FOURTH BATTALION

INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES

DIARY OF SECOND LIEUTENANT D. W. WALLIS,
4TH OXFORDSHIRE AND BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY,
ATTACHED 145TH BRIGADE ANTI-TANK COMPANY

10th May, 1940
0630.—News received that the Low Countries have been attacked and message from brigade headquarters ordering us to prepare to move immediately.
1030.—Ready to move.
1100.—This order cancelled and message putting “D” Plan into operation received—zero hour 1330 hrs.
Visit by Brigadier Hughes.
1430.—Gun drill—new drill for 1937 pattern gun perfected. Continental air-raid warnings all day.

11th May, 1940
0715.—Gun drill instead of P.T.
Aiming and laying on miniature range until 1730 hrs.
Regular air-raid warnings.

12th May, 1940
Church parade cancelled. Gun drill all morning—drill now as good as with other guns. Bathing party at Leforest in the afternoon. More air-raid warnings. Darts match in the evening.

13th May, 1940
Company continued practising gun drill and aiming and laying all day. Billeting brought up to date and electric-light bills paid. Final Plan “D” orders and maps issued to platoon commanders. Time of departure put forward to 1200 hrs. on the 14th May. Each platoon reporting to battalions at 0900 hrs.

14th May, 1940
0500.—Reveille.
All platoons left Ostricourt by 0830 hrs., each man with one day’s ration. They reported to their respective battalion headquarters by 0900 hrs.
Company headquarters clean billets, visit Maire and obtain clearance certificate, then reported to brigade headquarters at 1100 hrs. Brigade started move into Belgium at 1200 hrs.; route: Orchies—Tournai—Leuze—Ath—Enghien—Hal—Alsemberg. Billets already waiting in three unoccupied houses: car park, orchard.
2100.—Hot meal served.
Enemy aircraft fairly active on route; no damage done to this company.

15th May, 1940
Aircraft very active at dawn. Morning spent improving billets, the afternoon resting.
1400.—Warning order concerning move for that night received. Refugees becoming very plentiful.
2100.—Order for platoons to join battalions received. Company headquarters to join brigade and retain all 30-cwt. trucks.

16th May, 1940
0400.—Plans altered during night, brigade now taking up defensive position five miles east of Waterloo. All guns in good positions. Breakfasts and dinners sent out from company headquarters.
1300.—All troops withdrawn from one front—no sign of the enemy.
2000.—No. 3 Platoon withdrawn to brigade headquarters; Nos. 1 and 2 stay with battalions.
2200.—General withdrawal starts.

17th May, 1940
0300.—No. 3 Platoon in position on Waterloo—Hal road to protect withdrawing infantry. Infantry take cross-country route, so guns withdrawn to actual road entrances into Hal.
1245.—Whole brigade over canal bridge in Hal—the bridge was then blown up during a bombing raid. Whole company now collected again and proceeded to village north of Enghien.
1400.—Arrival. Hot meal served.
2100.—Everyone in bed; orders received to take up positions by wood east of Enghien, platoons to report to battalions by 2300 hrs. This was done. Men very tired but cheerful.
18th May, 1940
A lovely day.
0300.—All guns in position.
Breakfasts cooked and issued by platoons. Lack of hot-food containers made the food question very difficult.
0645.—Brigade began a further withdrawal. Each platoon protected its respective battalion's march as far as Ath. Heavy shelling in Enghien, otherwise quiet.
Refugees very plentiful. No. 3 Platoon finally withdrew to Houtaing, remainder stay with their battalions.
1800.—All platoons again in position along brigade front on Ath Canal. Hot meal served.
After dark a lot of firing at shadows, otherwise quiet.

19th May, 1940
0100.—Order to withdraw. Company remained split up in platoons—destination Bleharries. There appeared to be two divisions on the move and a third joined our road at Leuze—result a bad hold-up in Leuze, traffic four deep and unable to move. In the middle of this the town was bombed. Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons had narrow escapes, but all was well. Road west of Tournai was blocked by incendiary bombing; convoy had to turn left and go by country lanes to Antoing and so to Bleharries.
0400.—Arrival.
Platoons put in position immediately, Bucks in reserve. A very hot day, no enemy activity. Company headquarters at Lesdain. Food position good, troops well supplied with beer, etc.

