the time we had reached the above mentioned positions the Gurkhas had gone into action in their usual way, silently and attacked without any artillery support using their Kukries - a very sharp curved broad knife about 18 inches long. These brave soldiers must have scared the wits out of the enemy, provided he lived long enough to be scared. Before he knew what was happening his head was on the ground.

Our 25 pounder artillery now opened up with a creeping barrage which, to the uninitiated, is a barrage of shells which keeps moving just ahead of the infantry. Meanwhile, the enemy threw everything at us, their machine guns now opened up and we felt very exposed on that flat plain - but there was no turning back and many lads went to join their comrades in heaven.

As we got nearer to the hills and as they were rather steep at the front, the enemy fire slackened off a little because we were below their sights, except for a time in the centre just left of us.

Up to now tanks had been very noticeable by their absence although one of ours had managed to get forward as furtively as possible before the flares went up and it had succeeded in filling-in part of the anti - tank ditch, sufficient for tanks to cross.

The sight which greeted us when we reached this tank, before it was knocked out of action was horrible - what an initiation to going into battle. The tank commander must have been in the turret directing operations when he was hit but would most certainly not have felt a thing. Something, whether it was a shell or machine gun fire, had cut him to ribbons. The body, or what was left of it, was leaning backwards. The stomach was ripped wide open, revealing his intestines, some of which draped over the side of the turret, and blood flowed freely down the side.

That scene would be the first tragedy that most of our lads had seen. I don't know what their thoughts could have been. I passed within six feet of that tank and the hoards of flies were already at work. It was a good job that the tank commander's loved ones would never know how he had died - just 'killed in action' covered everything.

We were now in our individual sections and were given orders about the advance. Keeping low and moving forward slowly but being shelled and mortared all the time and now and again a single shot being fired at us, (probably by a sniper after our N.C.O.) we made some headway into the hills.

Our section moved along the Wadi - a dried up river bed - then started to make for higher ground to give us an advantage over the enemy. Suddenly we came under machine gun fire and were pinned down. We could not move in any direction for twenty minutes until, quite unexpectedly, two of our tanks came along the bank of the Wadi and fired on the machine post which was pinning us down and under cover of this we reached safety - the battle was by no means over !

Under orders our section began to move to the right and would be about fifty yards from any other section. We were in open order of course, when suddenly and without us being aware that we were under observation, our section leader dropped stone dead only six feet away from me. We were horrified and I being the senior soldier took command. It all happened in seconds and I shouted to the other lads to keep firing towards the enemy trench on the hillside to make them keep their heads down. I grabbed poor Coughlan's sub-machine gun and shouted "come on lads, charge the bastards, send them to hell but keep firing and don't forget your grenades." When we were about ten yards away we had reached the top of the slit trench and we killed any of the survivors. It was no time for pussy footing, we were intoxicated with rage and had to kill them to pay for our fallen pal. This much I had learned at Dunkirk - no quarter given - and those Italians paid the supreme penalty. The event is still imprinted on my mind as if it was yesterday.

Our divisional partners in the battle were both more than holding their own.

Now came a warning of a German counter attack but this was really no tank country so the enemy only used infantry against us. A few of our lads fell wounded but the attack was too inadequate to succeed and our blood was up as we had all lost pals in the fighting so we gave them bloody hell!! One of our bren gunners was really on the boil, he charged the enemy, firing his bren from the hip, with his number two changing magazines as they ran. They were both awarded the Military Medal - sadly that gunner was killed in the Normandy invasion.

After another four hours of killing and winking out the enemy all fire stopped and it was all over.

We went over the whole area which had been held by the enemy and found caves which had been dug into the hill-sides. In many of these we could smell perfume and there was evidence of female occupancy. Though we had heard about these things previously it had been hard to believe, but now we knew.

We also came across four 88mm guns which had been abandoned by the Germans. It was the first time I had actually seen the awesome weapon at such close range but the possibility that they may be booby trapped prevented us from examining them too closely.

Retracing our steps, we returned to a clearing among the hills and a meal was brought up to us. On these occasions it was always corned beef stew and boiled rice and it was certainly appreciated.

Our company commander then said a few words about the result of the action and gave us some praise, which was typical of Captain Hull.

As we rested it was decided that we would stop at this spot for the night but first we had to make sure that all the dead were taken care of. Myself and another soldier were detailed to bury a body which was lying a little distance away - the stretcher bearers were busy taking care of the wounded - so off we went with our entrenching tools. What I saw when I reached the body appalled me. It had been blown to pieces, the legs and one arm were lying yards away, the face was just not there at all and the body was ripped open. Never before had I experienced a situation like it but the job had to be done.

We dug a shallow grave (because the remains had to be recovered later) and put the torn limbs into it. Then I found the identity discs - the name was Arthur Oxley, one of my pals on the Queen Mary and I don't know how I contained my emotions at that moment. I took off one of the discs for our officer to report, we had to do that, and left one in the grave.

Arthur's equipment, of course, was scattered and suddenly I found a half of a Green Howard cap badge. The blast had cut and twisted the badge which must have been in the small pack or Arthur's pocket. That half cap badge is among my souvenirs.

After burying that poor lad we put stones on the grave in the shape of a cross and then made a small cairn to identify the grave to the people who had the dreadful task of recovery. We then went back to our platoon and reported what we had done.

All next day I could not forget how a human body could be so violated as was Arthur Oxley's.

Next morning we walked only about five miles and were halted for two days.

The East Yorks had come to rest next to us and I went over to see John Bousefield only to discover another sad thing. My best pal had been killed on the plain during the approach into the attack. I was now devastated once again. That was two grand young lads only nineteen years of age - dead - and when I had last seen them only a matter of days ago they were laughing and cracking jokes.

What a tragedy war is. Amongst the many other casualties at Wadi Akarit were Sergeant Myson and Corporal Shaw. No, I will never forget the 6th April 1943, but life had to go on. most of the lads belonging to the new 6th were just as good soldiers as those I had known in the past.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

12. PREPARING

The eighth armoured brigade followed by the New Zealand division now passed through our lines and continued to pursue the enemy on his retreat North - we were off the order of battle to rest for three days, right now nothing would be more welcome than to lie in a grass field and rest our heads on our small packs, and that is just what we did. Rommel had made a stand just North of Enfidaville.

Tunisia, unlike many of the other Arab countries is a green country and it was a treat to see oranges, lemons bananas and date palms growing - there were also far fewer flies than elsewhere. Replacing the flies unfortunately were mosquitoes - any uncovered part of the body was a target for them. I had nineteen bites on one hand, many of the lads went down with malaria at a later date, the Mepacrin must have worked for me.

Though we were still being spasmodically shelled in our rest area, it was nothing to cause us any anxiety and our 25 pounder shells were music to our ears, giving Jerry a pasting! Our division did not see any further part in this theatre of war, the honour of seeing the enemy routed right out of North Africa was largely being left to others who had not already chased the enemy for two thousand miles and 50th division would not be able to relish the opportunity of seeing the total surrender in Tunisia of an enemy who had put up such tenacious resistance from Alamein to Tunis. This was also the case in Sicily and Europe, and it was not playing the game! 50th division were always withdrawn for more important rolls, so that at least is something to be proud of.

Before we left Enfidaville I was more than pleased to receive seven letters which I took aside and read and read again many times. Also at this time we were informed of the casualties suffered by our Battalion at Wadi Akarit, they were two senior officers killed, six senior N.C.O's and junior officers and one hundred and eighteen other ranks.

On 23rd April we moved further to the rear, passing through Sousse and coming to rest in our divisional area twelve miles North of Sfax. Nobody knew why we had been taken out of action, I suppose at the time none of us cared either, expecting that the high command would, we hoped, have the situation well in hand. This was by no means always the way we thought! What we were sure about, was that a fleet of three ton trucks arrived in our motor transport compound and next day we were enlightened a little more.

We had to pack our kit and were going back to Egypt for reasons unknown at the time - back to the flies, but that was of no importance after what we had experienced over the past few days.

Our convoy began its journey on the 25th April at just a steady speed, any ex-servicemen will know that army vehicles had governors on the engine - a device to prevent speeding. The journey was to be about two thousand miles, taken in easy stages, especially for the benefit of those conscientious chaps of the Royal Army Service Corps. or RASC who I don't believe ever received the credit they deserved for the demanding work they did during the war years.

Travelling through the battle areas down to Akarit, I could not avoid casting my thoughts over past events, it had been a very traumatic time in my life, going over the battle in my mind, thinking of every detail, poor Oxley and the tank commander dominated my thoughts, their loved ones would not yet know. I wondered if the shattered remains of men were ever recovered - even if they weren't, their souls were with their maker and what remained would rest where we had buried them until they returned to dust. I said to myself a little prayer as I passed Akarit, my religious thoughts were very important to me.

For many years past I have, every couple of years, looked over my wartime souvenirs and read my memoirs - I may be a sentimental fool but comradeship was ingrained into my character for seven years and will be part of my memories for as long as I live. I find it gives me enormous pleasure just thinking of times long gone and which I pray that today's youth will never have to endure.

About ten miles past Akarit we made a stop in a green field and a good place to get our heads down as we were here for the night. We had only been there an hour when our company commander came up to me and enquired about how L.Cpl. Coughlan had died because he knew that the lad was my section leader, apparently L.Cpl Coughlan used to be in the intelligence section and the Captain knew him well. Then, just as a casual remark the Officer said "by the way Cheall" I am told that you used to do a little cooking back in the 11th Battalion" I replied "that's right Sir", and he wondered if I would fancy trying my hand at it now. I asked if it would be under the same arrangement, part time soldier and part time cook, which would be fine by me and he agreed that the same conditions would apply. I would be Company Officers cook whenever the company was at a separate station to Battalion headquarters,

other than when we were in action of course, Officers then had the same food as the men.

I kept in touch with the lads and also improved my knowledge of cooking. A 2nd Lieutenant walked up to me and said "right Cheall, what's for dinner?" Of course he was only kidding then, though I did return to where I had been resting and thought about what I had taken on. Next day I prepared a meal for the five company officers.

Although I made notes of many things in my spare time during the war I never wrote about anything I cooked, which I regret, except that is, for one occasion in Sicily - more of that later. However, I remember I went to the company cookhouse for rations - they were a grand lot in the army - the Sergeant cook said "well Cheall, what are you after?", because at first he thought I was having him on, so he said "bugger off grubbs up in two hours" and insisted that I was coming the old soldier, as the army saying goes. Eventually I was given the rations when my Platoon Commander came up and explained.

Of course under such conditions our cooking stove, as all ex-servicemen will know, was as follows. Take one water can, cut it in half, fill both halves with sand and soak the sand in petrol, take a match and you have two small fires - that is how I cooked my first officers meal in the Middle East.

Continuing on our way next morning and going past Tripoli, we were back into the inhospitable desert. The debris of war littered the ground everywhere - the Arabs must have had a whale of a time when a battle had moved on. We camped one night at Benghazi and a sand storm came up. I had never before experienced a sand storm in the desert, it was never to be forgotten. There was almost minus visibility and after the storm had passed there was sand in everything.

The convoy was travelling along the coast road, the same road that had been used by both sides, back and forth, the thousands of soldiers and vehicles which must have fled each way with the flow of the conflict. I bet the Germans went hell for leather when the 8th Army was chasing them. It took us until 6th May to reach our destination, Sidi Bishr camp very near to Alexandria and it was in a hard sandy field alongside the main road to Alex. We had small tents with three of us sharing and had to be on our knees to crawl in - not much fun. The Battalion was all together here so I hadn't any cooking to do.

It would have been a treat at this time to have had a show put on for us, by ENSA, but no such luck. I was in the Army for almost seven years and only once did we have a concert laid on, that was at Southwold early in 1944 when we were entertained by Cyril Fletcher on the Pier Theatre.

We were at Sidi Bishr for five weeks, reorganising and re-equipping all companies to a high degree. One Platoon at a time was given a three day pass to go into Alexandria and my pal George Bertram and I went together on leave and we stayed at what we call a boarding house. Just the owner at a desk in the entrance where we paid our piastres and were given a key and room number. It was just a very plain room, thin carpet, hard bed, two chairs and a table, with a water jug and bowl standing on it - who cared - we didn't and we had to go to the Y.M.C.A. for meals and cakes.

While George and I were out one day another pal who was not on leave called into my room - no key needed - and pinched my cakes, leaving a letter explaining. I kept that letter - poor [Charlie Lee](#) was a casualty of war in Sicily.

While I was in Alex. I thought I would go down to the docks to see if by any chance H.M.S. York was in dock as I knew it was in the Med., I had a pre-war pal called Bill Collings who was an engine room artificer on board. I went to the gate and explained, showing my pay book. The gate keeper was very understanding and told me that the ship had been damaged in action in the Med. but had limped into Suda Bay in Crete, where, during the battle for Crete, it had been hit by an Italian remote controlled explosive boat. Only two men lost their lives and Bill was one of them. Incidentally, his brother Vernon died in India, what a tragedy for their parents, the boys were only nineteen and twenty two.

