



CHARLES WILLIAM BULL

1914 - 1944

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FOREWORD

I never knew my Uncle Charlie (he was always referred to as Charlie by the family). I was born about two years after he was killed fighting with the Royal Tank Corps in WW2, and named after him, but I remember that when he was mentioned in the family it was with a kind of reverence. It was always intimated that he was a 'hero' and as a child I felt there was something special about him. Before she died, his mother, my grandmother gave me the letters he sent back from the desert that I was allowed to read on Sunday evenings when I went to visit her at Tutbury with my Mum & Dad. I did nothing with them for many years, until out of the blue in 1980, we discovered that the old bridge over the River Scheldt that Charlie had died defending was to be replaced by a modern structure, and the Town Council of Gavere, in Belgium, had decided to name it in memory of Charlie. The family visited Gavere and the bridge in 1981, and it was after that I decided to investigate what had actually taken place on the night Charlie died, and to reveal the contents of his letters.

Rather than just transcribe and record the letters, I have tried to show them in their historical context and so I have included as many relevant photographs and as much general information as possible.

I have no idea what motivated Charlie, or what his feelings about the war or the rest of life were, but I suspect he was not a complicated man. From what I have been able to elicit from the few people who knew him that are (or were) left alive, he seems to have been well liked and fitted in well with his contemporaries. According to my Dad, his experiences in the desert had changed him somewhat, and he apparently became more assured and probably arrogant, but I think that some of the things he must have seen and done would make that a certainty.

It seems rather sad that his family were not happy with his choice of wife, Peggy, and it appears that they basically ostracised her. Family gossip leads me to believe that they thought she was 'not the right sort' for Charlie, indeed, only my Dad attended the wedding. It is possible that any letters that Charlie wrote from Europe were directed to her instead of my Granny, I don't know, but there are none surviving that I know of, which is a great pity. Incidentally, a brief delve into her history shows that she re-married in 1947, had two children and died 10 years after Charlie in 1954.

My motive in creating this little piece of work was to pass on to future members of my family the pride in knowing that one of us played his part in the struggle to liberate the world from Nazi tyranny, and gave his life in the process, and there is a small plot in Belgium that is, in the words of Rupert Brooke "forever England".

There have been several excellent books written about the part the 5th RTR played in the war, and I have consulted them and many websites freely and used the information in this work. You will find the titles in the bibliography. 5th RTR was disbanded in 1970, and its regimental museum is the Tank Museum, Bovington, Dorset.

DAVID CHARLES BULL
March 2012

PROLOGUE

CHARLES WILLIAM BULL

CHARLES (Charlie) was born in on 28th February, 1914 at 40 Bridge St, Tutbury in Staffordshire, the eldest son of ALFRED BULL, a farm labourer, and HARRIETT, nee' CORDEN.

At the age of 18, on Oct. 4th 1932 he joined the regular army, and served with the 3rd Batt. Royal Tank Regiment until 4th July 1938, when he was placed on the Army Reserve. For a time he drove a bus for the East Kent Motor Traction Co, and eventually returned to Tutbury and became the driver for the officer in charge at the R.A.F. establishment, at Fauld¹, Near Tutbury, Staffs. He was recalled to the army on 1st. Sept. 1939, and reported to the Royal Armoured Corps. camp at Bovington, in Dorset, where he was posted to the 5th Batt. R.T.R. near St.Albans, and then to Farnham in Surrey.

On May 23rd, 1940 The 1st Armoured Division arrived in Cherbourg as part of the British Expeditionary Force, and was composed of two brigades: the 'Light' 2nd Brigade and the 'Heavy' 3rd Brigade, which was composed of the 2nd, 3rd and 5th Royal Tank Regiments

The 257 tanks of the Division were questionable in quality. The Vickers Mark VIB and VIC tanks were obsolete even by 1940 standards, and to make matters worse many of the gunners had not been trained on using and maintaining their armament. The A9 and A10 tanks were, in the words of one historian: "Deplorably equipped in comparison to the Germans." The A13, a fair Cruiser tank for the time, had only just finished field-trials and was only present in small numbers. It was an unfamiliar machine and its crews still had much to learn in operating it. Added to all these weaknesses was a lack of essential equipment. Looking back in hindsight, the Division's commander, Major-General Roger Evans, had to admit that his force was a travesty of an armoured Division.

On the 27th, the advance began on Abbeville, and the 5th moved towards St.Valery - sur - Somme

(Lt. Col. Drew was now O/C), and by the time they reached St.Valery they had been in contact with German Defence forces, but had been badly let down by the French forces. They tried again later to reach Abbeville, but again were not supported by the French, and by this time they had lost 11 cruiser and 7 light tanks, and had to return to Rouen to re-fit and re-arm.

On the 5th June the Germans opened a new offensive along the Somme, and amongst the armour was Rommel's 7th Panzer division. By the 7th June, Rommel was sweeping towards the Seine, and there came up against the 2nd. & 5th. R.T.R.

By now, French resistance was crumbling, and things were becoming chaotic, so on the 16th June, the order was made to retreat to Cherbourg, so Charlie would have been part of a composite force under the command of Maj. H.N. Winship. The 2nd. & 5th. R.T.R. raced back, harassed most of the way by enemy aircraft, ²and the last ship sailed for England at 4.30pm on 18th June. Most of the British transport and armour was destroyed on the quayside to prevent it falling into enemy hands

¹ Hanbury Munitions dump, at Fauld, Staffs. destroyed later in the war.

² See letter No. 1

After replacing the tanks they lost in France, the Regt. embarked from Liverpool for North Africa. About 30th Oct.1940, the 5th R.T.R. arrived at Suez in North Africa, they had by now re-equipped with 58 cruiser tanks, A9s, A10s, and A13s, part of the 4th armoured Brigade, under Gatehouse, and had been equipped with the American light 'Stuart' tanks (Honeys) in preparation for Operation Crusader, the code name for the attempt to relieve Tobruk and to drive the Italians out of Cyrenaica.

In Sept. 1940, 5 Italian Divisions led by Marshall Graziani had advanced into Egypt and occupied Sidi Barrani. By Dec.10th Wavell's Western desert Force under the command of Maj. Gen. O'Connor had counter attacked, and at the end of the first weeks fighting, they had re-taken Sidi Barrani, Charlie was in action at El Agheila, when the Italian Army surrendered en masse.

Tobruk was relieved on 22nd Jan1941, and by Feb.9th, the 7th Armoured Div. had reached El - Agheila, where the Italian Army unconditionally surrendered.

On the 25th Feb.1942. Charlie was seconded to the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, a Cavalry Regt. which was changing over to tanks [*see appendix 1*] he was a senior instructor and instructed the R.W.Y. on Sherman's, Stuart 'Honeys' and Crusaders tanks.

In January 1944, the 5th R.T.R. arrived back in the UK from Italy, and were stationed at Shakers Wood near Brandon in Norfolk, where they were re-equipped with new tanks, Cromwells and Sherman fireflies ready for the invasion of Europe.

On landing in Normandy on 7th June 1944, they were sent straight into the notorious Bocage³ country where some of the fiercest fighting of the war took place. The 5th RTR assisted 56th Brigade in the close Bocage countryside, and one tank commander actually had to fight off German infantry who had jumped onto the top of his tank from the high banks. This was something that had never happened in the desert!

The letters and photographs Charlie sent back to his mother in this collection relate mainly to the early period of the war which was fought in the desert. Eventually later in the war during the push to liberate Ghent in Belgium, they arrived at the small town of Gavere, where Charlie was to meet his end on 7th September, 1944. He was 30 years old and a Troop Sergeant.

A few months before his death he married a Burton girl, Peggy Fessey.

This is his story.

³ The bocage country is the sort of landscape found in England in Devon, narrow lanes with high hedges and banks. Poor tank country.

THE LETTERS

There are about fifty letters in all, about half are written on the aerograph type small airmail letter format, and have almost all been inspected by the censors, so they contain only mundane family chat, and are actually rather boring and contain little of interest even to members of the family, and several photographed messages which are similar but virtually impossible to read without a magnifying glass, however, the rest have been written on writing or airmail paper, and appear to have escaped the censor. These contain a lot of interesting content, and these are the ones I have concentrated on. I have transcribed each one to make them easier to read than the originals. The first letter describes Charlie's escape from Europe via Cherbourg, and the last relates to travelling through Italy.



