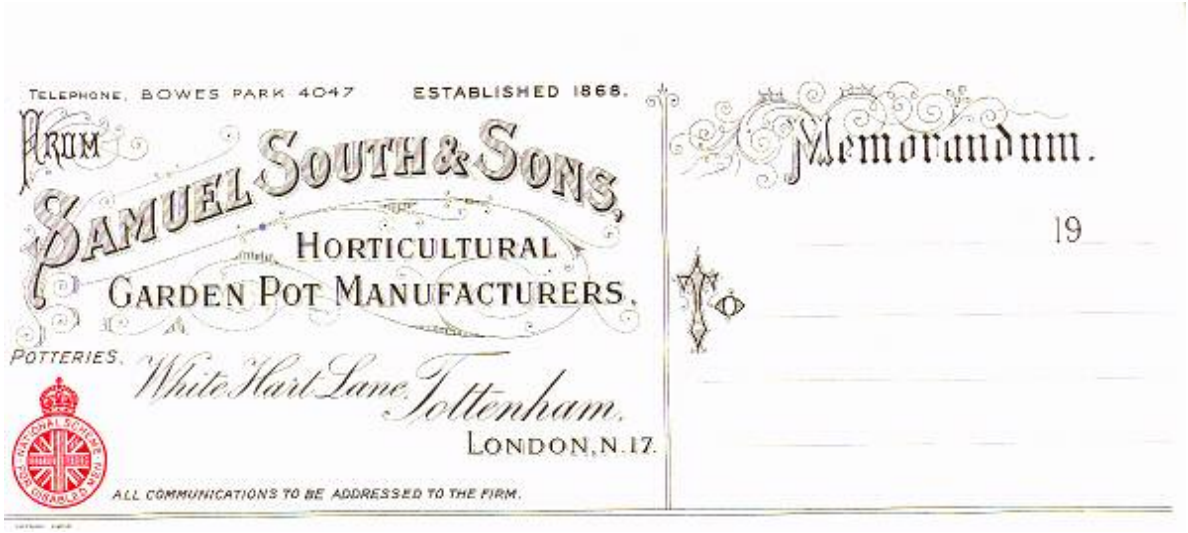

ARCHIVE UPDATE No 46

WORLD WAR 2

This summer has witnessed the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the ending of hostilities in 1945. Three sons of Samuel South(2) saw active service. Samuel(3), with the Royal Artillery, served in Burma and Charles, REME, in Italy. The youngest son, Ted (Edwin) South, a volunteer, became a sapper in 677 Company, Royal Engineers and received fatal wounds in May 1940 during the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force to Dunkirk.

The War Diary of 677 Company and other official records of the unit were destroyed in an action at Les Moeres during the retreat but, on his return, the Commanding Officer wrote a narrative history of the unit which was deposited with the War Office in August 1940. The account was compiled from the memories of Major Cole, his Officers and the Company Sergeant Major together with personal notes kept by them. In submitting the document to the War Office, Major Cole, quite rightly, commented :-

"The following will give probably a more interesting record than an official dairy could read. I have added occasionally personal experiences which probably would not be included in an official war diary"

The Company history (extending to 15 foolscap pages), now held at the Royal Engineers' Library, Gillingham, provides the basis of the account that follows with additional material from:-

History of the Corps of Royal Engineers Volume V111
Letters from Ted South to Gladys Short (sister) January 1940, 24 February 1940
Letter from Major E. Cole, Royal Engineers, to Samuel South (father) 6 September 1940.
Tottenham Herald 21-28 March 1941

677 General Construction Company, Royal Engineers
January 1940 – May 1940

On 3 September 1939, Great Britain declared war on Germany following the invasion of Poland. The armed forces were mobilised and a British Expeditionary Force, in which the Royal Engineers were to play a vital supporting role, was sent to France. A major responsibility for the Royal Engineers was the provision of airbases for the RAF which had indicated a need for 25 airfields and ancillary facilities within a period of 12 months. These requirements were beyond the existing resources of the Regiment and arrangements were hastily implemented to raise new units designated, General Construction Companies.

In January 1940, recruits for the new units, including Ted South, reported to Butlin's Holiday Camp, Clacton, which had been requisitioned by the Ministry of Defence. 677, General Construction Company, a wholly volunteer unit of 258 men was established under the command of Major Eric Cole. Very few of the men allocated to the newly formed unit had previous military experience.

Conditions at the Holiday Camp were far from ideal. The concrete holiday chalets were not suitable for habitation during winter months and certainly not through the harsh winter of 1939/1940. Condensation ran down the walls and over the floors saturating the bedding. The temperature was below freezing and there was insufficient heating. Ted South wrote to his sister that the walls of his chalet were covered with a sheet of ice. These conditions were thought responsible for a 'flu type illness which swept through the unit and was popularly known as either "Butlin's Bark" or "Clacton Cough".

Interviews were conducted to identify the trades and allocate the men to the relevant section. Ted South became Sapper E L South 1912550 of the Transport Section. There was time only for a rudimentary induction before, on 25 January 1940, orders posting 677 Company to France were received. The opportunity for leave was limited and, in the event, only 30 men were allowed 48 hour compassionate leave and the remainder told that they would be entitled to 10 days home leave at Easter.