Alex. was a very bustling place with people of all nationalities crowding the streets and the trams were outrageous, simply loaded with people, they seemed to be clinging on by any available means. I never found out if anybody paid a fare, I did travel on the trams a couple of times but am afraid the details have gone with the passage of time.

One thing I do remember though, is that each morning when I went out in my khaki drill uniform, which was only shirt and shorts, there was no shortage of street photographers, which I was pleased about because I still have the snaps. also as soon as I went outside the door of the place where we were staying a little boy of nine or ten years would be waiting, he would say "hey Sojer I clean your boots, I clean good and shiny." He was such a character, pitch black, with white teeth, so this 'sojer' let him do his cleaning each morning even though my boots were already clean, I had a snap taken of him doing his polishing.

One thing many of the lads went to Alex. for was, well, any ex-serviceman who has been in Alex. will have heard of Sister Street, even if he never went there himself, most of the married men and many of the young lads frequented the place. Out of sheer curiosity I just had to go and see what they were all on about. No - I didn't partake of the dubious pleasure, my moral principles were above that kind of thing. I could not accept that it was decent, going with a female who was having 'you know what' with hundreds, maybe thousands, of all kinds of men.

Three days soon passed, anyway we were broke once again which was nothing new, we went back to camp to find that another move was on the cards. From Sidi Bishr we moved to a camp alongside the Suez Canal. Each day we would go by transport to the Gulf of Akaba - I have read 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' by Lawrence of Arabia and it brought back memories, but 'to Akaba' was not our cry ! Here we would board an assault craft and be taken to a spot two miles out to sea, then the craft would turn about and at full speed make for the beach. We were laden down with all manner of kit and when the water was waist deep the ramp would crash down and

out we went as fast as we could, encouraged by our N.C.O.'s.

Jumping into the water we ran up the beach shouting and yelling and firing blank ammunition at an imaginary enemy. It was strenuous but easy, there were no enemies firing at us and we could imagine from past experience what it would be like under real conditions. What we did know from the first day of the exercise was that we were going to invade somewhere and we also knew now why we had left Tunisia when we did. We did a lot of other training to make us fitter than we had ever been. laden with kit we would run up and down hills to strengthen our legs and jump into fifteen feet deep sand pits. We knew why, when we had landed in Sicily, but of course nobody knew this at the time.

The restriction on mail was lifted for a short while so I sent home all my photographs and letters I wanted to keep. all written mail was censored of course, still who would want to worry our loved ones by telling them of our experiences.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

13. SICILY

The training for our new venture was now complete. We were ready for the off and we didn't have long to wait. In the early hours of 5th July 1943 we embarked on board ships at Suez and we sailed to Port Said. It was early next morning by the time our invasion fleet moved off for our destination.

When the convoy was assembled it was of formidable size, never before had anyone seen so many ships at one time, over three thousand craft of all sizes. We said "where the hell can we be going?". This question to each other was soon answered when we were told over the tannoy, what it was all about. It was Sicily. We had never taken part in an invasion and our minds boggled at the prospect but we were not at all apprehensive about the task which we were to undertake. We were told all we needed to know for the job we had to do including the landing place, what the whole invasion force consisted of and also what was expected of us during the operation which was given the code name 'Operation Husky' - it was to be a combined operation.

The sea was rough and gave us a little concern while we waited around for something to happen. On this occasion the 69th Brigade of which the 6th G.H. was a part, were to be the follow up to the initial assault and it was just after midnight when we dropped anchor about seven miles from the objective. Later, during the early hours, about 4.30am we climbed down the scrambling nets and into our assault craft which were bobbing up and down like corks, it was the first time we had had experience of this sort, the sensation of going to put our foot on something solid and finding it wasn't solid at all, but almost alive. By the time the other assault craft had assembled it would be about six o'clock and seven miles from the beaches. Our beach was called Jig which was near Avola and we were due to land at 8am.

I know everybody was surprised at the lack of opposition, even though we had not been in the first wave and consequently we were soon established on dry land, but with very wet legs. This same day we had to do a march of twenty miles but again without much sign of the enemy, still it was a very tiring day as we had not been able to get much sleep during the previous night. Our objective was to be Syracuse; during our march I vividly remember searching a shed for the enemy and what did I find? - four naked men lying on tables, the corpses were starting to decompose, they were being eaten by maggots and the bodies also showed evidence of torture. It was beyond my comprehension how anybody could do this kind of thing to another human being - I hope they perished in Hell.

We progressed up the Eastern side of the island to make an attack on Sortino and during this period came under attack by the enemy and lost some of our lads, including Sgt.Harrington, [John Ryan](#), [Charlie Lee](#) and Jack Betly.

Sicily is a very mountainous country and we could see Mount Etna from wherever we happened to be, but of course there were cultivated areas also and tomatoes and seedless grapes were growing for hundreds of yards in each direction - oh those seedless grapes - we would just grab a handful as we walked past the bushes were only about three feet high. The climate is ideal for growing citrus fruits and as we walked along the sides of the road the civilians were offering us oranges and lemons. They were very pleased to realise that the Germans were going to be evicted from their beloved Sicily.

We had to walk many miles in Sicily, but of course there were times when we used transport, most of the roads were only dirt roads and huge clouds of dust would rise with the passage of the vehicles, particularly the Bren gun carriers. The roads snaked around the mountains and one could look out from the back of the three tonners down into the valley - the beauty of the countryside however was the last thing on our minds.

Now, for the first time since landing we came to a halt which seemed to be causing the high command some anxiety. At a later date we knew what the problem had been and it is written about in other books but this is my story and at the time of the event we had no idea why we were being held up. It was Primosole bridge, and during the next three days a fierce battle took place ahead of us. Much of the fighting was done by the 151st Brigade of 50th Division. This Brigade consisted of the Durham Light Infantry, those lads gave the German paratroops a very hard time when they were dropped, to try and secure the bridge which crossed the river Simeto. We knew also that British paratroops were being dropped because we saw them. at the time our Battalion were in a position on the hillside overlooking Primosole bridge, though a little distance away we were still in a situation where we were being shelled by the enemy 88mm guns and consequently suffered some casualties. We had had to assault the hills in order to deny the advantageous

position to the enemy and in the process we captured thirty five Italian prisoners and several Germans - unfortunately we lost ten of our own men also.

After the Primosole bridge battle came to a conclusion we moved from the area and realised that the encounter with Jerry had been very fierce, bodies were scattered all over the river and on the ground, corpses, parachutes and weapons lay around everywhere.

It was now 25th July and we relieved the Durham Light Infantry in the line of battle and very shortly after taking up our positions our regimental aid post was hit by a shell which killed our medical officer, the Padre and a medical orderly.

After starting to advance once again we were constantly held up by mines which had already killed an officer and his batman and we soon met our next stubborn resistance, it was on the plain in front of Catania airfield and in the distance was Mount Etna.

We had cause to dig deep slit trenches here, about a mile in front of the airfield because the enemy shelling was very severe, they being on the slopes above us. If we had not taken up position during the hours of darkness we could not have reached these positions so near to the enemy. We held onto our defences for two days whilst the powers that be decided what to do, then our 25 pounders opened up with such a tremendous barrage, the sound of the shells screaming overhead was terrific. We now had tanks in support and we attacked with some losses but the enemy were forced to evacuate their positions on the mountainside and many Italian prisoners were taken - it always seemed to be the German element who managed to get away to fight another day!

Soon after the action at Catania we rested overnight in a field and over the other side of the hedge we had the company of a squadron of tanks and during the evening we heard a tremendous bang only yards away from us. apparently one of the crew had been cleaning the gun barrel and was taking a look through, the same as we looked down our rifles to examine them, when somehow or other the gun was fired and the soldiers head had been blown off and there on the ground was a headless and shoulderless body - killed in action ! What a way to die.

We continued to advance up the Eastern side of the island, sometimes travelling in transport and this day going along the narrow road which had been cut out of the mountainside we came to a section of about ten yards which had been blown and was impassable. The mountain towered way above us almost vertically and the sea was to be seen about three hundred feet below, it was really a spectacular view to admire had we not been in this situation. However the Sappers soon put a Bailey Bridge across and we were on our way, those engineers certainly knew their job.

Once again we were on foot and walking through villages which had recently been occupied by the enemy, we were welcomed by the inhabitants. One day we walked along this street making sure that no enemy had been left behind to harass us, when I saw a small boy in the street and he stepped on a mine, he was blown into the air and killed. The things that one witnessed during war were heartbreaking.

It would be about 7th August when we learned that the war in Sicily was over. We were told that although it had been a short fierce campaign, the 50th division had played an important roll.

I remember walking with the other lads of our company and seeing the signpost Letojani, the seaside village was only half a mile away and that is where we were to rest our weary bodies. Battalion H.Q. was billeted at Taormina a beautiful place perched on the hilltop above our village, we were about forty miles from Messina.

It was at Letojani that whilst the other lads of the company were resting and bathing in the sea, which they well deserved, that I was told I would be taking up the Officers mess cooking again, the company being in it's own quarters. We were all billeted in houses now and my room was above the kitchen of a large house which was occupied by air officers.

We had been here a few days when an officer came to me and said that some very important visitors were going to meet at our Battalion headquarters in Taormina in a matter of days. It transpired that all officers mess cooks had to contribute something towards the meal that was being laid on and I was asked if I could prepare hors d'oeuvres for the occasion. Fortunately I had brought my sisters Mrs.Beeton cookery book from England so I had no problems, except for supplies, in preparing such delicacies, I informed the Mess Officer and without more ado and within two hours the Commanding Officers jeep with driver turned up at my cookhouse door, "come on Bill we are going for rations". Well, the drive was unforgettable, about twenty five miles through the foothills of Mount Etna, which was smoking away. The views were magnificent, I had never before seen anything like it. I should really in my later life have gone back, but that is how it goes. On our way to our destination we drove through groves of oranges, lemons, melons and olives. After such a passage of time I have forgotten what I prepared as my part for the delectation of our important visitors but afterwards I was told who they had been - Montgomery and Eisenhower !

Years later when I read about the Sicilian campaign it gave me great pleasure to remember the tiny part I played in it.

Return to Top of Page





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

14. OUR RETURN TO ENGLAND

Our battalion was now occupied in cleaning-up operations around the area and our own company was kept very busy. In addition to this there were the all important guard duties to be reckoned with. Two soldiers were on guard together and they always had to be on the alert, not only for their own sakes but for the remainder of the company and vehicles, after all, this campaign had only just reached a conclusion and there was always the possibility that enemy agents were up to no good.

The day arrived when we were told that all stores and vehicles were to be handed over to a battalion which was taking our place and that our division together with the 51st. Highland Division was going back to England. Anticipation was hard to conceal, even our Officers seemed to be very light hearted.

Another episode of my life was drawing to a close and a new one about to unfold, with yet more memories to store away for future moments of reminiscence.

Travelling by transport we went back along the road we had traversed over the past weeks and I took a long lingering look at Etna, those groves of citrus fruits and the glorious view from the mountain road across to the sea. It was all so unforgettable and I haven't forgotten either, consequently I have read avidly many books about Sicily and now I am writing my own little episode of that picturesque country.

By now we had arrived at the port of Augusta on the East Coast and we went aboard the troopship Otranto on the 17th October, sailing next morning.

The ship was no Queen Mary by any stretch of the imagination but nobody cared if we were a bit crowded and uncomfortable, the ship was England bound. However, we could have done without the rather rough sea tossing us about.

We arrived at the busy port of Algiers on 25th October where we stayed for two days, then we were on our way again and I remembered all the ships which must have been sunk in this part of the Mediterranean during the siege of Malta.

Arriving at Gibraltar we stayed for twelve hours for some reason or other unknown to us. We had a perfect view of the rock and the activity in the harbour - pity we couldn't have gone ashore but of course it was quite impossible, though I didn't hear anybody complain, their minds were on more important destinations.

It was very rough passing through the Bay of Biscay but we were good sailors by now and anyway England would soon be on the horizon. During the early hours of the 5th November 1943 we docked at Liverpool - what a laugh - bonfire night coming up - we had heard enough fireworks to last us a lifetime. It was a pitch dark night and raining too and for security reasons there was no brass band to welcome us home. Anyway nobody cared, we were homesick and very, very tired, but it was a fantastic feeling to have English soil beneath our feet, even if it was dark, wet and windy.

Transport was waiting for us at the dockside and we were very soon on our way through devastated Liverpool, we could hardly believe our eyes at the destitution we saw all around us.

New quarters were somewhere ahead of us, but we had a good way to go yet. It turned out to be Riddlesworth camp, which was about three miles outside of Thetford in East Anglia. It was still daytime so we were able to observe what sort of camp it was - all Nissen huts. No sooner had we settled in and not given a chance to explore the area, when we were all paraded and told that we would be going on leave without delay.

Next morning we collected our back pay which had accumulated, also our travel warrants, then we had a good dinner to see us on our way. Afterwards transport took us to the station, only a skeleton staff had been left at the camp.