LETTER No 1 – June 1940

UNDATED

Believed to have been written around the last week in June 1940, after the British Army's escape at Dunkirk. In it, Charlie relates how he escaped via Cherbourg.

"B" Squadron, 5th R.T.R.
Warminster Camp
Wilts.

"Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I am all right, I sent you a telegram as soon as I got to England, hope you got it alright. I may be able to get a few days leave soon as I suppose we shall be here for quite a while yet, waiting for new tanks. We only brought seven back in the whole batt. all the lorries were left, as they hadn't time to get them on the ship.

We came away from Cherbourg and I think we were about the last to leave. Anyway the docks and the railway station were blown up after we left.

When we were told that we had to get out of France we were about 200 miles from the coast and we kept going all the time, day and night, with the German planes after us nearly all the time. We were often bombed or machine gunned, but they didn't do any damage to us, I think we lost about 20 men in the Batt. I heard the other day that Joyce⁴ was missing, I don't know whether it was true or not, I saw him on the ship going over, and another fellow who worked at the dump⁵.

We had a pretty rough time while we were there, as we had to be on the move all the time, we didn't get much sleep either, but I think I liked it, and wouldn't mind going again. I got the wind up once or twice, especially when I could hear bombs whistling down all over the place.

Well I don't think there is any more I can say so give my love to them all at home, hope you are all well,

Love

Charlie."

⁴ A neighbour

⁵ Hanbury Munitions Store, blown up later in the war

LETTER No 2 – October 1940

UNDATED

Believed to have been written whilst the 5th Royal Tank Regt. was waiting to embark for North Africa. They sailed approx. 29th Oct. 1940.

B" Squadron, 5th R.T.R.
c/o G.P.O.
Dorking
Surrey

"Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I arrived here safely, though it was very late, 11.00 when I got in. It was very bad coming through London, as quite a few stations are closed now, and there was an air raid on just as I got there.

I haven't heard yet when we are moving, but we have got to be prepared to move at any time. I got my toupee and other kit this morning and I look quite nice in it. I had a parcel from Tutbury this morning, quite nice too, some stamps and writing paper this time in it. Next time you write will you send Ces's⁶ address and I will write to him.

There is nothing more I can say this time, I'll let you know when we are moving.

Love

Charlie"

⁶ Ces was Charlie's brother in law.

LETTER No 3 – October 1940

UNDATED

Again believed to have been written whilst the 5th R.T.R. was waiting to embark for North Africa

"B" Squadron, 5th R.T.R.
C/O G.P.O.
Dorking,
Surrey

"Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I may be coming home one day next week, I'm not sure which day yet, it will be embarkation leave. We are under orders to move again any time now, don't know where we are going of course, but we are being issued with tropical kit.

We are all confined to camp today, and all leave is stopped for the present, so it looks as if something is going to happen. I got the stripe a few days ago so it is L/Cpl. again. haven't got time to write any more, will let you know which day I'm coming.

Love

Charlie"

LETTER No 4 – October 1940

UNDATED

Yet another undated letter, written whilst waiting to embark for North Africa.

"B" Squadron, 5th R.T.R.
c/o G.P.O.
Farnham,
Surrey.

"Dear Mother,

Thanks very much for the letter I received, glad you are all keeping well, Alf⁷ is very lucky to be exempt, good job he did go back to Nestles.⁸

They are letting us have a few days leave but I don't know when I will get mine, the people who live farthest away are going first, about five a week going, so it will be a few weeks yet before I get any.

The weather has been very nice for the last few days, now and again we go to the Lido in Guilford for a swim, I've been this afternoon and I went last Sunday too, it's very nice there, big swimming pool, lawns and gardens, sometimes we go to the pictures but we have to be in by 10-30 at night.,

We are still quite busy with the tanks, did you see a photo of some one day last week in the papers, I could see my tank alright, we gave a demonstration on the moors to some Americans, I suppose they will be on the films too.

Daphne must be in love as she is writing to you so much, she hasn't written to me, I will drop her a line when I feel like it, anyway, I've got another one now, nearly six months I've known her, so don't be surprised if I come home with a wife one day.⁹

There is nothing I want at present except you can send me another pair of socks sometime, glad the budgies are alright and don't forget to save a young one, a white one if you can as it is for my Lady Love.

I don't think there's any more I can say this time so give my love to them all.

Love,

Charlie"

⁷ Alf was Charlie's brother .

⁸ Nestles condensed milk factory at Tutbury in Staffordshire, where the family lived and Charlie's father was a sugar boiler.

⁹ Charlie apparently came home one day driving a Hispanio –Suiza sports car.

LETTER No 5 – October 1941

31st October 1941

This letter was written near MERSA - MATRUH, and describes conditions in the desert, and the Australian troops entering TOBRUK.

7883714
Cpl.C.W.Bull
"B" Squadron 5th R.T.R.
M.E.F.

"Dear Mother,

I had quite a nice surprise last night, I received a parcel from you posted on the 15th July, it was very nice and it was in good condition, thanks very much for sending it to me, as soon as we get off the desert to some civilised place I will send you another parcel.

We don't get any fresh fruit here, but while we were in Cairo we got plenty, I'd have sent you some fruit but it wouldn't keep such a long time. I'd like to see Sylvy¹⁰ with a water melon bigger than a football, like we could get at Cairo, very cheap too, a big one for about 6d.

At present we are at Mersa - Matruh but we expect to be moving shortly, probably up near the Libyan border, I've been through the wire there once, don't know when I will be going through again, still I don't suppose there is much of the wire left now.

I am sitting inside the tank writing this as it is a bit windy outside, it's cooler now than what it was a few months ago, the only trouble on the desert is that you get those dust storm sometimes, that is when it tries you, the sand gets everywhere no matter where you go, if you wear goggles it still comes through, gets in your food too, so you eat it, drink it, and sleep in it, it's certainly a tough life in the desert, no matter where you go there's always millions of flies, add a few scorpions and snakes, not forgetting the desert rats and you can imagine how nice it is.

I think we are getting some pay today, though it's not much good as it is only now and again we can buy anything, a lorry went into Mersa - Matruh yesterday and came back with some stuff but the sugar has been cut down before we could (get) as much as we could afford, at about 3d a Lb, but this time they couldn't get any, so we shall have to go easy on the tea now.

We've got plenty of tea and milk, we have been brewing up 4 or 5 times a day, but I don't like tea without sugar, we have got about 5Lbs of sugar but it is in the emergency ration but I'm afraid the bag will develop a leak very soon.

I've been a tank commander now for about two months, we haven't been in action yet though. Next month I shall have 8 years colour service in and I get another 3d a day, I don't know how much money I've got in the bank as I lost my bank book when we came up the desert first. I've written for a new one but haven't received it yet, and I don't know how much I'm getting from the R.A.F¹¹ now I don't think it will be a lot as I'm getting about £2.10d a week Army pay, that's including the allotment, I don't know what to do when the War is over, whether to get married or buy a car, I don't know which is best.

¹⁰"Sylvy" was Sylvia, Charlie's sister.

¹¹ Charlie was a driver for the RAF C.O. at Fauld in peacetime

LETTER No 5

continued

I'm glad you are all keeping well at home, hope Norah¹² and the baby are all right, Ces is lucky being still in England and able to go on leave, what is he doing now, is he still with the anti-tank guns, tell him there's plenty of Gerry tanks out here to shoot at, the Aussies with A/T guns at Tobruk were the boys, they used to let Gerry come through the wire before they fired at them, they knocked out no end while I was there, we used to keep well away from them in our tanks as they were not particular who they fired at, they were the first to go into Tobruk and you should have seen the mess they made, they looted all the shops, smashed everything up and nearly all of them were drunk on the Italian wine.

I was getting the papers pretty often up till about a fortnight ago but while we are on the desert we usually go about three weeks then get a lot of mail all at once, I think that they must hold it at the base till there's quit a lot then send it.

I suppose by the time you receive this letter it will be almost Xmas, hope you are able to have a good time, I don't know what we shall (have) for our Xmas dinner, perhaps an extra tin of bully each, it is getting near tea time now, we have our dinner though at night, except it will be the usual thing, corned beef stew, still I like it and I'm nearly always hungry on the desert so I don't mind what it is, I saw a dead camel yesterday a few miles from here near a well, so it might be a nice big steak.