Shortcomings in organisation, because of the hectic arrangements, became evident during the Company's transfer to France. An advanced party left Clacton on 25 January and, sailing from Harwich, reached Calais in the early hours of 28 January without significant incident. Together with a party from 678 Company, a convoy of 10 vehicles set off for the town of Albert. An English speaking guide did not arrive and the convoy continued during the hours of darkness, on icy roads, relying on a map that had been procured. The vehicles conveying the 678 Company became detached during the journey but the 677 unit pressed on. On arrival at their destination, a thaw began and the proposed billets were flooded. A cattle shed was used as alternative accommodation.

The remainder of 677 Company followed on 30 January travelling via Southampton to Le Havre. It was discovered that the four trains available were unable to accommodate the six Companies that were moving to France and, therefore, the men travelled in separate trains. By the time that the second party arrived at Southampton, the first group had already embarked and the troop ship had cast off. The naval escort was not prepared to wait and the remaining 128 the men were left behind and obliged to wait in Southampton for another ship.

The second party followed two days later. After the men were on board, the captain was unable to make contact with the naval escort and decided to cross the Channel to Le Havre without protection. On arrival in Le Havre, the whereabouts of the first group and the Company's kit could not be established. Eventually, the confusion was resolved and the men travelled to Albert by train. The billets remained uninhabitable and the Company were accommodated in barns, lofts, cellars and pig styes. The Company Headquarters was set up in a stable. However, the C.O. recorded the men as commenting that "it was better than Clacton".

Several days were spent in Albert until orders arrived instructing the company to proceed to Dieval and establish quarters. An advance party, including the C.O. and the Company Quarter Master, travelled ahead in order to arrange accommodation for the men. Billets in the village and an encampment of Nissen huts, erected earlier by the Pioneer Corps, were inspected. The decision was taken to occupy the huts so that the officers and men would be closer proximity and not scattered in houses throughout the village.

At first, conditions at the camp were poor. There was no fuel for the stoves in the huts and the boiler used for cooking had frozen and burst. Water was available only from a well in the village where candles were also bought to provide light. However, a supply of fuel and straw for palliases had been found before main body of men arrived having marched from the station after disembarking from the cattle trucks that had brought them.

Over the days following their arrival, the Company set about turning the site into a permanent camp. Trenches were dug to drain the water that had accumulated and materials, including picks and shovels, abandoned by the previous occupiers were salvaged. The drinking water carted from the village well was condemned as unfit and arrangements were made to lay a pipeline to bore-hole sunk almost a mile away. Cooking ranges were designed and built with materials at hand and bricks purchased locally. A gas-proof shelter was excavated together with trenches to provide protection against air attack.

The efforts of the men were not helped by the lack of equipment. The C.O. records that the Company had arrived without surveying staffs, measuring tapes, saws, planes, chisels, rulers, screwdrivers or trowels; the only tools immediately available comprised a cook's saw and spanners from the vehicles' toolkits. Tools were improvised and purchased from the nearby village. Empty petrol cans were converted and used as fire buckets, trays, drains and flashings. Writing to his sister, Ted South described how wash basins were improvised from the cans.

At last there was now the opportunity for Military training which was organised by the Company Sergeant Major. Training in Musketry, drills and lectures in Machine, Bren and Lewis guns were arranged. Soldiers attended voluntary drills each evening and a ceremonial parade and march-past were held on Sunday mornings.

Amongst all of the activity, time was found for relaxation. The company had been organised into four sections and each had a football team. Boxing gloves, table tennis equipment, dartboards, cards and wireless sets were collected or bought locally using Company funds. Visits by the men to neighbouring towns were permitted under the supervision of N.C.O's and only a few incidents of disorderly conduct occurred. On Easter Sunday, a trip by the Company to Vimy Ridge was arranged which the men called their "Sunday School Treat".

For the first few weeks, the freezing weather continued. It was not possible to drain the radiators of the vehicles when they were left standing because the water froze before the radiator had emptied. On one occasion the radiator froze on a vehicle as it was being driven and was thawed out with hot coals held on a shovel. A constant guard was maintained on the vehicles and the engines started continually during the night.

Within a few days of the arrival at Dieval, 677 Company had began their designated task of airfield construction and matters progressed in a more or less orderly manner until the German invasion of Norway on 9 April and, four weeks later, the entry of enemy troops into Belgium and Holland. The Company became responsible for the defence of the airfield which was subjected to air raids. Eventually, 677 Company were mobilised and re-designated as an Infantry unit which came as a shock because, as the C.O. recorded, "…..the Company had not been trained as such, in fact had not fired a rifle as yet, even for practice".

An increasing flow of refugees passed the camp. On one occasion, a lorry suddenly stopped nearby and the troops found a young French woman slumped at the wheel from exhaustion. She had been had been driving continuously for three days and nights ferrying children to safety from the German advance and wanted to continue. At the insistence of the British troops she was made to rest overnight but continued on her mission the following day.