During my seven years in the Army I was granted fifty six days leave, apart from the weekend passes I was able to get when I was stationed within reasonable travelling distance of my home. Although it always felt great to be going home for a spell I cannot recall anything significant about my leaves, except one - this one - it was going to be a good one!

Before the War I was a member of the Methodist Church (I still have my wartime membership card) and attended regularly, so while I was home this time I went to church and prayed for the pals I had lost and for their loved ones left behind, and of course I thanked the Lord for bringing me safely home. At this time I had two other duties to perform. I went to see John Bousefields mother and two elder brothers who lived just a few miles from my home town. All I can say is that after introducing myself and telling them that John was my pal, they just seemed to be in such a dreadful state of mind at the loss of their lad at only nineteen years of age, that they could not speak, and I left.

I had another, similar experience at this time; before the war started I had a pal named Don Savage, he was only eighteen and when he left the grammar school he joined the RAF becoming an air gunner on Lancasters. When he went on one of the bombing raids he was posted missing, never to return. I went to see his mother who lived in my home town and had the same experience as I had with my other friends family, how sad those two visits were.

All leaves passed too quickly and I was soon on my way back to camp on the usual overcrowded trains, sitting in the corridor on my kit bag, there never seemed to be a seat on trains in those days and there were always a long wait at transfer stations. The compensation was that there was usually a welcome cup of tea from the Salvation Army or Women's Voluntary Service.

There was nothing makeshift about Riddlesworth camp, it was very well organised and for the first time since my call up we had a proper NAAFI. Another advantage was that we had good metal beds and three blankets, which we needed, as it was a bitter cold winter, the camp was rather exposed to the elements and we had just returned from the hot climate of the Middle East.

When we left Sicily all our stores and vehicles had been left behind for the use of other regiments taking our place, now here at Riddlesworth everything was replaced. Only a very limited programme of training was laid on, but of course this arrangement would not be for long. We had no illusions about our return to England, the war was far from over and we knew that the invasion scare was behind us. Discussions amongst ourselves led us to believe that at some point we would be going into Europe, but of course at that time nobody knew anything about the roll that our 50th division would play in the invasion of the continent.

I was kept rather busy as I was cooking again. The guard would wake me up at 5am every morning and after I was ready I would go to my Officers mess hut which included a room set aside for a kitchen. I would make early morning tea and prepare for the cooking of breakfast, while the Officers Batmen came to collect their charges morning tea. Rations were allocated on a generous scale and we lived rather well.

After breakfast the Duty Officer would come and see me and talk about the days menu - depending upon what particular rations were available for that day. Having settled that I would tidy my kitchen; I didn't have any help but this was not really a problem as there were only five Officers. Around 10am my pal Jack Spooner who worked in the orderly room would pop in for a cup of tea and a chat with me, then an Officer might put his head round the door and say "Any tea on the go Cheall?" I always made fresh tea, I couldn't do with the brew which was permanently on the stove where one kept adding more tea and more water until the spoon stood up in it!

It was now January 1944 and we made yet another move - always on the move - to Southwold, on the coast in Suffolk, we were billeted in requisitioned houses.

For some reason unknown to us the equipment we had been issued with at Riddlesworth was totally withdrawn and everything replaced - ours not to reason why but to do as we were told. No sooner had we settled in at Southwold when we were involved with new training methods, using section, platoons and companies, employing different tactics from those used so far. We had in fact to learn a new art of warfare almost from scratch. It seemed stupid to us at the time, but eventually in Normandy we realised the purpose behind the apparent madness.

Our stay at Southwold didn't last long and in no time we were on the move yet again.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

15. INTENSIVE TRAINING

The time had come for our training to be stepped up to a higher level of intensity, fit and ready for any eventuality, and so, for this reason we found ourselves on trains bound for - well that was anybody's guess - all we knew was that we were heading North. Thinking of times such as this I don't think any Second World War soldier will ever forget the old wartime songs and the comradeship created by them. For security reasons we were never told where our destination was and of course this made sense. It wouldn't do for Tommy to write home saying that 50th Div. were going to such and such a place.

As the train sped on its seemingly endless journey the boys were saying "Where the hell are they taking us?" Well, they took us to Scotland, to a training ground near Inverary which is North west of Glasgow, it was somewhere different anyway. I had never been to Scotland but I was to get to know it and love it over the next eighteen months - that wasn't right now!

The real reason for the special training we were to undergo in the days to come was not apparent to us until June when we became very much enlightened. It was rough, tough, wet and bitter cold and most certainly uncovered any weaknesses in our fitness; there was no need to wonder why those Scots lads of the 51st Highland Division were a hardy lot.

The camp had been especially built and laid out so that soldiers undergoing the course here would be at the peak of their fitness when they left. We were in nissen huts once more, which I must say were of a warmer variety than any encountered so far in my experience; I suppose they needed to be too judging by the climate. Each hut was in its own clearing and was surrounded by tall trees, how the wind blew in those trees. The whole site was totally desolate and without any amenities or comfort whatsoever.

This, most certainly was not going to be a rest cure, that was beyond any doubt and we were soon to find this out for definite. It was a regular commando course and it was to prepare us for strenuous times ahead. We tackled everything with a will because we were urged on by regular commandos; running, climbing up the mountain sides, crawling through swampy ground and along ditches half full of mud and water until we were up to the eyes with filth. We went across ropes suspended over the river which was fast flowing, though only three feet deep; two of the boys fell into the water but fortunately there were ropes across the river on the water line - although their enthusiasm was dampened somewhat they easily hauled themselves out. There were ropes tied on strong branches of the trees and we had to climb up hand over hand. This was most certainly no place for the faint hearted and for the first week we were all aches and pains - after that we just became fitter and fitter and it felt great. We were very well fed and, being kept on our toes, the time passed quickly and the course came to an end.

We took transport from the camp to the railway station and I remember passing by Inverary castle which I have never forgotten, or the mountains of Scotland, or that training course !

The lads were making bets as to where we were going this time as the train sped on its way, the only time we stopped was for a meal break. There were always red caps (military police) on the stations to make sure nobody was in the

mood for absconding, or as we would say in those days 'buggering off'. Doors would clang shut and on our way we went further South.

The following lines are taken from my diary and which I wrote a week after it happened.

'As we passed through the countryside of Southern England and our troop train was passing beneath a bridge we heard such an awful screeching and crashing of coaches. As the coach which was two behind mine was going under the bridge a lorry crashed through the parapet and landed in-between two coaches and separated the train. The following three coaches came off the track and ploughed into the field on the left, which fortunately was accessible from a main road and the services were soon on the scene. Injured and dead lay all over the place.'

How unlucky for those lads who had fought for their lives in North Africa and Sicily, only to be killed in such a tragic way in England. We had to hang around for some time whilst another train was brought up, then on we went with saddened hearts. Many of the boys were really shaken up by the accident but soldiers having the temperament necessary for doing the job they were trained to do were soon playing cards again.

At last our mystery trip was over and we arrived at Boscombe which was then in Hampshire. The town was about nine miles from Highcliffe castle where I was billeted in 1940. During our stay at Boscombe we were in a very large hotel called the Burlington which was used only by troops. It was about four hundred yards from the beach which was at the bottom of quite a steep hill. Here we had a rest of sorts. Apart, that is, from running down the beach and doing physical training exercises, which was a laugh after Inverary. Then we would run length wise in two feet of sea - it was too bad if we fell over! The stay was easy and we slept like logs on our palliasses - well - who needed luxury accommodation anyway ? - We did.

The one item of real training we did at this time was every third day, when we would be taken to Southampton and, among the debris of bombed buildings, we made practice attacks on part demolished property. We shouted and yelled at an imaginary enemy and, using live hand grenades, gained experience in street fighting. We hadn't done anything of this sort before and it proved to be invaluable knowledge, also to the NCO's and Officers, some of whom had never even been in action before.

Just a couple of hundred yards from our billets there was a small cafe run by the YMCA where we could buy beans on toast and other light meals as well as cakes and of course good old 'cha'. The YMCA also had a larger cafe at Bournemouth, only three miles away, where we went several times - its still there on Westover Road. Apart from the pubs there was not much activity in Boscombe, it was a typical seaside town in Winter. On the other hand it was the first time ever that I had actually been stationed in a town and the residents were very tolerant towards us.

This short respite soon came to a conclusion and once again we were on the move, finishing up at Studland Bay. In those days it was desolate and was, what we in the Army called, a dump. Fortunately we were not here long. We came to Studland Bay for sea to land exercises and I got the impression that it was the intention of higher authority to make us as wet as possible and often as possible, and then go on a cross country manoeuvre whilst our clothes dried on us.

After being taken out to sea a couple of miles the assault craft would turn around and at speed make for the beach. We jumped into three feet of water after the ramp went down, then hasten up the beach to attack an imaginary enemy - just as in the gulf of Akaba before Sicily. We, of course, were certain that we would be invading somewhere in the not too distant future. After we had engaged 'the enemy' we had to proceed inland at a fast pace and do a forced march away from Studland, round Corfe Castle and back without any halts.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

16. TIME FOR ACTION

Studland Bay was only a short stay and the beginning of April saw us at yet another place, Bushfield camp, about two miles outside Winchester. Here we were under canvas and luckily the weather was fine. I remember the main cookhouse was just set up on the grass and we had to join long queues in order to be served with our meals - I don't know why the Army could not have provided waitress service for its infantry ! In the field next to ours there were some American soldiers who appeared to be from a different planet, their easy going attitude and the way they slouched about left a great deal to be desired - still they were our allies and I am sure they were a good lot at heart.

Winchester was really a rest for us after our exertions of the past weeks. Weapon training and kit inspections being the order of the day. I did make a couple of trips into Winchester and nothing happened to make me want to go back in later years.

Guess what ? - another move - this time to a delightful place in the country about three miles outside Romsey, it was great, see how you fancy it. This was the second week of May 1944, we were in bell tents in a wooded area running alongside the main road and our tents were pitched beneath the trees and there were ants everywhere; it was drizzling with rain and almost the whole time weapon cleaning was a nightmare. OK, so I fibbed a bit !

It was at Romsey that things began to happen and left us in no doubt as to future moves. Suddenly all outgoing mail was stopped and we were confined to camp, yet strangely enough, I don't recall any extra security being placed around us. Our woods did not have a boundary fence patrolled by military police, nothing at all, we could just have walked out. Of course it was entirely the word of honour of the lads and we were trusted accordingly. Anyway who would want to go to the nearest pub and talk his head off and perhaps jeopardise the whole thing. Having said that, the military police would most certainly be on the alert in areas away from the camp, particularly in pubs and at bus and railway stations.

The date would be about the 22nd of May. During the following few days we were put in the picture with regards to several things which had been on our minds for some time now. Considering the variety of training and exercises we had been undergoing during the past few weeks it was obvious that we would be playing a significant roll in any invasion whenever it came.

The reason for our return to England, along with the 51st Highland Division soon became clear because we were told what our roll was going to be as part of the invasion force. 50th Division as we were always called, would be landing on a section of the beach code named 'Gold' with a three mile frontage. As a part of 50th division our 69th Brigade would be assaulting the section of the beach code named 'King'. In order to demonstrate the situation to us a hut had been built among the trees and a large sand table had been set up, around which a platoon of soldiers looked eagerly on while a senior Officer with long cane demonstrated.

On the tables, models were displayed showing every building, fence, track, stream, in fact every possible detail, which we had to recognise when we landed. the models also showed beach obstacles which we could expect to encounter - the whole set up was incredible. All these details we had to picture in our minds eye because speed would be of the essence once we set foot ashore. All kinds of questioning was encouraged except where it was going to be. The planning was on an incredible scale.

After the lecture we were all agog, wondering where the landing would be taking place and any amount of guess-work went on about the subject. It was to be some days before we found out. We also received a pep talk from our Commanding Officer about what was expected of us and the general state of the war situation; he spoke for an hour, the intention being to boost our morale. However there was no cause for concern, our spirits were never better. The Green Howards were a grand bunch of lads from the North Riding of Yorkshire and no square head was going to have it all his own way when we were finally confronted with him.

I have often travelled along beside that wood going on holiday and remembered all that went on beneath those trees but I am sure that most men of my generation who served in the war are the same.

As we were undergoing all this enlightenment around the sand table other things were taking place on the road just about fifteen or so yards away from us; heavy vehicle noise made any further talks impossible, so we went to investigate.

Large trees ran along the sides of the road and there was a six foot grass verge; also, as far as we could see each way, the trees

formed an archway and all kinds of vehicles were being parked on the verges nose to tail. It was a most incredible sight and we had never seen anything like it. There were hundreds of fifteen hundred weight trucks, three tonners, twenty five pounders, anti-tank guns and many other weapons of war; but the most impressive sight was the tanks - tanks we never knew existed, and at that time we did not know what their rolls in war would be - we soon found out. I am certain that by now the reader has read about 'Hobarts Armour'. To see all that power assembled in one place made the mind boggle, they looked so incongruous having their exhausts high in the air and the engines waterproofed. I know today all the new ideas are common knowledge but in 1944 it was a sight we would all remember. The lads couldn't stop talking about what we were seeing - it was something we would never see again.