20th May, 1940
A quiet night—gun positions improved during the morning.
Meals again good, consisting largely of commandeered food.
1400.—Enemy attacked strongly on our right flank by the international post. The river was crossed at one point. No tanks at all. Evening fairly quiet, our own artillery shelling enemy concentrations very heavily.

21st May, 1940
Enemy infantry attack very heavily at about 0100 hrs. and small numbers cross the canal, but soon driven back. At the same time the houses in the rear of the canal were bombarded by shells and mortars—no damage to gun teams. Everyone very impressed by the shelter afforded by even a small dug-out to fairly heavy shell fire. Continual bursts of fire during the day from both sides—still no tanks. Hot meal issued at night.

22nd May, 1940
Sharp enemy attacks again early in the morning—all repulsed very easily. Brigade decide that guns should protect flanks and not front in case of penetration on the flanks. All positions reconnoitred with platoon commanders—arrange for guns to be moved at 2200 hrs.
1800.—All our gun positions were heavily shelled, one gun slightly damaged, no one hurt. Gun positions changed without incident, although enemy fired machine guns at regular intervals.

23rd May, 1940
0100.—Ordered to withdraw all guns beyond Rongy. Rendezvous other side of canal at Rongy.
0500.—All platoons arrived, position reconnoitred and guns in position by 1000 hrs. No. 3 Platoon has two guns in forward pillbox. The gun fits in very well and men very happy.
Hot dinners issued. A quiet day, a few shells drop near No. 3 Platoon gun, but nothing serious. No. 5382815 Private Brace spear wounded in chest by own Bren gun—taken to Regimental aid post.
2000.—Ordered to start withdrawal at 2300 hrs., destination rest area behind Lille. Company moves off at 2300 hrs. and joins up with brigade at 2350 hrs.

24th May, 1940
0400.—Arrive at village where we are to stay for one day.
Men sent straight to bed.
1300.—Reveille.
Three officers all sleeping together.
0700.—Message received that we are to report to battalions as soon as possible in order to go to Calais.
1000.—Reported to battalions, waited under cover until 2000 hrs. All the men fed on local food and after sleeping all day they felt quite refreshed.
2030.—Destination changed to Cassel, move off 2230 hrs. Anti-tank platoon directly behind commanding officer's car.

25th May, 1940
0400.—Arrived at Cassel, no incident on journey.
0500.—Dispositions given out, platoons still under command of battalions. Guns dug in and breakfasts issued by 0800 hrs.

0900.—Gun positions altered by order of brigade, now all guns covering road blocks on roads, each gun being allotted to a company.

It should be added here that the Bucks platoon was with its battalion at Hazebrouck, so this diary does not deal with it from now onwards.

The 2nd Glsters, 4th Oxf. and Bucks Lt. Infys., four anti-aircraft guns and one anti-tank battery arrived at Cassel at 0400 hrs. The town had been bombed the previous evening; there had been many civilian casualties but no serious damage.

The day was spent digging in. The 4th Battalion had B Company in reserve on the top of the hill, and A and C Companies half-way down the hill; C Company's left on the Dunkirk road, A Company's right astride the Lille road, with D Company covering the Steenvoorde road from Mont de Recollets, about three-quarters of a mile from Cassel. There were 25-mm. anti-tank guns on A, C and D Companies' fronts.

During the day there was a little bombing, but no ground action. Enemy armoured fighting vehicles were reported in the distance, but not confirmed.

Late in the evening patrols reported a machine-gun post in a wood about two miles north of Cassel. The carriers went out at 0300 hrs. on the 26th, but could not find the gun, although signs of the enemy were found.

26th May, 1940

No. 9 gun moved up into Cassel. No. 8 gun moved with D Company from hill west of Cassel to village north-west of town, about one and a half miles away. Aircraft again very active. One machine-gun post reported on D Company’s front at 1600 hrs., but not confirmed.

D Company was relieved by another battalion and moved to a village (name forgotten) about one and a half miles north-west of Cassel, with one anti-tank gun. During the day there were more bombing and a little ground action. Many reports were received, but the enemy were reconnoitring only.

*Bavinchove. D Company was relieved by East Riding Yeomanry. Bavinchove is south-west of Cassel.

27th May, 1940

All quiet at stand-to. At about 0700 hrs. a few shots fired on D Company's front.