The retreat was now underway and the Company History graphically describes the confusion that ensued. Some 70 men from 677 Company were drafted to one of four Field Companies that were hurriedly formed at Hoondschoote. Orders were received for the remainder to march about 7 miles towards Dunkirk which was completed successfully without major incident. On arrival, however, instructions were received to return Hoondschoote and once there, further orders were received to proceed to the village of Les Moeres. After sleeping in the open overnight, on the following day the Company was allocated a section of the nearby canal to defend where it stayed for several days.

It was whilst at Les Moeres that a devastating air attack occurred. Three or four German bombers made. The village was reduced to ruins. Cover for the troops was limited except for ditches and irrigation channels and after the raid a search was made for casualties. There were several dead and Ted South was amongst the injured. The C.O. estimated that some 25 men were either dead or wounded.

In a letter to Samuel South four months later (September 1940), Major Cole wrote "I would like to pay tribute to the bravery of your boy……Your son was hit by either M.G. bullet or flying shrapnel on his chin, but whilst he must have been in pain he was endeavouring to assist others more seriously hurt." The description in the Company History records "One transport driver, a lad, had been hit in the shoulder and I pay tribute to his calmness and bravery, though he must have been in agony." The similarities of the two accounts may suggest that they refer to the same wounded soldier. A passing ambulance took the more seriously injured, including Ted, to a Civilian hospital in Zuydcoote.

Orders were received for the remainder of the Company to move to a rendezvous outside Dunkirk during the course of which one party was lost because the men were without maps. After waiting for several hours, under continual bombing attacks, the Company were instructed to move towards the sand dunes on the coast. At the dunes, the men found whatever cover was available and Major Cole attended a conference of Company Commanders. It was arranged that the troops should be formed onto queues of about 1,000

men each at the water's edge, embarked onto tenders in groups of 25 and taken to the waiting Royal Navy ships. This operation was painfully slow, because of the lack of ships and tenders, and lasted for two or three days and nights. Clothing became sodden, it was bitterly cold at night and there was a severe shortage of food rations.

Eventually, orders were received to embark from the quayside at Dunkirk which entailed a gruelling march of seven or eight miles along the sands to the town. Kit and equipment was abandoned to lighten the load. Three ships were waiting at the mole in the harbour and the troops formed lines on the jetty. Some 100 men of 677 Company, who had managed to stay together during the chaos, boarded a packet steamer and crossed the Channel by a circuitous route, arriving at Folkestone in the late afternoon. Afterwards, it was learnt that the other two vessels embarking troops at the mole had been sunk later that day.

Over the ensuing days, the Company re-grouped and forty-eight hours leave was granted Around 35 men were missing from the unit including Ted South. He was posted missing and the letter from Major Cole to his father in September 1940 offered the hope that Ted had recovered from his injuries and was held captive as a prisoner of war. However, in March 1941, the Belgian Red Cross reported that he had died from his wounds on 26 May 1940 in the hospital at Zuycoote. Ted left a widow, Gwen, who he had married in July 1939 five months before he enlisted.

Headstone at Dunkirk Town Cemetery

FAMILY MEMORIES

Ted was described as an active man with a ready wit. He was a member of the Bruce Castle Cycling Club and, before his marriage, was the proud owner of a Morgan three wheeler sports car. The car had the unusual, and somewhat unstable, configuration of two leading wheels and a single rear wheel. The exhaust pipe ran through the cockpit providing an unwelcome surprise for unwary passengers.

After the weddings of family and friends, it was his devilment to follow the newly weds from the reception to whatever London main-line station from which they had (secretly) chosen to depart for their honeymoon. At the station, to the embarrassment the couple, they would be given a public farewell with cascades of confetti. He recognised that his victims would be seeking their revenge at his own wedding and arranged for the car taking them to the station to stop alongside an alleyway. Ted left the car with his bride, ran through the alley way into a waiting car at the other end. The guests in the pursuing cars were frustrated.

In earlier years, Ted had acted as "guardian" to his younger, sister, Joyce, at the infant and junior schools that they both attended although the sibling relationship was not always so equable. During one particularly robust game of "cowboys and indians" with their elder brother, Jim, Joyce was tied to a tree in the large garden of River House by her brothers and left. Some time later, her disappearance was only discovered by her mother when Joyce failed to return to the house for her tea. (in later years, Joyce would complain that she was <u>always</u> the indian.).

Ted (left), Joyce and Jim
All Indians this time!

The death of their son made a great impact on his parents although they were of a generation that did not show emotion easily. I was the first child born in the family after Ted's death and was given the same second name, Lewis. His mother, up to her last years and in moments of inadvertence, frequently called me Ted. I vividly recall, in the early fifties, watching the Festival of Remembrance on the television with my grandfather. As the ranks of soldiers stood to attention with the poppies raining down on them, silent tears were streaming down his face. An unforgettable image.

His widow, Gwen, re-married and moved to Bristol. She became the mother of twins, a boy and girl, and on her trips to London always visited her former in-laws accompanied by her children.

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