I often wonder what memories in fifty years time today's youth will have to look back on. Judging by present day attitudes I doubt they will be sentimental old fools like us.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

17. D-5 TO D-DAY

Come the first day of June and I was sat on the tailgate of a three tonner looking back along the road and saw the crews of the vehicles having a smoke and I am certain they would have a great deal to talk about. I had a birdseye view as we passed along, of all the armour on both sides of the road.

I can't really explain the feeling I had when I saw just a fraction of the massive power that was going to back us up when we invaded, I felt proud to be British. I say British because although I am a Yorkshireman I came into contact with some tremendous characters among the Welsh, Irish and of course the Scots, who were very often fighting alongside; it was an education to meet such lads.

As our vehicles sped through Romsey the civilians who were about gave us long lingering glances - by this time they would know almost as much as we did - that the invasion was on the threshold.

There was no stopping until we were in the docks alongside the ships, to which we transferred without delay and we were at the beginning of a never to be forgotten experience.

It was a 'Liberty Ship', made or rather built in the USA; all sections were welded together, as opposed to the British method of riveting, the former being much quicker to produce. I often wondered if any of them came apart under the battering of the sea, we certainly could not have managed without them.

Our 'Empire Lance' ship was rather crowded and it seemed to me that no consideration had been given to the amount of gear we would be carrying. Apart from our rifles, or in my case a two inch mortar and six bombs, most lads carried two extra bren gun magazines, three hand grenades, or 'Mills bombs' to be correct, a bandolier of fifty rounds of three-o-three ammunition and an entrenching tool. All this was in addition to our usual equipment of water bottle, gas cape, a full small pack and our webbing equipment plus a steel helmet. We had to make sure we had plenty of ammo, nobody really knew how the thing would go or how soon we could be re-supplied. Fortunately we had no problems in that respect.

We were allocated hammocks and settled ourselves down and then the lads started to loosen up, telling smutty jokes as soldiers will and generally having a good laugh. The food was good which it needed to be for young healthy men about to go into action.

For two days before the third of June everybody was wondering when we were going to get cracking - the worst thing for a soldier is to be bored. Then on the fourth of June, when it was becoming a bit claustrophobic, we were given the information we needed. The tannoy came to life and told everybody to pay the utmost attention. Our Commanding Officer then proceeded to speak and we were all ears.

It was to be France where we would invade and Normandy in particular, our landing beach was between Le-Hamel and La-Riviere. Because of the tide differences on the coast which ran from East to West, the assault would have to be staggered, causing different units to land at varying times. It was intended that our battalion would assault at 0725hrs on the morrow, the fifth of June. It was a very informative talk and everyone realised what was expected of them. I don't know how the two hundred or so newcomers to the battalion coped with the news because this would be their first confrontation with a real enemy - there is nothing like the real thing to give you food for thought. Most of us of course, had faced the enemy several times and gave the new lads the support they needed - no problems arose when the time came to show their mettle.

Suddenly because of the atrocious weather the assault of Normandy was postponed for 24 hrs. but all other information remained as given.

Somehow many of the lads quietened down a bit, deep in thought, well that was understandable, we were facing the unknown tomorrow and the estimate of casualties did not do any good - fortunately they were widely exaggerated - some of the lads wrote letters home to be posted after the landing. On the afternoon of the fifth, Officers walked amongst us to give the lads confidence and there were always the young lads who didn't give a damn, they cleared the air a bit with their wisecracks and later on made jerry sit up too. They were the tough kids of nineteen, some of whom were awarded the Military Medal.

Another request came over the tannoy, the padre wanted to say a few words to us. Padre's were always very kind and understanding and the short sermon went well with us, then we said the Lords Prayer. I don't recall seeing any atheist's either. After the Padre had done what he had to do our Battalion Commander began to speak and gave us a message from Monty, telling us what was expected, knowing he could rely on us to put on a good show.

By this time the ships engines had begun to throb and we were on our way, to avenge Dunkirk, prepared even more than the Germans were in the early years of the war, now Hitler was going to be beaten, no longer would he think he had the god given right to be victorious. This is the big battle the 6th June 1944 and we are going to give him something to contemplate.

That could have been the kind of thought that was going through our minds as well as the more sinister 'will I live to see another day'?

We were making history in those days and I only hope that the youth of today appreciates the sacrifices that were made - I doubt it very much.

It was of course dark when we put to sea and we were all below decks, it would have been good to have seen England from seaward, but it was not to be. The drizzle was still falling as we left Southampton and that drizzle plagued us for days.

I believe that anybody who is not a little apprehensive or doesn't have a queer feeling at the consequences of battle, is fooling himself; this is common with most normal soldiers. However, once the attack goes in that feeling changes to grim determination and death never enters the mind of a soldier in action because he hasn't the time, he is in the company of thousands of other brave men. When the confrontation is over, that is a different matter; I feel certain they thanked God quietly for watching over us, I confess that I very often prayed during the War.

I saw some lads, over the years, who, after being in battle just broke down and wept and trembled all over; they were out of control but were not discriminated against in any way because we were all aware that boys of a particular nature just could not help showing the effects of a very traumatic experience. They were not cowardly and they fought well but they went to pieces afterwards and were evacuated to the rear where they received the care and understanding of the medical officers.

Few of us slept that night, our thoughts completely monopolised by what was going on around us. The total number of soldiers taking part in the initial assault was about 160,000 and I am sure they would all be in the same frame of mind as us, grim determination would come later.

The weather in the channel was the worst for twenty years and we were to discover it for ourselves. Reveille was about 0330hrs on the 6th June and everybody was soon alert and getting themselves prepared for what was to come, then we had breakfast.

Many of us made our way on deck to see what was going on and in the distance we could see the glow of fires started hours ago. It was still drizzling and there was a heavy swell going. At 0500hrs the ship heaved to, it was just starting to become light and we could hear, but not see, what must have been a huge number of planes passing overhead.

We were now stood waiting for further orders, almost weighed down with equipment, ready for the fray, suddenly "Right lads, lets go" from our Platoon commander and then we were climbing over the side trying to get a foot onto the scrambling nets. It was not easy going down those nets, remember the sea was rough and we were heavily laden. The most difficult part was getting a foot onto the assault craft which was bobbing up and down at a different time to the ship - as we went to put a foot onto the craft it wasn't there and then suddenly it came to meet us. Luckily nobody suffered any injuries though the operation could not be rushed.

There were fourteen assault craft to land on King beach with thirty men in each. I was on the port side fifth from the front of our boat - how could I forget? The first thing we all did was to get out our sick bags from on top of the grenades in the right pouch of our equipment. As soon as we were all settled on the bench seat, the order came "Craft away" - we were only seven miles from our objective. This then was what we had trained for.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

18. GRIM DETERMINATION

Looking around us we could see other assault craft taking station at each side of us. The sea was very choppy but the light was now improving and the whole mighty operation became visible to us - and what a sight it was. The mind could not absorb the enormity of it all. There were thousands of ships of all sizes and, standing out like huge sentinels, the mighty war ships. Nobody could vividly describe what a tremendous occasion it was, to see all that power, it would never be seen again in our lifetime - so many ships in one place at one time. If the British people could have seen it they would have been very proud.

The sky seemed to be full of planes, bombers, hurricanes, spitfires and others I could not recognise, hundreds of them going towards our target for the day.

Enormous power surrounded us but it could all come to nothing if the infantrymen failed at the first hurdle. Failure was not in our vocabulary or in our thoughts on this day, a memorable day in the history of the world. The 6th June 1944 will go into the history books.

The other assault craft in the line with us, and in the hands of competent helmsmen, sped towards the beach and very soon through a slight drizzle, we could see the coastline, Rommel's Atlantic wall. Warships were shelling the fortifications and the sound of the shells flying above us was uncanny, great flashes were coming from the gun barrels and lit the morning sky.

We were now making full use of our sick bags but could still manage to see what was going on around us; nobody wanted to miss this great occasion. Then shells started coming towards us; the enemy seemed to be going for the ships not us and they created great spouts of water when they hit the sea. Now we could see bombs falling from our planes and fighters skimming low above the enemy defenders. An amazing sight suddenly opened up to port side of us about five hundred yards away. It was a rocket ship which sent a continuous barrage of missiles screaming, dead straight towards the coast; it was fantastic but I should not imagine that the enemy on the receiving end would describe it so.

We were getting near now and the defence machine guns opened up; a landing craft next to us suddenly slowed down; the helmsman must have been hit by a bullet. Swiftly, somebody took over control but the boat was now a little out of line with the other assault craft and I saw it hit a mine; and was blown to pieces. The enemy fire made us keep our heads down and all we could do was watch the umbrella of planes above us, the noise was terrific, there is nothing I can compare it with, to try and convey to you the enormity of it all.

It seemed to be a hell of a long way to the beaches, then peeping just above the top of our craft I saw another boat hit a mine, it was awful, the front half of the boat was lifted out of the water and smashed to smithereens, bodies and pieces of body flying in all directions. The stern half of the boat just went under the water. All those boys, laden as they were, would not have stood an earthly chance of survival.

We were getting nearer to the shore and, suddenly, the helmsman shouted at the top of his voice "100 to go, 75 to go, all ready, 50 to go!" The enemy machine guns were giving the lads some stick. "Ramps down!" and in three feet of water, the craft stopped dead. Our platoon commander shouted "come on lads! and we moved as fast as we could, I can tell you. It was no fun being a sitting target and the water being waist deep made it very difficult. Two of the lads went forward as they jumped into boiling water and they went under with all their gear; I dare say they would fight like hell and recover but we were not hanging about, that had been our instructions from the start; we must not linger.

I heard later that a Sergeant in D company had been drowned when, as he jumped into the sea, the craft lurched forward and he was forced beneath the boat. I knew that chap and knew he would have given a very good account of himself had he lived to go into the assault. He was rough at the edges but he was a great scrapper and good soldier; his name was Ruffy Hill.

I was told that two lads who jumped into the water after me had been hit by gunfire.

It was impossible for me to keep the mortar dry but the six bombs would be OK in their sealed container. Keeping as low as possible was the right thing to do but in the process we were soaked to the skin from head to foot; who cared so long as we got away safely.

It was quite a heavy drizzle now and it continued until about 1600hrs. Fortunately, with our exertions our clothes soon dried out; anyway we had more important things to think about so our personal comfort was of little consequence.

A flail tank had gone into the assault on King beach before us to make a path through the minefield which ran along behind the beaches. Unfortunately, it had been knocked out and was standing on the beach about ten yards from the sand dunes. The crew had bailed out and had continued, under fire, to make a path across the minefield and had taped it. Our old company commander, Captain Hull, having been promoted to Major, was on a signal ship and keeping in touch with proceedings. We now had a new C.O., Captain Linn; tragically he was very soon wounded on the run up the beach. I saw him resting with his back against the tank and while he was in that position received a second wound which proved fatal. He was such a good man. The second in command, Captain Chambers, now took over and he too was wounded but was able to carry on his duties. At this time we lost Sergeant Burns but I never did get to know how many others were actually killed on the beach.

Just as I looked at Captain Linn our platoon commander took control, "get off the beach - off the beach, off the bloody beach, get forward lads and give the buggers hell!" It was difficult to make too much haste in the soft sand but, by a supreme effort, we ran up the slope towards the sand banks in face of heavy enemy fire. Dead and wounded lads lay around but the stretcher bearers were always close at hand to take care of them. They were bricks, those medics.

I'll tell you what, we didn't look back; the situation didn't allow it but now I wish I had the presence of mind to turn around to see the navy in action.

After all our haste and determination and taking about fifty prisoners, there wasn't a great deal of opposition after we had left the beach, though there was some machine gun fire and always the snipers, looking to kill our officers. We had taken some prisoners and, of course, killed many of the enemy.

D Company, on our right, was held up by machine gun fire from a pill box and the Sergeant Major Stan Hollis, brave man that he was, rushed zig-zag over open ground and threw hand grenades through the aperture and killed the enemy. Stan Hollis won the Victoria Cross awarded on D Day, a true Green Howard to the core. Stan's citation said that he saved the lives of many of his comrades by his action.

We moved forward warily now, keeping to hedgerows whenever possible. We never knew when danger threatened, usually marksmen, because up to now we had not seen an enemy tank.

The make-up of the country started to change very quickly and we were confronted by a situation we had not seen before; it was called the bocage, small fields which all had 'v' shaped ditches around them. The earth from the ditches formed a bank and on top of the banks, hedgerows had been planted. It was ideal country for defensive positions to be set up but disadvantageous to attackers.