0800.—A few armoured fighting vehicles had been seen and quite a lot of motor-cycle troops. Gun in position on railway, firing across road. Four armoured fighting vehicles put out of action very quickly. Infantry now attacking on our right flank; one section of D Company in position there. They did considerable damage to enemy, but could not stop them advancing. Eventually light mortars and hand grenades (causing practically no damage) were landing on the railway line behind the gun, and one machine gun was shooting straight down the railway line from the right flank. No. 5384722 Private Blake was killed, No. 5384379 Private Allum believed killed, and No. 5385331 Private Eldridge wounded. The gun was lost, but very doubtful if it would fire, at any rate. Remainder of section quite safe.

1030.—Withdrew to main position held by company and so by bounds to Cassel.

Immediately on arrival at Cassel No. 8 gun saw about forty tanks approaching and opened fire. Later their gun was moved to a more suitable position and did very great damage to the enemy. Some of these tanks were medium light, others medium heavy; 25-mm. gun was very effective. Four tanks were smoking after about fifteen minutes and there were about eight stationary ones deserted by their crews. It appeared that after one shot at a tank the crew were very apt to get out and run. At this time the fighting became very heavy from other tanks and light machine guns. Captain Dixie was killed, but gun remained unhurt. Odd tanks still appeared, which were shot at. By 1500 hrs. there were eighteen tanks in front without their crews. At this moment a heavy anti-tank shell hit the gun, blowing off the sights and damaging the breech block, so that it was unusable.

At about 0700 hrs. D Company was attacked by motor-cycle troops, troops in lorries and about six light tanks. The front section of D Company with one anti-tank gun was on the far side of a railway, supported by two sections on the other side of the lines about fifty yards back and a platoon on the left and right to the rear of the village.

The front section was attacked first on its flanks, the enemy stalking it. Grenades were thrown by both sides. At about 0930
hrs., when the section withdrew across the line to its rear platoon, it found that the enemy were on its right flank and pushing round behind the whole company.

At this time the wounded were sent back in the transport and narrowly escaped capture. The rest of the company withdrew across the fields to within about half a mile of Cassel, where it took up its final position.

During all this, Cassel itself had been shelled and the withdrawing troops were bombed with mortars. At about 1130 hrs. snipers in the town itself became very active and patrols were sent out to deal with them. D Company also saw about thirty medium tanks cross its front about a mile away.

At about 1300 hrs. tanks were seen by A Company's right platoon. The anti-tank gun was moved to a more suitable position and opened fire at once. This continued very successfully for about two hours, when the gun suffered a direct hit and was put out of action. By this time the tanks had suffered pretty badly and withdrew. They never approached nearer than about four hundred yards.

Meanwhile, German infantry had been brought up either in lorries or on motor-cycles, and there was very heavy small-arms fire. It was difficult to tell what was happening a hundred yards away from one's own position, and since there was firing all round the town it was impossible to tell whether the fire was friendly or hostile.

Shelling and bombing continued during the afternoon, but at about 1600 hrs. everything quietened down.

During the night patrols were very active and casualties were suffered on both sides.

28th May, 1940

Everything quiet on previous day's front. One company of the 2nd Glosters, with an anti-tank gun, was surrounded and has not been heard of since—there is no information about it. Day spent resting men as much as possible.

More fighting round the town, but chiefly on the Glosters' front. Fortunately tanks were not used, as our anti-tank defence by this time was rather weak. Shelling and bombing continued, but everyone was well dug in and very few casualties were suffered.

29th May, 1940

0730.—Captain Dixie buried.

Spasmodic firing on all fronts, although no definite move by the enemy. No tank activity. Aircraft very active and regular shelling. Day spent going through company files, etc.

Major Thorne killed by a shell at headquarters, Cassel.

1200.—Warning order concerning withdrawal received—no details. In the afternoon impress checked up, all papers filed, recommendations for decorations sent to brigade.

1600.—Order received to prepare to move at 2130 hrs. with minimum of transport.

2000.—Order received that all transport and as much as possible would be left. All opposition to be avoided if possible. Order of march: Oxfordshires, brigade headquarters, 2nd Glosters.

2130.—Brigade moved off.

This is the latest information that can be given of the anti-tank company.

Shelling continued during the day, but little small-arms fire.

The preliminary withdrawal order gave the impression that we would take our transport, etc. We attempted to bring our trucks up, but since they had moved from Steenvoorde and we were then surrounded, this was impossible. Two despatch riders were sent off but were captured on the way and subsequently were sent ahead of some German tanks back to Cassel and were wounded by our own guns. The tanks which were using them for cover were destroyed.