There's not much more I can say now, I am quite well at present, I don't think there's anything particular I want, remember, don't rob yourself to send me things out here, though it's nice to have a parcel from home, especially the cigs, everyone comes scrounging a "Blighty Fag" as they call cigs from England.

I will write again as soon as I get the chance, so cheerio, and give my love to everybody "

Love,

Charlie xxxxxx

Am expecting to meet Father here any time as I'm sure there's some blokes older than him here."

¹² Norah was Charlie's youngest sister

LETTER No 6 – January 1941 (or Jan 42)

10th January 1941 *

*This letter is dated 10th Jan 1941, but I believe that it should be 10th Jan 1942. It describes actions in LIBYA, and at SIDI - REZEGH. Charlie's tank was hit, and his crew injured, he himself was awaiting promotion

7883714
Cpl.C.W.Bull
"B" Squadron 5th R.T.R.
M.E.F.

" Dear Mother,

At last I have chance of writing you a letter, I sent a cable a few days ago when I had a couple of days leave, at present I am on guard and have plenty of time to write, I have received quite a lot of letters including the £2, thanks very much for sending it me, I also had an Airgraph from Alf Williamson and one from Florrie¹³, I will answer them as soon as I can.

Well, I have had quite a hectic time since I last wrote to you, I suppose you read about the fighting in Libya, well we were right in the thick of it all the time until a few days before Xmas, Xmas day I spent out on the desert on the way from Tobruk to Matruh, but I managed to be in Cairo for new Years Eve, and had quite a good night.

We had a very grim time for nearly three weeks when we were fighting every day from dawn to dusk, and we did have one or two battles at night, I could write a book I think about all the things that happened, we have laughed over lots of things since we have been back, but I can tell you at the time I wasn't laughing, in the early mornings it used to be freezing cold and when we used to sail into action my knees used to knock and I couldn't decide if it was the cold or the sight of big Gerry tanks advancing towards us, and to see them sometimes reminded me of battleships, they just used to keep coming and we would be pumping shells at them as fast as we could, then our artillery behind us would open up and it was a grand sight and a relief too, to see the shells landing on and among the Gerrys.

Do you remember the Airdrome of Sidi - Rezegh being mentioned, well we went there twice, the second time it was just getting dark and it was a mix up, you couldn't see anything to shoot at but everybody seemed to be firing at my tank, we went on the Airdrome flat out and we were going between aeroplanes and tanks, all Gerrys, and running Gerry infantry down, we lost quite a few tanks in that do though, as there were some anti - tank ditches about and as it was dark we couldn't see them.

¹³ His Auntie

LETTER No 6

continued

We lost about 20 men killed in the Batt., a lot of Officers too, "A" Sqdn. lost all their Officers except the C.O., it seemed to be mostly the tank commanders who were being killed but I must have been one of the lucky ones, I did get knocked out in the end, a shell hit the tank and set some of the machine gun ammo off, the gunner and wireless operator got wounded slightly by splinters, I had to drag them out of the tank as they lost a lot of blood, all I got was a black eye and a few little cuts on my forehead and eye, it wasn't much but I flapped a bit at first as I put my hand to my face and there was blood all over me and I could taste it in my mouth, the driver didn't get a scratch at all, but we were all very lucky, I think it was a mixture of German and Italian tanks we were up against that morning. Do you know I saw my first dead man too this time, I helped to get two fellows out of a tank who'd been killed, after that I saw lots, I also saw the field dressing station that the Gerrys had gone through, N.Z I think, and there were some very grim sights and I hope I never see them again. I know for a fact that I did knock one Italian tank out, we went up to it afterwards and got the crew, two of them were wounded pretty bad, an Italian when he is wounded makes a lot of noise, praying, calling on all his saints, all sorts of things but a German is different altogether, he just sits down and never speaks at all, most of them used to scowl at us, especially German Officers, all the German soldiers looked very young, not more than twenty, and mostly all of them seemed to be washed and shaved, we went without a wash or shave for a fortnight and I had a lovely beard, it was a shame to shave it off.

Food was the biggest problem most of the time, we did go a week without anything hot to eat, just bully and biscuits and sometimes a tin of sausages or some ham, I didn't half get thin.

Well there's lots more I could tell you but I will save it till the time I come home then I can tell it you all. I got the paper with Ces's photo in, very nice too, what about putting mine in, I should like to see myself in the paper, anyway the fellows here always ask when I'm having my photo in the "Local" as they call it.

I am expecting to be made Sergeant any time now, I'll let you know when it happens, also I am going on an Instructors course soon on tanks, I haven't been told when yet, you have heard me speak of Fred Potter's brother Les in this Batt. well he went for a commission and is back here again with two pips, I haven't seen George Wooley¹⁴ yet but he might not be anywhere near Cairo, Fred Potter is out here in the 2nd Batt. but I haven't seen him yet.

Glad to hear everyone is keeping well at home, ask Norah to send me a snap of Brian¹⁵ if she's got any I'd like to see him, Aunt Maud has certainly got a good job now, remember me to and tell her to remember me to Beardsworth and Newton, I think Beardsworth spent a few years out here, if he did ask Aunt Maud to ask him if he knew Heliopolis at all, our tents are on the edge of then Airdrome. Well I think this is about all I can write now, it's dinner time too, so I'll close, give my love to everybody at home "

Love,

Charlie xxxxxx"

¹⁴ All these were Tutbury men

¹⁵ Charlie's nephew, Brian Woolett

LETTER No 7 – July 1941

4th July 1941

In this letter, Charlie talks of life in the desert.

7883714
Sgt.C.W.Bull
"B" Squadron 5th R.T.R..
M.E.F.

" Dear Mother,

Thanks very much for the cable I received about a week ago. I wasn't able to answer it as we were up in the desert, near Mersa Matruh, anyway, you should have had some of my letters by now as I sent them by Air-Mail. Also I sent you a cable just after we got back from Tobruk. Yesterday I sent off a little parcel for you with a few things in, I don't know whether will go round everybody, but I didn't know what to buy and things are very expensive in this country. I bought the thing with the crest on for you, and I'd like Norah to have the pink thing. There's either a necklace or a bracelet for Sylvy. Ron had better have the wallet as I suppose he wants something to put all his notes in. I should have thought he'd be flying a spitfire by now.

I've had quite a lot of papers at various times, though I don't think I've received all you have sent me, and I've had lots of cards, I've written to Florrie and one to Jack Wynn, I had a parcel from the Comforts Fund not long ago so I'll have to answer that.

I got the paper with Uncle Bill's funeral in, I was surprised to see it, tell Aunt Maud I am very sorry to hear about it.

At present we are just outside Cairo, it is summer time here and it is very hot, I'm sitting on my bed writing this with just my shorts on. There's a breeze blowing, but it's like when you open the oven door.

When we were up on the desert somewhere near Benghazi it was winter time and it wasn't too bad then, except at night when it was colder than it is in England, no frost or snow but biting cold. We had only just got up there when the retreat started, I suppose you read about it in the papers. We saw the Gerries coming one morning, we were on some hills and we were told to withdraw about four miles and while we were going back my tank broke down. You can guess we began to flap a bit, and started practising "Heil Hitler" anyway we managed to struggle on a bit, then the rest of the Batt.

(what was left) turned back again and met Gerry, I think we were about a couple of miles away when the battle started, we could hear the guns going. We had to set fire to the tank then as there was no chance of getting it fixed up, and we managed to get on a lorry, we went like the devil all night, we eventually got back to Tobruk, I don't know how long it took us, it's hard to remember days on the desert.

I think we lived mostly on tinned fruit and Ideal milk we pinched from ration dumps on the way down, I had nothing but what I stood up in when I got to Tobruk.

LETTER No 7

continued

We got some more tanks and stopped there about two months then we came to Alexandria for about six weeks till we got some new tanks, then we went up to Mersa Matruh, we were up there only a few days when another Batt. came up and we had to hand over the tanks to them

Now we are waiting for some more tanks now, supposed to be Yankee specials, of course we don't really know what is happening all we hear are rumours, but I do wish we were back in England again.

These foreign countries look alright on pictures but they are not so good when you get to them. Cairo is much better then Alex. but you still get some awful smells, especially from the native quarters.