We met some stubborn resistance about three miles inland; the enemy were putting down intensive machine gun fire from a small wood and we could not get around it. Then we saw something new to us - the C.O. had got a message over the air with the result that a Churchill tank came up in no time at all. It went towards the wood and came under anti tank fire, whereupon it retaliated as quick as a flash. It was a flame throwing tank and it shot a huge tongue of flame towards the wood and fried the enemy who had been holding us up; bet it was a bit hot !

Daylight was drawing to a close and our company came to rest in a corner of one of the fields in line with the other company's. We were to rest here for the night and adequate sentries had been placed. The platoon commander walked amongst us; he knew us all by name and was singing praises to us all, how well we had done and all the usual things. Most platoon officers were first class and well liked by the lads, even cracking jokes with us. After he left us we sat in twos and threes and proceeded to dig into our packs for something to eat. We came across something else new to us, it was a tin of ready meal which was self heating, all we had to do was pull a ring and, hey presto, after a few minutes we had a hot meal; it was great. Then, of course, we had chocolate in our emergency pack.

We had thoroughly dried out by now and felt more comfortable so proceeded to organise somewhere to sleep, or try to.

Taking our ground sheet from our pack we spread it out and, using our pack once more as a pillow, covered ourselves with the gas cape and really we should have slept because for three nights sleep had evaded us. I closed my eyes as I lay on my back and prayed to Jesus.

"The day thou gavest Lord is ended, the darkness falls at thy behest, to thee our morning hymn ascended, thy praise shall sanctify our rest."

Of course this is the first verse of hymn number 667 in the Methodist hymn book.

I then said to myself "O Lord grant that the souls of our fallen comrades who have given all in battle rest in peace with thee in heaven, watch over us in the days to come." I ended with the Lord's Prayer.

I felt better and drifted into a restless sleep.





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

19. D+1 TO D+30

At dawn on the 7th June the camp began to stir and there was soon frenzied activity, delving into our packs for the emergency rations which were of such good nutritious value, chocolate, sweets, biscuits and a tiny box of raisins, there were several cigarettes too, always Woodbines, and since I did not smoke I shared them out among my pals. Cigarettes were so important to the lads, although many of them were only 18 or 19 years of age. Almost everybody smoked and I could never understand then why the weed was so special and why they were so addicted.

Of course washing and shaving - it was only fluff anyway - was out of the question at the present time, while the invasion was at such a critical stage, get up and go was the order of the day. During the twenty four days I was in Normandy the opportunity to wash hair or take a shower never arose - other more important things occupied our time. Our officers having returned from their meeting with the C.O. (this getting together was called the "O" group) gave out their orders about the line of advance, who was to lead off and other details, and would always end by saying "good luck lads" and off we would go, section after section alternately along either side of the narrow lanes. We always kept three yards apart, at least the narrow lanes with the high hedges cut down the chance of enemy fire from any distance away. We only advanced across open ground if it was unavoidable. But this day we had reason to do just that and after a while we heard planes coming towards us, instinctively we looked at the sky and could see they had allied markings, and were fighters, so naturally we got the shock of our lives when they proceeded to strafe us, we flung ourselves onto the ground and made some attempt at becoming ostriches. When the planes had passed over they had left two good lads dead. The only explanation could have been that the pilots had mistaken us for Germans, however our Officer being the intelligent chap he was, thought that it was possible that the enemy were in our vicinity. We deployed and after crawling along muddy ditches, surprised a patrol of five Germans who got the shock of their lives - they were not the arrogant type and quickly surrendered but it still left us with two dead companions.

In 1944 there were many new ideas coming to light relating to warfare and we saw many of these being put to very good use. During the afternoon of this day, some very concentrated machine gun fire coming from a farmhouse had slowed our advance and it was in a situation where we could not deploy around it without loss of life. Tanks would not approach too closely either for danger of being fired upon by a hidden 88mm. The situation was resolved by our C.O. sending a message to the rear and it opened our eyes to the concept of combined operations. We heard planes coming towards us within fifteen minutes, they were two Typhoons coming in low across the hedges and fields and whoosh, like two flashes of lightening two rockets went straight as an arrow towards the farmhouse and left a pile of smoking rubble. If only our young pilots of 1940 had had such weapons at their disposal.

The above situation happened a countless number of times whenever we came across enemy strongpoints such as farms and church towers - in fact any kind of building which was treated with suspicion was quickly dispatched by the Typhoons - they were brilliant.

I once saw a tiger tank suffer the same fate and there were no survivors I can tell you. Whenever we were held up or just stopped for any reason we had to dig in but the ground in Normandy was agricultural so we never had the problem we had in North Africa where much of what looked like deep sand soon became rock!

We came across two dead Germans today and searched them, mainly on the off chance of coming across a Luger pistol, which was a prized souvenir - no such luck, though I found [a photograph of the two of them](#) and I still have it.

The advance was now going slowly because some units were able to go forward faster than others, depending on the opposition and sometimes we had to go back a little distance to be in line - we did this at about 1600 hrs. on the Wednesday and we dug in, making our trenches 2ft 6ins. deep to hold two men. Soon after we had finished we heard planes coming towards us and could tell by the engine noise that they were jerries and suddenly they went into a dive and we knew what was coming after seeing the bombs leave the planes - they killed three of our lads.

The Stukas had no sooner pulled out of their dive than two spitfires came tearing across the sky and sorted the enemy out, we saw the aircraft break up in the sky then crash in flames. that was the only time I remember seeing enemy planes in Normandy - what planes they had left didn't stand a chance, the retaliation was so swift and conclusive.

The company settled down after the excitement but it was my turn to do guard with another lad - 2 hrs. on and four hours off. It was always a bit scary in action, it was pitch dark and we had to keep silent and listen, with our rifles at the ready, for any enemy patrols coming our way - they too would be silent!

The morning of the third day and surprise, surprise, the company cooks had been busy at 'B' echelon - just to the rear of us - and had brought up a hot breakfast. The verdict was unanimous, it was great, mind you we were a bit hungry and it was a sight for sore eyes. Never before had we seen canned bacon, it was out of this world to us, delicious and with beans and canned sausages - as much as we wanted with an ample supply of good white bread. I'll bet the Germans could have done with some of that instead of their black bread. Needless to say, the cooks went to the top of the class and in our present frame of mind were promoted immediately to full Sergeants; so began another day. We had not gone far when we came under very heavy mortar fire and in common with the rest of the line, we were unavoidably held up for four days, until higher authority decided what to do about the situation. We dug in and waited and after a while a minor miracle occurred. Mail had arrived from home, well what can I say, of all the essential supplies which had been brought from England, some understanding individual had thought of mail for the troops - it was a great moral booster, that of course must have been the logic behind the effort which must have been put into it.

On the twelfth day our section was walking along the right hand side of the road towards a bend and at the same time a tiger tank was halfway out of a bend about 150 yds away, he was so quiet and hardly moving, I don't know who was the more surprised. The tank commander must have seen us at the same time as we say him, it could have been that our sudden reaction gave him the impression that we were an anti-tank crew and were going to blast him, anyway he soon backed off - I am pleased he didn't open fire - I don't think I would be sat here writing now if he had. He was probably on a probing mission to find out our position because soon after we were plastered with 88mm shells but we only suffered three wounded casualties. Perhaps after we had reported the sighting we should have re-deployed.

For two or three days nothing of any real significance occurred, only the usual shells and mortars coming over, but we just accepted this. Moving forward again slowly down a land just as we turned a bend - these narrow lanes seemed to be all bends - we saw a German machine gunner poking out from behind a tree, his hands still in the firing position, so our section went round the back of him keeping very low. When we reached him he was stone dead, just sat there on the ground holding his gun, obviously somebody had been there before us because we found a dagger in his back - he certainly got his just desserts - I reckon he missed the main course!

Also this same day as we were advancing spread out across a field, there must have been a reason for us to be deployed like that, anyway we came to a cornfield where the corn was three feet high and we continued to walk through it. After getting halfway across the enemy opened fire on us, machine guns and snipers, the snipers were after the NCO's and Officers and they were very successful too. Our Company Commander Captain Chambers who had already been wounded during the landing on D Day was killed, together with a Norwegian Officer who was attached to our company, also several NCO's and other ranks suffered the same fate - it was quite a nightmare while it lasted. I can't imagine why we had to go across a cornfield at all, when all the enemy had to do was lob over a few mortars and it would have been catastrophic to us had the corn set alight.

It was certainly not a dull existence for us in Normandy, we had to be on our toes every minute or we paid the penalty. After the cornfield affair the company was feeling the effect of the shortage of men so we had to be reorganised, and then more thinly opened out. We were advancing slowly along the side of a field close to the hedge, when I saw one of our tanks on the other side of the field, suddenly I heard gunfire and the tank went up in flames - how two of the crew bailed out is a mystery - they were like jack rabbits, they certainly must have practised that performance during their training.

I went on many recce. patrols during the evenings, after the company had come to a half for the night and we had been given a meal of bully stew. Nobody liked going on patrol, well it was not an enjoyable pastime, and was almost always a hair raising experience, although we usually got back to our company. But there was one particular time when we were not so lucky, our section was walking silently alongside a hedge, when a machine gun opened up on us from not too far away. Our section leader and two of our lads were killed. We hastily retraced our steps and reported to our platoon commander, who then went to see the C.O. and explained about the killing. The section who had been on the patrol, or at least the remainder of them, accompanied by two Bren gunners went back to where the incident took place, then deployed and quietly came upon the German position, the end result was two dead enemy.

I cannot possibly list all our activities in the days that followed without consulting the history books and that is not my intention.

The 30th of June dawned and we were in the position of being spread out about four yards apart in a ditch overlooking a field. My section was sent on a patrol during daylight at about 10.30hrs. and were fired upon by the enemy, so we returned and made our report, but I believe we must have been observed.

It was time for tiffin and I was sat on the side of the ditch, my feet resting in the bottom when it happened, so I am sure we had been under observation on our return from patrol. We all knew that if we could hear a shell then it was passing above us, well one came over which we didn't hear. First thing I knew was that I was thrown in the air and landed five yards away, I knew I had been hit on the inside of the top of my left thigh, very close indeed to you know what, shrapnel had hit two of us.

Funny thing is that I didn't feel a thing, just that I knew I had been wounded and had landed five yards away from where I had been eating tiffin. I could feel blood running down my leg, but no pain at all, then somebody called for the stretcher bearer, which they should not have done in case the sound carried to the enemy. Anyway, within fifteen minutes a four wheel drive jeep came near to us and the two of us were put on stretchers affixed to a framework on the back of the jeep and away we went. I shouted so long to

my mates and never saw them again.

I was taken to a field hospital where the medical officer cut my trousers off to exposed the wound, put a dressing on and gave me a morphine injection and I went to sleep.

So ended my part in the invasion, it was the 30th June 1944.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

20. MY REST CURE

When I awoke next morning the M.O. was coming round the beds asking how we were feeling, then gave us a morphine injection. I was not feeling too good and an orderly came and gave me a cup of sweet tea. I was made as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances and in about two hours an ambulance came and six of us were put aboard and we moved off.

The place where I had been wounded was near Villers Bocarge and the trip back to the beaches took some time because the roads were congested with military traffic, but eventually we arrived at Arromanches where the British Mulberry harbour was situated. I felt the ambulance going over the hollow sounding floating roadway.

As I was being transferred from the ambulance to the ship I was determined to try and have a look at the Mulberry. It was amazing that anybody could think of building such a thing, I am pleased I had a look at it because many years later, 40 to be exact, I saw what was left of it and I just stood and thought back over the years.

After I had been settled on the hospital ship I must have succumbed to the morphine and visited the land of the not and had no idea we were back at Southampton - was it only 24 days since the last time I was here? An orderly awakened me and once again I was carried to an ambulance and taken to a hospital.

It was a brand new complex, a series of well build wooden huts each about twice the size of a nissen hut and all were linked by corridors. It was the 22nd Canadian general hospital and they received all wounded with the utmost care and consideration for their comfort. I was appointed an orderly named Leslie Buckler.

First I was put on a blanket covered table, stripped and bathed, all my clothes were thrown away, they left the dressing on my wound and put a night shirt on me then carried me to a lovely clean bed with white sheets and pillow cases - to me it was luxury. After a short while a Medical Officer came to look at my wound, which had started to bleed and beginning to cause me some distress, he was sorry about that but said that I would be having an operation in a couple of hours. First thing was to go for an x-ray, then give the usual pre-med jab to make me drowsy. I was soon in the operating theatre with the mask over my face and going out like a light.

After I had come to in bed, my Medical Orderly came to me and said "well William Cheall, you are all done and dusted and I have a present for you" - wrapped in a square piece of gauze was my shrapnel from an 88mm shell. Leslie asked did I realise how lucky I had been, it would have been a disaster for me if the shrapnel had hit me just one inch higher.

Anyway, the surgeon said that the piece of steel had penetrated so far into my thigh that they could not remove it where it entered and consequently had to put a four inch cut in my backside for that purpose. The shrapnel was 2 inches long and about three eighths of an inch thick - one more souvenir.

