

I remember my first trip abroad

By Eric Cooper.

As a boy I was lucky and had a holiday by the sea every year – but never abroad. "Abroad" was a place where people lived who spoke funny languages, who looked different from us and often had different coloured skin from us. I had seen one or two in this country – moustachioed men in berets selling onions and riding bicycles and the German couple living in our road – very nice people but everyone said they were spies! So my experience of "abroad" was somewhat limited.

The army put this matter right for me in 1943. I had been in the Territorial Army since 1938 and the real army since war broke out in 1939. I had married Dorothy earlier in 1943 and she was pregnant; so I could not say that my anticipation for seeing "abroad" was enthusiastic. However the Army seemed to be convinced that while Dorothy and her unborn baby were tough enough to withstand enemy action including flying bombs I should be sent somewhere out of trouble and danger.

So I went to Liverpool in October 1943 and joined 150 fellow Royal Artillery second lieutenants bound for "who knows where". 75 of us boarded the troopship 'Staffordshire'... 23,000 tons...The other 75 boarded another ship and the two ships joined a convoy and we moved out to sea gathering more ships as we reached the Clyde in Scotland. I should mention that whilst we were still in the Mersey estuary, the weather good and the water calm, there were two people on our ship who were seasick. I can't remember who the other one was!

The convoy left Britain and sailed westwards until we were within the protection of the American Airforce; then we turned south, then later eastwards to Gibraltar. This way we avoided the U-boats in the Atlantic. I continued to be sick and stayed in my bunk the whole week or more that this took – thereby missing the sights of the Isle of Man, Ireland and the vast Atlantic.

As we entered the Mediterranean Sea the water calmed and I left my bunk to witness the sights; but before I opened my eyes to them some German planes attacked us, sinking several ships and forcing us Artillery officers who were technically passengers to remain below deck clad in greatcoats, wearing gasmasks at the ready and life vests lest we had to swim to safety. It was galling for us Gunners to find ourselves protected by naval gunners. We would carry on smouldering and playing our perpetual games of cards. Between air attacks on us we were able to observe the north coast of Africa and the south coast of Europe. I saw parched land and sand, and saw my first wild growing palm tree, a few scattered fishing villages and their inhabitants. Everything and everyone looked much as I expected from childhood books and Sunday school stamps. Our sea journey ended at Alexandria in Egypt, where we disembarked and boarded trains which took us through the Nile Delta and on to Port Tewfik, Suez at the north end of the Red Sea. It had been a very interesting first trip abroad... and there was still more to come.

Alas, security meant that I could not write and tell Dorothy what I had seen and what she had missed. I did resolve, however, that after the war I would take her to all the countries I visited during the war. For the moment I was enjoying the sunshine, but not the millions of flies buzzing around.