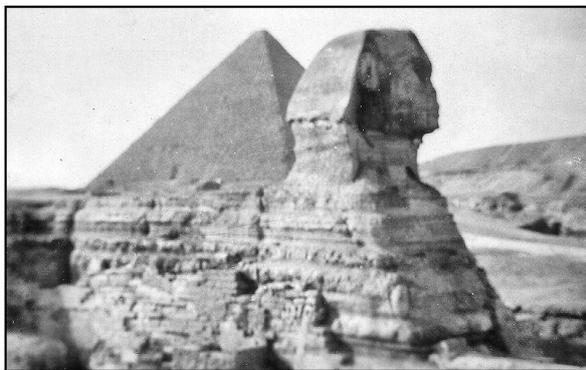
I hope you are all keeping well at home, and is the baby going on alright now, how are you going on for food, I don't suppose you are starvoing yet.

There's nothing I want you to send me and I hope you are using the money when you want it.

Well I don't think there is any more I can say this time, so give my love to them all

Love, Charlie xxxxxxx

P.S. Have enclosed a few snaps, I can see the Pyramids from the camp"



PYRAMID AND SPHINX



CAIRO



CHARLIE (X) AND SOME OF HIS TROOP

LETTER No 8 – February 1942

21st February 1942

This letter was written whilst Charlie was waiting to be temporarily transferred to the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, as an instructor. The R.W.Y. went out to the desert as a cavalry unit more used to horses than tanks, and Charlie assisted in the transfer.

7883714
Cpl.C.W.Bull
"B" Squadron 5th R.T.R.
M.E.F.

"Dear Mother,

Sorry I have been so long in writing to you but we have been very busy during the last couple of weeks, we have been equipped with our new tanks¹⁶ and have been doing a lot of training with them, they were taking films of us last week and we were doing all sorts of things and it should look pretty good.

I've had quite a lot of papers from you in the last few days but only one card. I've had the two postal orders from the fund, I answered the first one and received the second just after I had posted the letter, so will you ask Sylvia to tell Mr. Taverner I got the other one. In the card I got I can't understand what you mean by feeling a bit better after your loss, there is perhaps some more letters somewhere for me which I haven't received yet, let me know as soon as you can.¹⁷

I am still waiting for my transfer to come through, there's three of us going, all corporals and we are being transferred to the Wilts. Yeomanry, they are an old cavalry regiment but have now got tanks and we are going there to kind of show them how things are done, probably to instruct them on tanks too, I took the chance of getting away from this Batt. as I have a better chance of promotion, we should be promoted when we join them, also I'm getting a bit fed up with the people here.

If ever I get away from this country I shall never want to hear about it again, when you read about Egypt and see pictures of it, it looks alright, but believe me Mother, there is nothing nice about it. The real high class Egyptian people are not too bad, but there's very few of them, and you get a dirty stinking person of no special nationality, probably half a dozen mixed up, always after "Baksheesh" and would commit murder for half a piastre, about a penny farthing.

Everything is very expensive too, though of course if you have the money you can buy anything I would rather be on the desert than back here like we are, for one thing we get much better food while we are on the desert than we do here and the food at present here is very bad, we've seen no potatoes for weeks now and all we seem to be living on is rice and onions, if it weren't for those two things I don't know what we should do, nearly everything we have tastes of onions, we get them so often, we make complaints every day but nothing ever seems to be done about it. There's lots of things I could tell you but I'd better not, this letter might be censored somewhere.

I have read in the papers how bad the weather has been this winter in England, at present it is very cold here, almost as cold as England I should think, for the last few days I've been doing nothing at all as I'm waiting for this transfer and I spend most of my time in the Q.M.Stores, I'm in there now writing this letter, just making some OXO too as I've still some left you sent in the parcel.

¹⁶ Believed to have been Shermans

¹⁷ Charlie's sister Annie Elizabeth, known as 'Cissie' had died during an epileptic seizure

LETTER No 8

continued

I don't go out very much nowadays, I go out to the pictures now and again, that is about all I do, I don't drink at all, haven't done for months, it's been so bad in Cairo with soldiers getting drunk and wrecking places that it's a court martial crime to be found drunk in Cairo, but you still see stupid fools getting drunk for all that, there's two or three in the Batt. waiting Court - Martial for that now.

I read about Nina Mousley's wedding in the paper, her husband was lucky getting back to England, I wish I could get back and I know I will never want to leave England again.

Well I don't think there is any more I can write this time, I hope you are all keeping well at home and I hope I get some letters from you soon, give my love to every body at home.

Love Charlie"

LETTER No 9 – June 1942

25th June 1942

This letter was written whilst Charlie was still seconded to the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry.

7883714
Sgt.C.W.Bull
"A" Squadron R.W.Y..
M.E.F.

"Dear Mother,

I will try to write you a letter while I have chance, the weather is very hot here and so we don't do anything during the afternoon, I am sending you a few snaps with this letter that were taken last winter in the desert, they were taken by the 2ndI.C of the Batt. and he has been killed lately in action.

I can't get any news here about where the 5th Batt. are, the last I heard of them they were somewhere near Tobruk. I hope they weren't in there or they will all be prisoners, in the first few days they had 54 casualties and nearly all my pals seem to have been killed, it appears that they were first to meet the Jerry when they came around the minefields.

By coming to this regiment it seems that I have missed it again, it must have been terrible up there this time as it was supposed to be worse than the time I was there, and that was bad enough.

I don't suppose this regt. will be in action for a long time yet as we haven't got any tanks yet.

Today I received a paper and another card, the cigs I had last week were from Alf so I must write and thank him for them, I hope Mavis gets her present alright and that she will like it, I hardly knew what to send her and it had to be something small so that I could send it by air mail, she seems to be very busy recently, and I suppose the money is rolling in.

I hope you didn't mind me stopping the allotment, the reason I did is that now I go in the Sgts. Mess I have to pay so much extra a week as they buy extra food and they have waiters and other various things will have to be paid for out of the mess funds and as I said before, there's plenty of moneyed men in the Regt. I've still got my P.O.bank book here but I think I will need to send it home so I wont use it again, when I do you can send it up to the P.O.and they will put in how much money I've got to come.

I heard the greetings from Cairo program today, from soldiers out here, I would like to be able to speak to you over the wireless but there is always a waiting list a mile long and you have to be in Cairo quite a long time to get to the top of the list.

How is everyone keeping at home I suppose Sylvy has grown quite a big girl now, is Norah and the baby going on alright, I have not met George Wooley yet or anybody else from Tutbury out here, don't forget to send me the snaps when you can.

I am trying to save a bit of money now so that I can have a few days leave, I shall go to Alexandria too for a change, it is much better than Cairo, especially in the summer even though it gets bombed a bit. I suppose it will get bombed more now that the Gerries have Tobruk as it is only about 250 miles from Alex. And that is not very far for planes, still lets hope the Gerries are stopped before they get to Mersa Matruh, because if they gat past there is nothing to stop them , it seems funny that Tobruk should fall so easily after it was held for so long by us. I wonder if I will ever go swimming again in the harbour.

Well I think that is all the news I can write this time, so give my love to everybody at home and write often.

Love Charlie xxxxxxxxxxxx

LETTER No 10 – July 1942

27th July 1942

This letter was written whilst Charlie was seconded to the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, in it, he writes of being bored, and of the 4th & 7th Batts. R.T.R.. being decimated.

7883714
Sgt.C.W.Bull
"A" Squadron R.W.Y..

M.E.F.

"Dear Mother,

I received two cards this morning, one the 1st of this month and the other a week after, quick going isn't it, also I had a paper with the photo of Daisy Wooley's¹⁸ wedding in , has MAVIS¹⁹ got the present I sent her yet, hope she will like it, I couldn't think what to send her.

Well, I have been pretty busy lately instructing on a tank, today the class I've had finished and tomorrow I start a new one, so you see I haven't much time. At present we are right on the desert about 20 miles from Gamalia on the canal, and it is very hot and lots of dust storms blowing about, we get a run into Gamalia sometimes when we have swim in the bitter lake.

I was told a couple of days ago that someone was asking about me who knew me very well and I think he is from Tutbury, they have only just arrived out here, an R.A. unit, I haven't had time to go along to the camp they are in to find out who it is, but I will do soon, it might be G.Wooley, as he is the only one I can think of.

What do you think of the state of affairs out here now, Rommel about did it this time didn't he, we can't get much news of what's going on, except what we hear on the wireless.