My orderly must have looked in my pay book for my next of kin and home address and at Christmas sent me a card. Within two hours and after thanking whoever was around at the time, I was taken to a waiting ambulance and thence to the train for more care and attention elsewhere.

The hospital train staff were at the beck and call of all the wounded and it was great to be molly coddled. I just lay wondering where they were taking me to this time, life in the Army was like a mystery tour.

The stopping of the train woke me up and a nurse came along the corridor saying come on lads you have arrived, but there was not much response and many of the boys didn't show any enthusiasm.

We had arrived at Dundee in Scotland, at that time it was a puzzle to me, of all the hospitals there were in England, they had to send us all the way to Scotland. The nurses tucked us in our stretchers and once more into the ambulance and hospital, we soon arrived at the Royal Infirmary where I was put into a small ward with two other wounded. After a while a nurse came and asked me if I wanted to send a telegram to my next of kin to let them know I was safe and well, everything had been thought of.

A doctor soon came to my bed, looked at my card and examined my wound, a nurse gave me a jab and I was quickly asleep - that was

the 5th July. Next morning two nurses, bright and breezy Scots lasses came to my bed, pulled the curtains round and set up a drip at the bottom of the bed, pulled the bedclothes back and proceeded to put a drip needle into my thigh. One held my leg tight whilst the other put in the needle which must have been an eighth of an inch thick - I didn't feel the shrapnel go in - but I certainly felt that needle. I was on a penicillin drip for seven days, though I was able to sit up after forty eight hours.

My two companions and I exchanged our experiences, they were geordies from near Newcastle, good lads the Tynesiders, first class scrappers who could be relied on in battle, or as mates. At the end of the seven days I was put into the main ward where there were thirty other wounded, so there was no shortage of topics of conversation, though some of the lads didn't feel inclined to talk and were rather depressed - after losing an arm or leg or both who would want to talk his head off?

During the night some of the wounded would moan or groan and shout out. Although my wound was bothering me a lot, at least I felt confident that I would make a good recovery, but to loose a limb when one is only around twenty years of age must have been dreadful, it was all so very sad.

The nurses were wonderful and we received almost personal attention, we only had to move and our nurse was beside the bed to tend to our needs. My nurse was a Scot whose home was in Dufftown in Banff, Scotland, about 160 miles East of Inverness and she was twenty one years of age. Every morning Mary Wiseman would change my dressing, then give me a kiss, it was nice to think they cared so much for our welfare and comfort. Mary brought my meals when she was on duty and at night tucked me in, gave me a kiss and touched my cheek with her hand - I was beginning to think she was sweet on me - it was great and I enjoyed the attention, it made me feel good and helped to make my three weeks stay very pleasant indeed.

Though my wound still bothered me I was able to limp around a little and since the hospital was in need of beds it was time for me to move on. No trains were involved this time, again I did not know where I was being taken to but we travelled all the way by transport and arrived at Killin, or rather at a very old mansion just outside of the village of that name.

The building held about forty wounded, all accommodated in small rooms. We were here to recuperate, again the nurses were fantastic, so kind and generous with their patience and understanding.

Until I went to Dundee I had never been to Scotland but of course I had met Scots men in the Army and they were always canny lads; my dealings with the Scots I had met since being delivered to Dundee confirmed my opinion that they were a generous race of people.

Our new 'home' was called Auchmore House and it proved to be a good move being sent here. We did have exercises to do, not to be confused with Army manoeuvres, and a certain amount of massaging, but a great deal of leisure time was available, during which we were free to do almost as we wished. Most of my time when I was not reading the books in the library, was passed making notes and writing of my experiences over the past weeks while they were fresh in my mind. We could walk in the grounds which were extensive and I found a huge pine tree which had been planted by Queen Victoria - I thought "to think that I was standing where that great Queen had stood." Oh! and of course we had a radio and a gramophone, the Ink Spots were all the rage then, better songs than the tuneless stuff they churn out today.

After two weeks I received a letter posted in Scotland - I have always examined the franking of letters before I open them, but it was Scotland alright, yet I didn't know anybody in that part of the country. It was from my nurse, Mary Wiseman, expressing a desire to travel to Killin to spend the weekend with me. Nothing like this had ever entered my mind.

Anyway I thought, she had been kind to me and she did look a good lass, so it was arranged. I had a slow walk into the village and passed along the riverside, I stood on the bridge and looked at the Southern end of Loch Tay. The water was flowing fast over rocks on the river bed and it was a delight to watch. I turned left at the bridge and walked slowly up an incline leading to the hillside and I found a nice bungalow belonging to a widow who would let Mary have a room for the night. It had a beautiful view of the mountains from the window, it would be ideal. My nurse arrived on the Saturday morning and the lady gave her lunch after she had settled in.

Pity I had to go back to Auchmore for my treatment, also we were not allowed to stay out overnight, I was back with Mary by 2.30 though. Well, we went for a nice slow walk up the hillside above the bungalow, it was a lovely day for strolling and we held hands. The ground was covered with heather and we sat down and looked at the landscape, the mountains were magnificent, forming a valley at the bottom of which Killin nestled. I had never before seen anything so picturesque - how could there be a war going on - oh! no, I hadn't forgotten the war.

I lay on my back and closed my eyes, carried away by my thoughts, then Mary lay down on her side and put her head on my shoulder, wanting to know what I was thinking, so I told her about my experiences and then she kissed me and said that she loved me.

I must stress here that I was not the sort of lad who would take advantage of a girls feelings and I had my moral principles. We were two people who could be in control of our mood although I thought that Mary had been growing fond of me while I was in hospital, I had no intention of letting things get out of hand. We just sat and kissed, happy to be in each others company.

I did love Mary Wiseman so it came as no surprise when she told me how she felt towards me. The weekend had been lovely and we walked back the way we had come, thinking.

I took my favourite nurse back to the bus in Killin, gave her a kiss and a hug and that was the last time I saw the first love of my life.

After the bus had gone I took the walk slowly over the bridge and past the fast flowing river Dochart, I was enjoying the meander back to Auchmore and it gave me time to contemplate the events which had taken place since I went to Dundee.

After a couple of days Mary and I began to write to each other and she was becoming far too attached to me, I needed time to think. In case orders came through for me to move on, the nurses at Auchmore paraded all their patients on the forecourt and took snaps of small groups of us, copies of which they sent on to me at a later date. Their generosity knew no bounds, it would be a wrench leaving Killin.

Before I was posted I wrote a letter to Mary, explaining the position I was in, that although I loved her, we had not known each other long enough to make a commitment. I also said that when the time came I knew I would be going back to Europe where I could possibly be killed and I did not want to make any firm promises that I knew would have a profound affect on her future.

Mary never wrote to me again but in the months that followed whenever I felt in a reflective mood I often thought of Mary and under the circumstances prevailing at the time I was certain I had acted wisely.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

21. BACK TO DUTY

Two days later we were told to get our kit packed ready to move the next day. After breakfast, the nurses came round the dining room and gave us all a kiss and said good-bye, we climbed into the trucks and were soon on our way - to where?

Back to earth with a bump. It looked a forbidding place, Glencorse barracks, a few miles South West of Edinburgh, near a village called Penicuik. Glencorse was a training ground for recruits. The barracks were a formidable grey stone building with scores of windows overlooking a large parade ground, on which, no doubt, many a young man had been given something to think about. I was pleased when I was told to report to a nissen hutted camp a quarter of a mile away because as I have said the barracks was for recruits and I was only passing through. As nissen huts go, it looked alright, with large trees dispersed between the huts.

It was November and bitter cold, I felt that I would not find this place home from home, plus the fact that all the NCO's seemed to be a little hostile towards us - probably envious of the fact that we had been in action and they hadn't.

The toughening up process was about to start and I was hoping my stay would not be extended. My leg was still giving me some trouble and I saw the M.O. who said that it was only a matter of time and I would not have any problems.

Soldiers seem to have been assembled here from various convalescent homes and they were a mixed lot of lads who kept their distance, not a bit like the old Green Howards who knew through experience what comradeship was all about. "Ah! well Bill" I said to myself, "be patient the lads will loosen up, perhaps their wounds still bother them."

Several of the men had suffered leg wounds and we had to go for walks which gradually increased in length, but fifteen miles was the limit until our legs became stronger. After two weeks we had to go on short runs across country and it seemed to be helping us all on the way to recovery.

We were allowed to go into Penicuik, which was two miles away but it was only a very quiet village, and anyway, my new pal said that there wasn't any talent there, so we stopped the trips and decided to try Edinburgh.

It was the second week in December and my pal and I had gone into a little pub on Princes Street for a shandy, when two men in their early forties came and sat next to us and started to chat. I brought up the fact that I was in 50th Div. and that we always fought alongside the 51st Highland Division. That really made them interested and they wanted all the news I was able to convey to them about the Scottish Division. When we were about to leave and had taken their hands to say cheerio, one of them said "tell yea what laddies, can ye no come tae oor Hogmanay on New Years Eve". Well at that time I don't think I knew what a Hogmanay was, they explained, but I was to find out for myself later.

Next day I spoke to our NCO, who seemed to have softened a little, he was not a bad sort at heart and said he would speak to the Captain about a pass for us to stay out overnight; whereupon the Officer sent for me. I told no fibs and explained about the Scots in the pub. Without any hesitation he said we could

have a pass to stay out of camp for three days as we were due for leave anyway.. He then went on to explain that he had given us three days because if we were going to a Hogmanay on day one we would need two days to recover - we had found a chink in the armour of the rigid regime of Glencorse.

We made the trip into Edinburgh to meet the two Scots as arranged and had a drink or two, then they took us to one of their homes and after introductions the lady of the house brought out the food.

All the stories I had heard about the Scots being a tight fisted people had gone out of the window weeks ago, here now was more evidence of their splendid generosity and hospitality.

As the evening progressed more folk arrived, just enough to make a very enjoyable gathering. I will never forget when the clock struck twelve and we all sang Old Lang Syne, and that was only the beginning - suffice to say it ended at 5am - we were more than a little tipsy. The mood of everybody was generosity exemplified, all those Scots entertaining two English soldiers. I can only say that

the Captain knew what he was talking about. It was now 1945.

Back at camp it was just a teeny weeny bit boring until my pal and I came down to earth, consequently I didn't lose any sleep when we were told a move was on the cards within a week.

Well, the move came and at the start it proved to be a good one. Since I had only been on the one three days leave in eight months I went to the orderly room to see what the chances were of a leave before I was moved. They agreed, and the next day I collected my rail warrant, but also another one which allowed me to travel from my home town to Bridlington on the East Coast, where I was to be stationed after my leave. I was taken by truck to Waverly station and off I went. When I think of how the Army moved us around it makes my mind boggle.

Bridlington was to be our billet for three months, given the choice between a place where there was not enough to occupy us, or being in Europe with the Green Howards and the consequent danger, I would choose the latter.

Our billets were requisitioned private hotels on the outskirts of the town. The first parade next morning proved to be a new experience for us all. It was a medical parade with a difference, but not unwelcome as it turned out. We fell into line in the street and when we entered the building we had to strip naked - there was nothing new in that of course - we had done it so many times before. However when I went into the doctors room, we got the shock of our lives, waiting to examine us was a female doctor, about twenty five years of age. Well! this was a situation with which we had never before been confronted but after the medical we were all agreed that the experience had been pleasant, especially when the doctor asked us to cough! Soldiers being what they are, there were many sordid comments and jokes going round the billet.

We started to do training at Brid. within a week, the same training which I had done more than four years earlier, it was of course for the benefit of most of the other lads who had only been in uniform a matter of months and would have a great deal to learn about all aspects of life in the Army. I was wishing I was with my old battalion where we were all on the same level, the only good it did me was that it made me fitter and able to cope with more strenuous activity.

This was a holding battalion and would supply soldiers to active service units when they needed replacements for casualties. The best thing about Brid. was that we had proper NAAFI which was situated in the pier restaurant, where we would go in the evening for a penny cup of tea. My mates were interested to know how a soldier who had served in North Africa, Sicily, Normandy and was at Dunkirk, came to be with them. I often wondered myself, but that was the Army all over.

Settling down had become second nature now and I accepted the routine without moaning to myself, but I was ready to be on the move again. Two days later a list of names was put on the company notice board forming a draft for posting overseas, with anticipation I went to inspect it, some of my new mates were included but not me. I had heard the saying of old soldiers, never volunteer for anything - but an interview was arranged for me to see the Company Commander and I explained that if it could possibly be done, I would like to join the draft. He gave his blessing, but I think he must have thought I was out of my mind. Me being a Green Howard I felt sure I would be joining the 6th Battalion again.

It was not until after the end of the War I learned that at the very time I was going back to Europe, my old battalion was already back in England and stationed at Malton in Yorkshire. However things did turn out rather well for me in the end, though it could have been just the opposite.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

22. THE EAST LANCS

During the third week of March we had a kit inspection in readiness for our departure at the end of the week. There would be about fifty men on the draft and we were transported by three ton trucks to Dover and thence by sea to Ostend where we transferred at once to transport. This took us to Brugge in Belgium, where we were billeted in a large building of wooden construction, move like a barn but almost in the centre of the town. This I could not understand, to be stationed in a town centre was something that had never happened before.