The final orders came out at about 1800 hrs. saying that the Glosters would move at 2130 hrs. and hold Mont de Recollets. The troops from there had already been ordered to withdraw. The 4th Battalion would follow, with brigade headquarters behind them. When they had passed, the Glosters would fall in behind and act as rearguard. The route was: Watou, thence to a rendezvous at Hondschote, and if that was held by the enemy we were to meet at Les Moëres. If the column was fired on from close quarters the necessary action was to be taken and troops were to move separately and go to either of the two rendezvous.

The withdrawal started as arranged and went without incident for about two hours. We then reached a road after moving across open country. We passed several burning farms and quite
a lot of damaged German transport. We were just about to enter a small village when at four hundred yards

30th May, 1940

0030.—Brigade was fired on by tanks using tracer bullets. Major Wykeham took self with about twenty-five others round to the left. Understood that the rest of the Battalion was following after a short interval.

0430.—After travelling across country we reached a small village which we thought was Watou. Here we halted to collect ourselves and decide on future action. C.S.M. Burton with about three others of the anti-tank company was present.

At this moment we thought we saw some British carriers enter Watou—on investigation we found they were German, and we were fired on by some tanks. After trying to take up a defensive position we withdrew, losing Major Wykeham and most of our men. Later, while crossing an open field, a German motor-cyclist gave our position away by means of a white and green Very light. We were immediately fired on from both sides and attacked by a small body of infantry. After waiting a few minutes (as we had no weapons except two revolvers and one rifle we could not return the fire effectively) we made a dash for a wood about four hundred yards away. On arrival we were five strong, and I was the only member of the anti-tank company. It is difficult to say exactly what happened to the others. At the time I thought they were all killed. On looking back it is quite possible that a few never entered the first open field and were captured. We waited in the wood while we smoked a cigarette and left at about 0600 hrs. We entered a farmhouse for a drink of water and learnt that the village we called Watou was actually about three miles north of Watou proper. We pushed on quickly, making for Hondschou. On the way we passed two parties of French engineers who had surrendered. They gave us coffee and biscuits and strongly advised us to surrender.

We crossed one canal at about 1000 hrs. On approaching Hondschouwe we were told that it had been occupied. We bore slightly right and at 1230 hrs. crossed the last canal at a small village about fourteen miles north-east of Dunkirk. The bridge here had been blown but was still held by a platoon of Green Howards.

We were resting here for a few minutes when suddenly a truck-load of Germans came round the corner and opened fire. The Green Howards replied. As we had no weapons then except revolvers we withdrew quickly to a road half a mile behind.

The Green Howards fed us and we continued on to Dunkirk at 1430 hrs. After a long time we were picked up and reached the beaches north of Dunkirk at 1830 hrs. We fed our men and reported to the control officer of the 48th Division, who referred us to the 44th Division. At this time the beach was shelled and a little later machine-gunned.

At 2000 hrs. we were formed up in groups of sixty to embark, but no boats arrived. Later some destroyers turned up, but were unable to do anything that night.

31st May, 1940

Destroyers were picking up troops on right and left, but no one near us. A staff captain came by at about 0900 hrs. He suggested we should move up the coast. We did this and were picked up, two in one boatload and three in another. Looked after very well indeed on the boat, plenty of food, and clothes dried. Landed Dover at 1430 hrs. We were pushed straight on to a train. I now found myself alone and eventually landed at Tenby.

1st June, 1940

Arrived Tenby 0430 hrs. Met by Manchesters, were very well looked after.

6th June, 1940

Arrived Hereford 1830 hrs. and reported to brigade headquarters. Anti-tank company now dissolved until further notice. List of survivors shown below.

145TH BRIGADE ANTI-TANK COMPANY NOMINAL ROLL

2ND GLOSTERS PLATOON

518191 Pte. E. Amos.
517787 Pte. J. Ellis.
5184768 Pte. L. Criddle.

1ST Bucks PLATOON

5382601 Pte. G. Herbert.
5384441 Pte. V. Bateman.
5384468 Pte. M. Oliffe.
5385096 Pte. F. Brooks.
5385103 Pte. A. Walker.
5384511 Pte. W. Campbell.
5385001 Cpl. J. Wright.
5384560 Pte. G. Hotson.