The 5th Btn. has been in the thick of it all along and have lost quite a lot of men, my pal has got the M.M.²⁰ I see in the paper today he was driving my tank last winter.

When Tobruk fell the 4th and 7th R.T.R. were there and so those Btns. are just about finished. Fred Hardwick was in the 4th, also a fellow from Horninglow²¹ who joined the army about the same time as I did, Bailey his name was. At one time on the desert the whole of the transport of the 5th Btn. were captured and they all managed to get away again. I have certainly missed a lot of exciting times by coming to this Regt. anyway, the three of us who did come here may be going back to the 5th soon, we have been trying very hard in the last few weeks, they are very short of N.C.O.s and we have some of the Officers from the 5th who said they would like us back.

I would rather be back with them now, it gets very boring doing nothing but talk all day and doing the same thing for weeks and never hear a gun fired, I'd rather be on the desert where you get a bit of excitement.

Hope you are all keeping well at home, I suppose father has been working in the garden, how is he getting on, where is Mavis working now, she should be getting pretty good having those courses and what is Ron doing now, and what is Sylvy going to do when she leaves school, join the W.A.A.F.S. or be a land girl, I suppose she is a big girl now.

Well, I think this is all the news for the present so give my love to everybody and write often."

Lots of Love, Charlie.xxxxxx"

¹⁸ One of his neighbours in Tutbury

¹⁹ Charlie's sister

²⁰ Military Medal

²¹ A village near Tutbury

LETTER No 11 – October 1942

27th October 1942

In this letter, Charlie writes of the Battle of El Alamein.

7883714
Sgt.C.W.Bull
"A" Squadron R.W.Y..

" Dear Mother,

I will try now to write you the letter I promised and give you some news, well last week I was in Cairo on a course and during that week the Regiment moved up to the line and at present I am waiting a few miles out of Alex.²² to be sent up to them. I suppose you know by now the attack has started in the desert, on Friday night at 10.0 they opened it with 600 big guns and then the tanks went in, we get a bit of news here of what is going, not much more though than what you read in the papers.

The Wilts, along with two more Regt.s form the Armoured Brigade with the N.Z. Infantry Division, and were the spearhead of the attack through the minefields, well what happened is that the Wilts led through our own minefield and then through the Gerrys, which was the plan and then they were to go round the back of the Gerrys and keep their tanks off while the N.Z. infantry went in against the Gerry infantry, anyway, they got through the first Gerry minefield o.k., the R.E.s ²³ had made a gap but they ran onto another one which they didn't know was there, and they also got shelled pretty heavy.

They lost quite a lot of tanks on the minefield, tracks blown off mainly, I don't think a mine would do much more damage, and so they have been withdrawn to re-equip, they had opened the way though and the 3rd hussars and Warwick Yeomanry carried on and got to the objective.

They had some casualties in the Wilts, I know of one Sgt. in the Squadron killed but we were told not as many as were expected, you see it was really a " ? or bust " effort, the N.Z.s were shaking them, as they were in doing hand to hand fighting.

All this happened in the central sector of the line, in other parts they are fighting just as hard, in the south of the line the Free French with tanks made a feint attack to draw the Gerry tanks and they got it pretty heavy, they knocked out 18 Gerry tanks first time, and they were all British tanks which Gerry had captured and was using against us, which means he is either short of tanks to be using captured ones, or he is just bluffing.

the 7th armoured Div. the 5th R.T.R. are in that, had a battle with 45 tanks of the 22nd Panzer Div. (Gerrys) but drove them off.

The R.A.F are bombing all day and night at present and the Spitfire tank busters are doing good work, up to last night they'd got 2,000 counted prisoners which mean probably about 3,000. that is about all I know of the battle at present.

As the Regt. has withdrawn for a few days I suppose I will be with them soon, I'm waiting now to go up anytime, so if you haven't had a letter for a while you will know what is wrong, and if you see the N.Z's mentioned in the papers you will know we were with them.

continued

²² Alexandria, in Egypt

²³ Royal Engineers

LETTER No 11

continued

The Sherwood Foresters are in our Brigade too, and I have met one or two who come from Burton, I also met a Sgt. in the Staffs. Yeomanry who came from Burton, he told me he worked in the Corporation Elect.Dept. and was very often in Tutbury, he knew someone named Ball who used to live in those houses along Iron Walls²⁴.

Well I don't think there is any more I can tell you at present, except that I have to run to the lav. pretty often, I think it's a chill I've got as it got very cold suddenly a couple of days ago, by the way Fred Potter's brother Les. is now a captain in the 5th Batt..

Well, I will close now so give my love to everybody and don't worry about me.

Love, Charlie.xxxxx"

MR. and Mrs. Abel Bull, of 35, Park Lane, Tutbury, have every reason to be proud of their second son and especially of the regiment in which he is now serving—The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry. From the Families Association connected with this regiment, Mr. Bull has received copy of a personal message from the Acting Commanding Officer to all ranks, congratulating the men on their recent triumphs in North Africa. "The action," says the message, "will be recorded and remembered in the annals of regimental history, and the epic of 'B' Squadron will live for all time."

* * *
SERGEANT CHARLES WILLIAM BULL, to whom the above message refers, saw six years' service, and was on the reserve for one year (motor driving for the R.A.F.), when war declared. He served in France, and after only 48 hours' leave was sent out to the Middle East. He was transferred to the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry last spring as a sergeant-instructor. At the age of 29, Sergeant Bull has therefore gained already a remarkable amount of experience, and I wish him further success and a safe return.

²⁴ A lane in Tutbury, Staffs.

LETTER No 12 – November 1942

16th November 1942

Charlie wrote this letter whilst in Alexandria.

7883714
Sgt.C.W.Bull
"A" Squadron R.W.Y.
M.E.F

" Dear Mother,

I have received one or two cards from you in the last few days, one from Mavis as well and I have written her a letter. I've had no papers for quite a time now though.

I managed to get some air-mail Xmas cards and I have posted some of them, but they are not like the ones we had last Xmas with the camel on.

Well at present we are at Alexandria, we came back here from the desert, the Regt. went into action at the start of this push, and we are supposed to have done some good work, they were only up for about a week, we've lost a lot, about 20 killed in the Regt. and a few still missing, and we are just doing nothing and no-one seems to know what is happening to us I told Mavis that there were strong rumours floating about of Blighty, but I hardly think we shall go back to England yet a while.

I didn't go into action at all with the tanks this time, as when I did get back to them after the course I'd been on I was put in charge of the transport taking petrol, ammo and rations up to the tanks, I'd rather have been on the tanks and I think I would have been if we'd stayed up there a bit longer, but perhaps I was better off.

We didn't get much bombing during the day, only at night they dropped a few around, we only lost one lorry in the Squadron and that hit a land mine, it blew the lorry to bits, but never touched the driver.

Did they ring the bells at church yesterday, I was down on the beach swimming yesterday morning and I wondered if they'd be ringing, I should liked to have heard them. I took a snap too, and I'll (give) you one when I get them done, the water is very warm too, how would you like to go sun bathing in November.

I don't know where we shall be on Xmas Day this year, at least I hope I will get a better dinner than I did last year which was a Bully stew right in the middle of the desert. I will have to see if I can't get an invitation somewhere.

What do you think of the 8th army now, doing well aren't they, I should think they will be in Benghazi soon at the rate they are going, I was hoping I would go into Benghazi this time as twice I've been near it and never been in the town, and the farther we go up that way the nearer we get to England, it would be nice to sail from Tripoli.

The allotment still hasn't been officially stopped here yet and until it is I can't touch it, I had a shock a few weeks ago when I discovered I had £20 income tax. I've got to pay so much monthly, £2 I think it is, so at present I'm in debt a bit, but as soon as the allotment is stopped then I shall be alright, so you see I'll be no better off for stopping the allotment and I still had to pay income tax on it as you were not dependent on me, although this is the money from the R.A.F. that all comes in, I don't know how much I've got in the bank now, I've got over £100 in and there is just one years pay to be put in yet.

continued

LETTER No 12

continued

I wonder if Mr.Wood could tell you how much the Air Ministry is paying me at present, my army pay altogether is 7/6 a day, and going on the pay I got when I was working.