Brugge seemed to have recovered, at least on the surface, from the effects of occupation, which must have been a dreadful ordeal during the almost five years it lasted. The shops, although a bit run down, had made some progress in bringing an appearance of normality into their various trades. Photographers were on the streets doing brisk business, making capital out of the fact that friendly soldiers had arrived. They probably were just as enthusiastic when the Germans were amongst them, after all business is business, but I'll bet they fleeced the unsuspecting Germans.

I could not comprehend why we had been sent to Europe to join a regiment and then put down in the centre of a lovely city, but there were no complaints. We had ample time to explore the long walks and waterways and to admire the splendid Town Hall.

It was here that, as far as I was concerned we were given some unwelcome information. I was not to join my old 6th Battalion, who I thought were in Northern Germany, but that I had been transferred once again to another regiment, the East Lancashire. Disappointment is all I felt inside me, since I was looking forward to seeing all my old pals in the Green Howards, supposing they had survived events after I had been wounded. Even though my cap badges had twice changed to other regiments, I was always a G.H. at heart.

I had no idea where the East Lancashire Battalion was located, or what had been their performance in the war to date, but I did know that the Green Howards with 50th. division had been in the thick of it since the beginning of real hostilities in May 1940. Also too, that their performance had been second to none. No doubt I would discover the history of the E.L. when I joined them.

During the third week of April we once again packed our kit for another move. We travelled North East and went through Arnhem the scene of 'Market Garden', I thought of the battle which had taken place there and what a tremendous fight those brave soldiers had put up against uneven odds.

Broken gliders were all over the place, also smashed jeeps and equipment of all kinds were strewn everywhere throughout the once lovely countryside. about three miles further on we drew to a halt at some large farm barns, where we were to stay for the night. A meal was laid on, after which guards were put on the trucks which still had all kit on board, except small packs and rifles.

It transpired that the E.L. were in front of Hamburg awaiting orders for their next move, when we caught up with them. Here we were lined up and our names checked against the list in case anybody had decided to go absent, then we were taken to the companies which needed replacements - I was put into Headquarters Company.

Things seemed to be extraordinarily quite everywhere and next morning news was given to us that a cease-fire had been declared and it was all over.

It was hard to accept for some time that there wouldn't be any more fighting, since it had been a constant moan with soldiers. We had been in our present positions for two days when the order came for us to move forward and take up occupation duties. we had already been given a talk about our responsibilities and conduct towards the civilians.

It took us one and a half hours to march the six miles to the suburbs of Hamburg where we were billeted in what looked like council buildings and were untouched by the bombing. Almost adjacent to these buildings was a large magnificent property which had been the home of the Gau-lieter of Hamburg. I entered this building and found two excellent souvenirs, a small dagger with a swastika on the side and a large swastika flag. There was a box full of medals of all kinds except iron crosses. I went into what must have been the linen room, it was about fifteen feet square and had shelves all round, they were laden with brand new linen bed clothes, towels and everything to do with a large household.

Patrolling was the order of the day and so start with was done by sections of nine men and an N.C.O., all with loaded rifles just in case of public unrest, but after a while the patrols consisted of only two men.

The German people were utterly dejected and down trodden, they must have been suffering mentally as well as physically under their tyrant masters because of the terror tactics employed by the Gestapo. No resentment was shown towards us from the populace, they must just have accepted that the War had been lost and were pleased to see the end of it. We were not allowed to talk to them as fraternisation was not encouraged at this stage, and there was a very noticeable absence of boys and men, who of course had all been absorbed into the defences.

The 1st Battalion East Lancs. was a regular Army unit so would be expected to do permanent duties wherever the War Office decided it was necessary, but of course at the present time the Battalion consisted of men from all over Great Britain, not just Lancashire, which is usually the case with regular army units. There was a great preponderance of Territorial Army and conscripted men who had been sent, like me, from holding Battalions.

About four weeks after we had joined the regiment we were issued with the cap badge, shoulder flashes and divisional signs - our transfer was now more official. Almost at the same time, I received a letter from home which contained a very pleasant surprise - a wound stripe and my Eighth Army medal ribbon, which had been sent by the records officer. I felt like a dog with two tails, because I was proud to have been in Montgomery's Eighth Army.

I had not as yet seen any other soldier here wearing this particular ribbon, the lads too were interested to know where in the Middle East I had been, no time was lost in sewing the ribbon on my blouse and fixing my wound stripe.

Two days after putting up my ribbon my Company Commander noticed it and congratulated me. Before the end of the week the same Officer sent for me and asked me a question he would give me twenty four hours to think about. He said "Cheall, you are obviously a senior soldier, how do you fancy becoming a member of the regimental police with the promotion to Lance Corporal." My first impulse was to accept, but I took the 24 hours to think about it.

I wondered how the move would affect my close ties with the lads, that is why I had never sought promotion before, the Officer sympathised with my attitude, next day I had made up my mind to accept my Captains proposal and joined the police and never regretted it.

I put my stripe up and also took delivery of a B.S.A. 250 motor cycle, crash helmet and revolver. Up to that time I did not know that we would have motor cycles so it was a pleasant surprise, and it caused me to think of the time in France when I found the baked beans.

I moved out from my mates and joined three other boys who had been chosen from the other companies, we soon started talking shop and all determined to do our best. I soon felt as though I had found a niche for myself and devoted my thoughts and actions to the job I had been entrusted with.

On my first patrol I felt a bit strange but soon settled down, and as I was riding along a road past a cemetery I saw what must have been a mass grave which was almost freshly dug - probably it had been intended for the many victims of the bombing of Hamburg but had never been used.

For the first few weeks fraternising with the Germans was not permitted, and the civilians were very sullen, though showed no outward signs of resentment, and I felt that they could not understand why we made no attempt to converse with them.

Later on however, the ban was lifted and the civilians became more tolerant and would say the odd word of greeting. It seemed better all round that we were now able to return any acknowledgement of our presence as occupation troops. Although I was in Germany for eight months, I never became close enough to the civilians to learn the language, other than the odd phrase, most instructions I had to give during the course of my duties were given in sign language, and I did not have any problems in that respect.

One of the consequences of the fraternising ban being lifted was that venereal disease raised it's ugly head among some of our lads, usually married men, the same men who hit the roof if they were informed of the infidelity of their wives. Unfortunately, unlike their American counterparts, our soldiers were not issued with the necessary item which might have prevented the disease. I never understood why our authorities had not catered for this problem before it arose.

During this same period I had to attend several court marshalls of soldiers who had gone absent without leave (AWOL) and the reason was usually because they had become acquainted with a German fraulien and could not resist the sexual temptation of taking up residence with the girl. The military Police - red caps - as they were always called, were very efficient and eventually caught up with them, informed the appropriate unit, and the regimental police had to go to pick them up - I went to Dusseldorf twice for that reason. The men were always punished by being given a term of imprisonment in the 'glass house', (military prison) and that was no soft option - I had been told about it.

I was pleased that I had to make two visits to the centre of Hamburg, the destruction was unbelievable over a very wide area. There was complete collapse of a great number of buildings and at the docks there was absolute devastation. I would never have believed it if I had not seen it for myself, the people of Coventry had been avenged many times over!

For three days the police had to accompany six Officers on a rather unpleasant duty. We went to a large field about five miles away from our billet, and what faced us was a very sorry sight. There was literally thousands of displaced persons standing around, waiting for somebody to tell them what to do. These people had been uprooted from their homes all over the occupied territories and made to help the German War effort by forced labour in the factories. We set up tables and one Officer together with a linguist sat at each. We police had to organise the poor folk into single file, it was all done by signs, because so many different languages were involved, but they soon cottoned on to what was required of them. They were well behaved and just stood there wondering what on earth was to happen to them, and were almost in a trance.

I was beside one table all day listening to the Officers questioning, asking all kinds of things, so that these pathetic people could be sent to their individual countries and hopefully find a home where they had been taken from, and look for their families, no wonder they were bewildered, their minds must have been in torment. It was a monumental task which had to be done as quickly as possible, and this same routine must have been going on in many other areas of Germany.

What a tremendous upheaval of humanity the Nazi regime had brought about, it was a miracle that it was ever sorted out, but for many a poor soul it never would be.

I was pleased I had joined the regimental police, because our duties enabled me to see more of the aftermath of War that I would otherwise have seen, and made me realise that not all Germans wanted the War - with all it's consequences - which had been forced upon them.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)

23. OBERHAUSEN

During the first week of August, a move became imminent and within three days we had packed up and were on our way a fair distance through the war-stricken German countryside.

We ended up at Oberhausen in the Ruhr district of Germany and were billeted in what seemed to have been makeshift offices belonging to the I.G. Farben Chemical Company. The firm's name was on a tall tower just fifty yards away from us. I got the impression that all the works buildings around us had been erected to replace bomb damage because nothing looked permanent.

Before our billet was occupied, I accompanied our Officer on an inspection and you can imagine the surprise when, upon opening a locked cupboard, we found a full case of twelve bottles of Scotch whisky in dimple bottles. The Officer's eyes lit up and he said "Hell Cheall, what a find", he then handed me a bottle and took the others to share with the Company Officers. My bottle went home on leave with me.

About two days after we had settled in, the orderly room sent for me and told me that a course had been set up at Dusseldorf for regimental police and I was to go on it, being the senior among our police section. Well, I went and it was a revelation to me; I was taught all aspects of policing in an occupied country, what to do and not to do in different situations; how to treat the civilians and how to handle emergencies. I even did a stint on traffic control on the main street in Dusseldorf. Whilst I was on the course, discipline was enforced, but when off duty I used to walk along the river side and go into a pub on the bank. Three of us always went out together after dark just in case of trouble. We would have a glass of weak German beer and a chat; the civilians in the place always welcomed us with a German greeting. Most of the German girls always gave us longing looks, but our behaviour had to be above board at all times; advantage could have been taken of any weakness in our make-up.

The two weeks soon passed and I was on my way back to Oberhausen. During the journey, in the faithful 15cwt. truck the driver took me through what had been Essen and compared to the destruction here, Hamburg had been untouched, just piles of rubble everywhere. If a building still stood, the top half was missing; I saw a large twisted sign resting against a pile of bricks, Alfred Krupp - they had certainly got their desserts here alright, and it pleased me enormously.

Now it was back to duty and I had to report to the orderly room on my return. We still did patrols, but on our motor cycles now, and to be frank it was rather enjoyable. The companies of the battalion were spread out over a good sized area, consequently I got around a great deal, which involved having to go over the pontoon bridge which had been put across the River Elbe at Duisburg. The engineers were very clever doing the work they did on the bailey bridges.

I had been back from my course about a week when my Company Commander wanted to see me and said the result of my police course was very satisfactory and consequently I was being promoted to full Corporal and would be responsible for the efficient running of the regimental police. I was very pleased with the promotion and of course realised that extra responsibility went with it, but the challenge was something I knew I could cope with.

Since we had begun the occupation, one important amenity was missing for the men, and that was a canteen or Naafi - somewhere for them to go for a cup of tea and a chat. There was also no form of entertainment to pass away the evenings, what was left of the town did not offer any attraction worth leaving your billet for, so the men just whiled away the time playing cards, reading and listening to the radio.

On one of the evenings I was in my room alone, thinking how good life was right now and I started to sing songs of the day. Suddenly, there came a tap on the door and one of our Sergeants walked in and asked if it was me who had been singing; I confirmed that it was. "Right", he said "I am putting on a bit of a show for the lads, they are feeling browned off". After a pause, he went on "How about giving us a couple of songs Bill?"

I really had no alternative, so I agreed. A week later the proposed 'bit of a show', became reality and although I was a touch nervous I stood there and sang what I knew the lads wanted to hear, and perhaps would be a little sad, thinking about home. I sang 'We'll meet again', and 'You'll never know', much of the time they all joined in. I can't remember the other songs I sang. I think that breaking the ice in that way encouraged me to become a member of the local operatic society some years later. Perhaps I gave a respectable

rendition of the songs because I knew I was going on leave the next week.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

[Next Chapter -->](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)

24. THE END OF MY WAR

At the end of September, the Company left Oberhausen for a new battalion headquarters which would be more central to the other Companies. Just about three miles south of Duisburg we turned right off the main road and travelled along a narrow winding lane for about half a mile, and came upon a wonderful old building on the left. It had a typical German name Wolfsburg, and must have been some kind of a country club; it had a disused swimming pool at the rear. On the ground floor there were about ten rooms, and at the back a spacious kitchen area fitted out to cater for a large number of people; this was to be the Company cookhouse.

The first floor consisted of a very large room, the size of a small ballroom, it had a long bar running along one side and several small rooms leading off. It seemed to me that it had obviously been the club lounge; it was now to be the Company dining room and canteen. There were two more floors above, which would accommodate the men; the police room was on the top floor looking out over the front of the building. I could look across the top of a forest of trees and on a clear day I could see woodland for miles.