I am getting 8/- a week as well from the A.M.. but I'm sure I'm getting more than that, so if you would ask Mr.Wood perhaps he would be able to tell you. In January I shall be ' War Substantiated Sgt.' in Wartime we do 6 months as acting Sergeant before we are War Substantiated and I hope to get another 3d a day. 8 years service pay I had to forfeit it because I had a black mark on my conduct sheet

Hope you are all keeping well at home, how's father getting on, has he got false teeth yet, I should think they would make him look much younger. Mavis seems to be doing alright at Brum ²⁵ according to the cards she sends me, and what about Sylvia, is she in the W.A.A.F. or A.T.S. yet, I bet she would look smart in blue, has Alf and Ron ²⁶been called up yet.

Well, I don't think there is anything more I can say at present so I'll close, tell SYLVIA not to eat too much pudding at Xmas, and save me a bit, how would she like a big bunch of dates, there's some date palms just outside my tent with plenty on.

Cheerio and Best love too all "

*Love, Charlie
Xxxxxx"*

²⁵ Birmingham, she was on munitions work at the Rover factory

²⁶ Charlie's brothers, Alfred & Ron

LETTER No 13 – October 1943

Life during June to September 1943 was spent in and around Homs, in Syria. The 5th RTR had said farewell to their crusader tanks and were issued with Shermans.

On 15th September, at 1915hrs, 5RTR landed at 'Sugar Beach' Salerno and were to experience very different conditions to those they were used to in the western desert.

The last letter of note from Charlie was sent when he was on the drive up through Italy.

19th October 1943

In this letter, Charlie writes of capturing German prisoners whilst moving up through Italy.

7883714
Sgt.C.W.Bull
"B" Squadron 5th R.T.R..

" Dear Mother,

Sorry I have not been able to write to you for such a long time, but we have been very busy as you know. I am in Italy and that is all I can tell you, but I've had some very exiting times, I'm still in one piece nothing has touched me yet and I am quite fit. At present we are having a rest and we are in a nice little town, something like Tutbury, lots of dark eyed Senoritas here too. we get just as much rain here as in England, and it's hard trying to keep our blankets dry, we've got a tame hen on the tank, we had two but one went in the pot and we decided to keep the other. She climbs on the tank to roost now, I don't know how long she will reign, we might get hungry one day. I have had some letters from you and Mavis, I've had three lots of cigs just lately but I don't know who they are from as there is nothing in them(paper missing)Glad you got the parcel alright, I'll try and get another brooch when we get some Gerries, a funny thing happened the other morning, our troop were out on patrol and we were just making breakfast when German soldier walked up to one of the boys and said in English, " Good morning, I'm a German " he said, he'd had enough. I could tell you lots of things the Germans have done to the Italian people, things you would hardly believe. I was first tank in some villages when we were advancing, and you should have seen the people when they found we were English, all over us. Well, I can't get any more on here so I'll close. Don't worry about me, back home soon through France.

Love to all,

Charlie xxxxx"

THE CAMPAIGN IN EUROPE AND CHARLIE'S DEATH

Part way through the Italian campaign, the 5RTR was re-directed towards the bay of Naples, and eventually arrived at Castelmare, near Sorrento. They were to have no further contact with the enemy until June 1944. On sat 20th December, they embarked on the ship 'Cameronian' at Naples, to return to the UK to prepare for the allied invasion of Europe, in 1944.

After fighting through Normandy in some of the worst tank country of the Bocage with deep lanes and high hedges, they were involved in the push for the Belgian cities of Ghent and Brussels, and on September 7th 1944, during an operation to hold a bridge at Gavere, Charlie was killed.

There are several versions of Charlie's death, and the description has appeared in several books written by members of 'B' squadron, and even the official regimental diary, and although I am inclined to accept the opinion of Eric Stevenson, Charlie's troop-leader at the time, and who was with him immediately before he was killed. I still have difficulty in deciding what actually happened, Eric's account matches with what I was told by the Belgians when we visited Gavere, although not with Norman Smith's account in his book 'Tank Soldier', which is similar to Joe Cannon's, although he could have heard it from Joe. Despite the fact that Joe Cannon was Charlie's gunner, he would have been enclosed in the tank at the time, and I suspect may have been pre-occupied with what was happening outside through his gun sight. However, I include his version for the record, you will have to decide.

First is a copy of the official letter sent to his wife informing her of his death, it was signed by Denis Cockbane, his Squadron Leader, followed by Joe Cannon's version then Eric Stevenson's lengthier and fascinating extract from his book.²⁷

The official letter written to his wife is obviously a sanitised version of events, which must have been routine in such circumstances, and this was the only version of events that his mother and family had ever known.

²⁷ Sadly Eric Stevenson died in Feb 2012.

Major Denis Cockbaine's letter to Peggy Bull, Charlie's wife

B Sqn,
5th R Tnks,
B L A
16/9/44

Dear Mrs. Bull,

It is with very deep regret that I have to inform you of the death of your husband Charles in action on the morning of 7/9/44 whilst serving with this squadron.

It is very hard to write about the loss of so true a friend and I fully appreciate the added grief which the receipt of this letter will bring you. Yet I feel that you should know how it happened and how highly your husband was regarded in this squadron.

"B" Squadron was ordered to hold a bridge over a river at all costs, and Sgt. Bull's troop was to stay on a cross roads the enemy side of the bridge to prevent the Germans from reaching the bridge by the morning.

All was quiet until 04:30 hrs when an enemy column approached the cross roads and seeing our tanks started to shell your husband's troop. It was during this shelling that one shell hit a wall by the side of Charles tank and a fragment passed through his heart killing him immediately. He knew no pain at all.

Meanwhile we had brought our artillery down on the enemy who withdrew quickly. By dawn the position was restored and we still held the bridge. His crew bore Charles back to my tank and as we were very busy with the battle it was not till 10:00 hrs that we could get things organised as to his burial.

However in the village there was an English speaking priest who readily agreed to bury him in his church-yard on the top of a hill. This he did and with the Union Jack on his coffin Charles was given a burial which he so richly deserved. I tell you all this because it shows how the people are eager to help us.

After the service the priest told us that later on the townsfolk will erect a granite and marble headstone as a token of their gratitude to one who fell defending them.

And we left the grave covered with flowers, a bunch from every family in the village and they promised that there will always be some flowers on the grave for ever.

We have since returned to the church-yard and have taken a photograph of the grave, and if you so desire we will send a copy of it later on.

Charles was one of the good old timers of "B" Sqn, He was loved by all, and never tried to exert his authority over anyone. He was always cheerful and his courage was of the highest order. His passing has, indeed left a gap which will never be filled.

He has for some time commanded a troop in action, a job normally done by an officer, and I would like to say that he performed his duties better than the majority of young officers.

We were proud of him and the entire squadron wish me to tell you that their sympathies are with you in your tragic loss though we appreciate that mere words are useless.

To conclude this inadequate note, may I say that if there is anything that we can do we will do it on receipt of your request.

Yours sincerely,
D.E.Cockbaine Major

How Charlie Died – by Joe Cannon

By

JOE CANNON HIS GUNNER

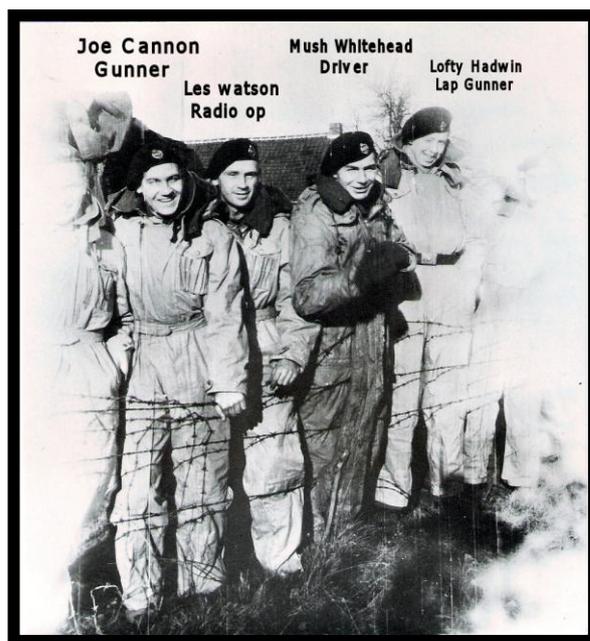
"Charlie's death came about during a night attack by German Infantry. The Germans were cut off from their main forces, and were trying to join up, they were in sufficient numbers to be a threat to the operation of the rest of the regiment taking place at Ghent. They had with them an Anti - Tank gun which they were pulling by hand.

Charlie was Troop Sergeant, 4 troop, B Squadron 5th R.T.R.. and at last light on the 7th Sept 1944, the troop was guarding a ' T ' junction a mile or so from Gavere. The Germans strongly attacked us and drove us off back to Gavere, here we took up a position guarding the bridge and town, this time supported by the Queens Regiment. Again the Troop was attacked and during this sharp action, a ' Panzerfaust'²⁸ round exploded over the top of our tank and Charlie was killed.

It was a typical night action where the tanks were blind, hard to tell a friend from foe, but the position was held.

The following day, the enemy were trapped at a bend in the river and forced to surrender to some of our other troops.

Charlie was buried at Gavere, the crew were very upset, we all thought a lot of Charlie and to come all that way and die near the end of the war was a bitter blow."



Charlie's tank crew at the time of his death

²⁸ German hand held anti - tank weapon similar to a 'Bazooka'

How Charlie Died – by Lt. Eric Stevenson

BY

Lt. ERIC STEVENSON

CHARLIE'S TROOP COMMANDER

Sometimes confusion reigned supreme on both sides. Once while we were moving in column at night a German Wehrmacht motorcycle and sidecar joined the column! They thought we were a retreating German Panzer Unit. Moving in column was sometimes unavoidable but on hot dry summer days the entire column would be shrouded in a moving cloud of dust, caused by the tracks. This played havoc with the radiators and air filters.

The most extraordinary and exciting yet frustrating night of my life occurred on September 7th.

Many of my memories are hazy, but certainly not of that night. We had been in an extensive wooded area near Vogelzand all day, mopping up large numbers of German stragglers who had lost their units. They gave themselves up readily and we sent them back to be dealt with. A young Belgian member of the Resistance, the White Brigade, in his mid-twenties, had attached himself to my troop. There was no room inside my tank for him so he had to sit on the bedding at the back of the turret. I gave him a Sten gun and he was delighted.

By the time darkness came we had not completed combing the woods so we did not know what enemy forces were still there. I recollect that a tank belonging to another Squadron broke down deep in the woods, just before dusk. The crew was ordered to put it out of action and abandon it, riding back on other tanks. B Squadron was ordered to pull back a few km. from the edge of the woods to a village called Gavere. My troop was following the other three along a minor road going south-east out of the woods. The road met a main road running at right-angles along the edge of the woods. We were to cross the main road and proceed east to the village. Just as we reached the main road I received the order to stop there and take up positions to spend the night there.

I positioned the four tanks, each facing one of the four directions. My own tank was positioned along the wall of a two-storey house on one corner. Just as we pulled in, a man emerged from the house, crossed the main road and ran across a small open field in a northerly direction towards the woods, where I knew there were still some German troops who had not yet been rounded up. I was suspicious and could easily have shot him but decided that he was probably just a frightened civilian trying to get as far away from tanks as he could. This was a very normal reaction. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, but as things turned out that proved to be a mistake because I believe he reported our position to the Germans.

Nevertheless, I had a premonition that something was going to happen, so I told the commander of each tank that every member of his crew was to remain in the tank all night. We slept in our tanks as seldom as possible because it was so uncomfortable. On this occasion I also instructed that each crew member must remain in his proper position. This was very unusual because normally they would change places to ease cramped muscles.

Further, I ordered that someone in each turret should remain awake and on watch all night, and that complete silence was to be maintained. Prior to this I had called on the wireless to ask for instructions in the event that something happened, as I felt that we were horribly isolated and vulnerable. I was told not to stay but to get out as fast as we could and liaise with the Queen's infantry who were to be located between us and the bridge over the river at the foot of the village. But I was also told that nothing would happen!

Darkness came, and it was pouring with rain, so visibility was very poor. I had positioned my tank so that I could see back up the minor road through the woods from which we had come. I thought I saw a tiny glimmer of light up the road in the distance. Then I saw another one. I was now quite certain that something was happening up there.

I also thought that I could hear some noises, like talking, from the same direction, so I asked the Belgian, the only man I could spare, to crawl up the ditch at the side of the road and let me know whether he could see anything.

He was back within 2 or 3 minutes, so he hadn't been far. He reported that there were German soldiers in the ditch and that he knew they were German because he could hear them talking to one another in German!

I asked him how far up the ditch. He said, 'Thirty metres!' Although my tank was not directly aligned to the ditch I decided to open fire along it with both machine guns. While I was whispering instructions to the two gunners my plan was pre-empted. There was a 'pop' and a parachute flare burst open right over the crossroads, floodlighting us.

Simultaneously a gun opened up and the first shell hit the house beside my tank, causing part of the brick wall to fall outwards on to the tank, covering my operator and me with bricks, tiles and glass. Fortunately we only suffered minor cuts and bruises. It was probably an 88mm gun, the most powerful and widely used German anti-tank weapon.

We were sitting ducks. I shouted, 'Start up - follow me!' All four engines started at once and we turned and shot off down the road towards the village. We moved so fast that all subsequent shells missed us. I think that the wall must have knocked the Belgian off the back of my tank because when I looked round he was no longer there. I was sorry; he was a brave man.

Noise no longer mattered so I called Squadron HQ on the wireless and was told to contact the Queen's infantry on our side of the bridge and take up positions among them. There were only a few houses our side of the bridge. The main part of Gavere was the other side of the river.

I positioned the four tanks on the forward outskirts of the village, facing back down the road along which we had come. My own was in the 'point' position, hull-down in a low-lying field adjacent to the road, about two or three hundred yards from the bridge. Hull-down means that the main part of the tank was below the level of the road and only the turret (with the main gun and one machine gun) was visible from the road.

My troop sergeant, Sgt Bull, and I got out to contact the Queen's. We searched the entire area. They were not there. There must have been some miscommunication as to their location. So Sgt. Bull and I met in the middle of the road about halfway between my tank and the bridge to decide what to do. We agreed that the Queen's must be the other side of the bridge. But before we could act the engine on my tank started and the co-axial machine gun started firing. Sgt Bull raced for his tank and I raced for mine. I could not mount it from the front as the machine gun was firing forward. So, although the driver had started the engine, I must have risked stepping on one of the tracks. I can't remember. My wireless operator, Cpl Arthur Sharrocks, told me that a column of German soldiers had appeared out of the rain about fifty yards away, marching three or four abreast and singing. They had scattered into the ditch when the machine gun opened up. They were returning small arms fire. But we could not stay there as our machine gun had revealed our position to whoever manned the unseen anti-tank gun.

Until that time I had presumed that their objective was the crossroads, which we had left. I had no idea that they had followed us for such a distance. Clearly they were fully motorised and must have been not far behind us all the way. So why did they dismount, form up, and start marching when they approached the village? They obviously did not know that we had taken up new positions

there; and if they suspected that we might be in the village it was stupid of them to march into it. They should have sent a patrol forward. Their tactics mystified me and made no sense at all. Equally, the absence of any British infantry at night to protect tanks in an exposed position must have confused the Germans.

I decided that we had to find the Queen's, and also that it would be easier to defend the bridge from the other side as there was plenty of cover for the tanks there, and we could train all four main guns on to the bridge. So we crossed. We still could not locate the Queen's.

We were told to cross back again and take up positions close to the bridge. Sadly, Sgt. Bull was killed on the second crossing.

The official War Diary claims that he was hit by shrapnel from a *panzerfaust* shell. I question this; if they were armed with 'bazookas' they would have destroyed all four tanks during the night. They could see us but we couldn't see them. I don't think their artillery was firing at that particular time. Because of a bend in the road they could not see the bridge so they would have had to fire 'blind'. Further, presuming that they intended to cross the bridge, they would not have wanted to disable one of our tanks in the middle of it. I suspect that it was a sniper's bullet from close range that killed Charlie Bull.

Their infantry had the advantage of stealth in conditions of poor visibility. Tanks, on the other hand, are comparatively large and are very noisy. My tank was immediately in front of Sgt. Bull's tank crossing the bridge. Both of us had our heads exposed.

Why did the Germans aim at him, not me? I shall never know but can only think that they were not expecting us to re-cross the bridge so were not in position to take aim until the second tank crossed.