The building was ideal from all points of view, not only being handy for the canteen which was run by the Battalion H.Q., but also for the dining room; so often in the past our meals had been taken stood up outside, or wherever we could find a seat. I always sat at the same table for my meals and formed a friendship with a lad called Harold Greenwood - he used to make a meal of his finger nails - but he was a good sort and we got on well together. We always met in the canteen for a chat. He came from Darwen in Lancashire - I could never understand why he smoked so much and sadly it killed him with lung cancer some years later. I should say here that after I was demobbed, Harold had a leave and I went to Darwen to see him, and to cut a long story short, directly through him I met the Lancashire lass who became my wife. He married my wife's best friend - God works his wonders in mysterious ways.

About a month after our move the police had to change their billet on the top floor as it was inconvenient for our duties; the Officers also, moved out.

The new building accommodated all the Officer's quarters and the battalion orderly room and was only three hundred yards from Wolfsburg. The mansion, which is what I would call it, was set in a large clearing among trees and was like something out of a fairy tale, such a building might be seen in Scotland, pointed towers and the lot; it looked magnificent.

There was another building a short distance away to be occupied by the police, a bungalow, which I thought was the lodge to the manor. It was ideal; we each had our own room and there was an outhouse for the motor cycles. There was a very tidy garden no use to us of course, and I can see now, the sweetcorn growing, it was in a lovely spot. At the front of the mansion there was a large cultivated lawn and in the centre a flagpole had been erected atop of which we flew the Union Jack. I was ever so proud when I raised the flag every morning and saluted and in the evening I would lower it, giving me a feeling I had rarely felt, to think that our flag was flying there, where the Swastika used to be.

One day the local authority at Duisburg decided to hold a sports meeting - how quickly they got things organised. Our police were given instructions to attend the meeting to make sure nothing untoward happened, but all the civilians were by now very sociable and kept good order, obeying the rules of occupation; it was a good day out, taking us away from our usual routine.

At the beginning of December, our Company Commander thought it would be a good idea to give a Christmas Party to about one hundred German school children about nine years of age. When the day came they were assembled in their school hall and the police were present to help with the proceedings. The children had never seen such a spread in their young lives, it was a joy to see such happiness on their faces. At the end of the party a teacher told them all to stand up to thank our Officers for their kindness; it was of course translated, then the teacher, standing in front, raised her arms for attention, gave some instructions to the children and they started singing the German national carol, Silent Night.

We were all very touched, it sounded so beautiful. I was so impressed, the memory is still vivid; I have never forgotten that day in a schoolroom near Duisburg. So much so that as late as December 1986, forty one years after the event, I wrote to the information bureau at Duisburg telling them of my memories and asking if they could they could possibly send me a record of German children singing Silent Night - of course I would send the necessary cheque to cover the cost. On the 16th of January 1987 they wrote back to me and sent the record I had requested - with English words on a separate sheet. It was a very kind letter thanking me for letting

them share my memories; it was signed by Dietmar Wolf, and the record was a gift from the German people. I cannot express in words how pleased I was and I play the record every Christmas, recalling that lovely day in 1945.

News was now coming through that some men were to be demobilised, and I was wondering if I should sign on as a regular soldier because the East Lancs experience had been good for me. On the other hand, my family had seen very little of me since I was called up in August 1939.

The War had taken almost seven years out of my twenties, but had given me experience beyond my wildest dreams, had enabled me to travel to see parts of the world it would have been highly improbable that I would otherwise have set eyes upon.

One of the most rewarding experiences the war had given me was the privilege of meeting so many generous and kind hearted people, soldiers and civilians alike, that it would have been impossible for me to meet otherwise. It had taught me the meaning of comradeship and discipline and given me priceless memories to think about in my later years.

On the second of January 1946 I was told that I was due for demob. on the eighth of the month and asked if I wanted to take advantage of it. I had, of course, decided to do so - later in the year the Battalion went to Palestine to do duty during the troubles there, so I was pleased I went for demob. having already had my fill of the sand, flies and food of the Middle East.

On the evening of the sixth of January, all the usual lads were in the canteen and we had a rare old sing song of all the tunes soldiers had sung for years; I will never forget, it was their farewell to me. It was hard to imagine that about one hundred soldiers could have such an enjoyable evening without the presence of the opposite sex and before the evening had ended they had got me drunk. It was great and I was very touched by such a heartfelt farewell, and to think that I was going home at last, after all the times I had thought the War would never end.

I was given my discharge book with a good commendation, on the eighth of January and I left for a transit camp and from there back across the channel to Dover, then by train to Catterick Camp where I was officially discharged. I didn't know whether I was sad or glad; real comradeship was something 'Civvy Street' didn't know about and never would, in the sense that soldiers experienced in abundance.

To conclude the recollections of my life in the Army, soldiers of the Second World War were a rare breed of men, boys of nineteen who became stout hearted men and fought incredibly for survival against a ruthless enemy. Not only the enemy, the trauma and depravation endured, particularly in the desert, being in action time after time, not knowing if he would be blown to pieces, they all came from the top echelon of the human race.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[<-- Previous Chapter](#)

[Index](#)





The Friends
of the
Green Howards

Bill Cheall's Story

Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment (19th Foot) The North York Militia, The North York Local Militia & North York Rifle Volunteers

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[Battle Honours](#)

[The Battalions](#)

[Medals](#)

[Diaries & Journals](#)

[Published History](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Netley Hospital](#)

[Bell Memorial](#)

[The Bands](#)

The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[Index](#)

EPILOGUE

I had decided to go to France a week before the 40th. anniversary because I wanted to be able to take my time in my wanderings and not be pushed around by all and sundry, and I also wanted to be at home to watch the t.v. coverage of that period so important in my life.

The first of June 1984, almost the fortieth anniversary of one of the greatest events in history, found me once again going across the Channel in circumstances I could not possibly have imagined in 1944. Then, all that concerned me was survival; now, this trip was going to be a very sentimental journey and it proved to be just that.

We travelled by hovercraft from Dover to Calais - the last time I had been in Calais was early in 1940 when my battalion was part of the British expeditionary force.

My first stop was Gravelines, a little further up the coast, the scene of our clashes with the enemy in 1940. Nothing seemed to have changed; the little row of cottages at the roadside was still there. I found the spot where Lt. Hewson had been killed and then visited Fort Mardik where he was buried. I spent some time just walking around the place, thinking.

My next stop was at Bray Dunes, not a thing had changed here either. I got out of the car three hundred yards from the edge of the village and walked exactly the same road as I had done all those years ago, down to the end of the road overlooking the beach, turned left, along the road for a hundred yards, then onto the sand banks and sat down in the same spot where we had dug into the sand when the planes came over. I walked down to the sea and stood looking across the water visualising things as they were the last time I was here, the ships and the men forming queues into the water to try to get back to England only to be killed in North Africa, all these things went through my mind as I stood, reminiscing.

I walked along the beach five miles to the East Mole at Dunkirk, picking up sea shells on the way, to keep as souvenirs of my visit.

I recalled the black smoke billowing from the blazing oil tanks. Retracing my steps I thought of all the pals I had known and how many I knew had been killed in various actions after they had got back to England and then sent to North Africa. There was one change to the picture I had remembered, and that was the large concrete gun emplacement which had been erected as part of the Atlantic wall.

I went in a half circle from Bray Dunes, covering the same ground on which I had seen the poor refugees being machine gunned by the planes - then I could see all the thousands of vehicles burnt out or immobilised, as I headed towards the coast and Bayeux.

I had booked in at the hotel Lyon Dor where many German senior Officers had been billeted during the occupation. Bayeux was decorated for the occasion, British, American, French flags hung across the streets. I came upon a plaque on a wall which declared to all that the city had been freed by the 50th. division on the 7th June 1944, the first town to be freed. I was so proud to think that I had been a part of it.

During my stay I wandered down to Gold Beach and just stood, carried away by the emotion of my racing thoughts, about what had happened that day so long ago, when we waded ashore at 07.25hrs. and a Green Howard won the only Victoria Cross awarded on D Day. It was so peaceful and the amazing thing was there was a heavy drizzle just as on that great day, but that did not deter me. I was determined to make the most of it.

I walked from the edge of the sea towards the land but there were no mines or booby traps, no shells or machine guns or dead soldiers. Although the weather was inclement, it was, to me, tranquil.

We visited the Bayeux museum and I was enthralled to see prominent recognition of the fact that my 50th. division had made such an important contribution when it freed the city.

Going across the road, to the cemetery, which, like all military burial grounds was magnificently kept, I wandered along the lines of graves looking for the Green Howard badge on the headstones. I had brought with me a list of names whose graves I was looking for

and one by one I crossed them off the list. I found the resting place of our good Captain Linn who was killed on the beach, alongside that of Rufty Hill, then came upon the headstone of Captain Chambers, killed in the cornfield fiasco, and many others. I remained there just looking at the graves for about thirty minutes, then saluted and went to sign the book of remembrance - 'remembered always, a Green Howard.'

All those splendid lives, gone, what a great waste of human life war is. I know it is said that one cannot live in the past; that is all very well for the hard hearted person, but I am inclined just the other way, I am an emotional person and I feel very proud to have been able to serve my country as I did and I have an overflowing cup of vivid memories that I am not ashamed to look back on with sentimental pride.

Next stop, Arrowmanche, also freed by the 50th. Division. To a large extent the museum there was devoted to the Green Howards and 50th.Div. I looked at the display with consuming interest, it was a great regiment and I would always be proud to have been a soldier in it.

I then stood on the rocks and looked seawards to the remains of the Mulberry Harbour, huge concrete blocks being pounded by the sea. It was once part of a magnificent achievement - when I had last seen it I was on a stretcher being put aboard a hospital ship.

Although they do not come into my story, I also visited all the areas where the Americans had fought; St.Mare Eglise and Omaha which of course was the next beach to Gold. I went to Pont du Hoc and saw the gun emplacements and shell holes which had been left as they were at the time.

While I was stood looking out to sea a huge coloured American came up to me, eyeing me suspiciously. He turned out to be a secret service agent who, together with others, had been covering the area for any characters intent on doing harm to President Reagan, who was due to attend the celebrations. Anyway, after explaining my visit to him he took my hand in a firm grip and said he felt privileged to meet somebody who had taken part in the initial assault on D Day - it had made my day.

It was my last day before returning to England and home.

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[Index](#)





The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[Index](#)

Names I Will Never Forget

Beckermeyer	Helmut	German prisoner of War, Hometown Bremen
Bertram	George	Not Known
Betley	Jack	Killed in Sicily
Booth	Ernest	Wounded by survived the War
Bousefield	John	Killed at Wadi Akarit
Bristow		Killed in Sicily
Buckler	Leslie	Lives in Canada
Burns	Sergeant	Killed on beach D-Day
Cargill	Jack	Entered the Church after War
Carmichael	Captain	MT Officer 6th Battalion
Castor	Private Ivor	Lost an arm and was discharged
Chambers	Captain	Killed in Action
Collins	Bill	Killed on H.M.S. York
Coughlan	Lance Corporal	Killed in action Wadi Akarit
Decker	Alfred	German prisoner of War, Hometown Bremen
Farrand	Lieutenat	Taken prisoner at Gravelines
Foster	Captain	Taken prisoner at Gravelines
Gort	General Lord	Commander in Chief British Expeditionary Force
Greenwood	Harold	Died 1976
Harrington	Sergeant	Killed in Sicily
Herbert		Officer Commanding 23rd Div.
Hewson	Lieutenant	Killed at Gravelines
Hill	Sergeant Rusty	Drowned on D-Day
Hollis	Sergeant Major Stan	Won VC on D-Day and survived the War
Hughes	Regimental Sgt. Major	Nothing known of future service
Hull	Captain	Survived the War, promoted to Major
Jones	Margaret	Died in 1960
Kidd	Captain	Taken prisoner at Gravelines
Lee	Charlie	Killed in Sicily
Linn	Helmut	Killed in Action D-Day
Mill	Alex	Killed in Sicily 1943
Myson	Sergeant	Killed in action Wadi Akarit
Owens	Margaret	Died in 1958
Oxley	Arthur	Killed at Wadi Akarit
Petch	Major Leslie	B Company Commander, Discharged 1940 (ill health)
Ryan	John	Killed in Sicily
Savage	Donald	Killed in RAF
Shaw	Corporal	Killed in action Wadi Akarit
Spooner	John	Not Known

Steel
Wiseman
Wolf

Lt. Colonel
Mary
Dietmar

Battalion Commander
Lives in Dufftown, Scotland
Lives in Germany

[Return to Top of Page](#) 

[Index](#)





The War of a Green Howard, 1939 - 1945. Bill Cheall's Story

[Index](#)

Photographs of Bill Cheall



Corporal Bill Cheall - First Photograph in Uniform - aged 22 (10th October 1939)



Corporal Bill Cheall - 3 months after call up (16th November 1939)

[Return to Top of Page](#)

[Index](#)