I told Sgt. Bull's crew to take him back into the village and deployed the remaining three tanks. I placed my own tank close to the bridge so that I could see if anyone tried to sneak across on foot. But that afforded me a poor view back up the approach road because there was a sharp S-bend in the road just before the bridge, so I positioned the other two tanks on the opposite side of the road where they had a better line of fire.

Modern binoculars have lenses which provide excellent night vision. I did not know whether the German ones at that time were effective at night, they may well have been because the Germans were world leaders in lenses, but British Army binoculars were quite useless at night. I could not even see my other two tanks, let alone any enemy. There was a 'blind' area between the tanks which worried me as we could not give cover to one another. Some of our wireless equipment had failed due to the constant heavy rain. I also could not allow 'runners' between the tanks because of the sniping. There was only occasional small arms fire. Either the commander or wireless operator, or both, had to risk the sniping because a tank is virtually blind with the hatches closed. We could not defend the bridge if we were blind, so we spent the next few hours popping our heads up, at irregular intervals so as not to give the snipers an easy target. I had no idea of the depth of the river or the strength of the current.

For all I knew enemy infantry could be ignoring the bridge and be wading or swimming across the river, out of our sight. If we had been on the other side of the bridge we would only have needed to look forward at the bridge and the river. Now we had to look in all directions. I was also acutely aware that infantry could board the tanks in the dark. We couldn't fire at the enemy as we couldn't see them; we did not have any flares and they may not have had any more as they did not use them. They could have planted sticky bombs on the tanks but they didn't appear to have had any of those either. We waited and watched, all night. The silence was eerie, particularly after the sniping stopped. In such a situation the side that can see the other has a huge advantage. They could see us but we couldn't see them unless they exposed themselves.

When dawn approached the rain eased off and visibility improved. To my astonishment a few hundred yards down the road was a column of SPs (self-propelled guns), half-tracks and soft vehicles. They were turning round, and soon sped off back down the road. It was the first time I had actually seen any enemy all night. We followed them, and kept them in sight, but were told not to engage, all the way back to the crossroads. It was frustrating to be told not to engage, now that we could see them at last, but I think it was suspected that they might be trying to lure us into a trap. We learned later that it had been a heavily armed column attempting to lead a break-out to the east. I shall never know why they gave up their attempt. Two Cromwells and a Firefly were certainly not enough to stop them.

Because of the awful visibility we could not see them but they must have known exactly where we were because they had infantry snipers all round us. I can only conclude that our frequent change of position, and crossing the bridge twice, confused them into thinking that we had more tanks than we did.

They may have thought that when we re-crossed the bridge we were reinforcements rather than the same tanks crossing again. Quite rightly, Dennis had not sent reinforcements. It was not more tanks that we needed it was infantry.

When we reached the crossroads we were told to stop. I went into the house whose wall had fallen on my tank and found a family in the house. The first shell had been armour piercing and had passed just under a cot in which a baby had been sleeping, and out through the back wall. Amazingly, the baby was unharmed. But the house was badly damaged; I think the shell must have hit a joist. It was only when we climbed out of the tanks and relaxed that my wireless operator and I realised that our hands were cut and bleeding. Shards of glass had stuck to all the wet horizontal surfaces of the tank. We had been so cold that we had not felt the cuts and we had not noticed the blood because the heavy rain had washed it away. The units in the column were rounded up later that day.

I have been told that in the afternoon the Squadron jeep took me back into Gavere to attend the burial service for Sgt. Bull, conducted by Padre Dickson, and that the villagers provided a beautiful coffin. I have no recollection of that, perhaps because I was in a state of utter physical and mental exhaustion. Photographs of the coffin were taken and subsequently sent to his wife.

I have also been told that he was still alive when his crew located the rest of B Squadron. He had been taken into a shop but died shortly after.

I was anxious to find out why we had been unable to locate the Queen's infantry. I learned that they had been in a small wood, off the road, somewhere between the crossroads and the village. We had not seen them and, although they must have heard us go by, they kept themselves hidden. As far as I know, the Germans did not find them either.

Fifty years later I learned that the villagers had erected a plaque on the bridge in memory of Sgt. Charlie Bull, 'the man who gave his life to save their village'. So I went to see it and pay my respects. The bridge was no longer there, but had been replaced by a modern wide bridge in line with the road. They had named the new bridge after Charlie. The S-bend had been eliminated. The plaque had been transferred from the old bridge to the centre of the new one; and the villagers were putting fresh flowers at the foot of the plaque every morning. I was deeply moved. He was the only man killed in action under my command during the campaign. Only the good die young. Sgt Bull was a good man and a good soldier. He had seen service in the desert and in Italy and it was tragic that he should die so near the end of the War.

In 2006 I planned again to be in Brussels and I felt that I would like to visit Gavere, probably for the last time, to pay my respects again. This time I thought I should make myself known to the Mayor, so I asked my good friend Jean-Marie Mommens, a prominent Brussels lawyer, if he could make an

appointment for me. The Mayor responded by asking us to meet him at the Town Hall at 5p.m. on Tuesday, June 27. I was accompanied by Jean-Marie, his wife Marie Claire and a friend who spoke Flemish fluently as Gavere is in the Flemish speaking part of Belgium. When we arrived we were astonished. The Town Hall was full of people and there was a large overspill of people outside. Almost all were men and some of the older ones were wearing RTR ties! We were introduced to the Mayor, a very friendly man in his fifties, then to almost everyone else. Once inside we were each given a drink then the Mayor made a welcoming speech. Some others spoke also and the Flemish was translated into English for me. Then I was asked to tell them exactly what happened that fateful night 62 years ago.

It was clear to me that the 'Battle of Gavere' was of enormous interest to the townsfolk. So much so that in addition to the plaque on the bridge there was a permanent display of RTR memorabilia in a prominent place in the Town Hall. They had even been in contact with Sgt. Bull's relatives. But they had received conflicting stories of what actually happened that night and they wanted to get the correct story direct from 'the horse's mouth'.

I told them exactly what had happened, then I asked if there were any questions. There certainly were - many. What surprised me was that many of them came from young fellows who were not alive in 1944. The extent of their interest and research amazed me; they knew the names of each member of Charlie Bull's crew, for instance. They reminded me that the name of his gunner was Joe Cannon and they thought that it was a marvellous name for a gunner. It was certainly appropriate. They also asked me what song the marching German soldiers were singing. I had not heard the singing as I was far from my tank at the time, but I had learned later that it was *Lili Marlene*. This was a haunting German Wartime song which had been picked up by Vera Lynn who sang it to the British troops, so both sides in the War were singing the same song. They knew all about Cromwell and Firefly, tanks. One question stumped me; they wanted to know the name of my tank. I had been in so many that I could not remember which one it was on that particular occasion.

The questions kept coming but the Mayor intervened to tell us that the Television people were waiting for us at the bridge, so we adjourned there. I laid some flowers below the plaque and was then interviewed, while the cameras rolled, by a very clued-up young man who asked excellent questions. One of them was whether I recognised anything. I pointed out that the bridge was new. He then showed me a photograph of the old bridge. I did recognise that but told him that I was puzzled that I could not identify any buildings. He then played his trump card; not only had they built a new bridge but they had also widened and re-routed the river! They had straightened it by eliminating a large double bend. The river was much bigger than I remembered and large barges were frequently moving along it. It was the Scheldt, which ends up in the North Sea.

The old bridge had been about 150 metres further nearer the main part of the town. Whereas it had been a large village in 1944 it was now a town of nearly 3,000 people. They took me to the location of the old bridge, with the cameras still rolling, and I immediately recalled some of the old buildings, hidden among the newer ones. I was able to indicate to them where I had positioned the three tanks and they were delighted to add this to their store of knowledge.

We then returned to the Town Hall for farewell speeches and handshakes all round. It had been a fascinating two hours and confirmed the impression I had gained in 1944 that the people in the Flemish part of Belgium are -amongst the friendliest and most hospitable to be found anywhere. I hope that the people of Gavere enjoyed the occasion as much as I did. One interesting fact that emerged was that this was the second Battle of Gavere. The first one was in 1453 when Philip III, Duke of Burgundy was attacking Ghent.

To describe the action in 1944 as the 'Battle of Gavere' is a bit of an exaggeration. Because of the appalling visibility the protagonists saw very little of each other, so it was more like a game of hide and seek. The Germans killed one man. I have no idea how many of their men we killed or wounded with our solitary burst of machine gun fire into their marching column but it must have been a

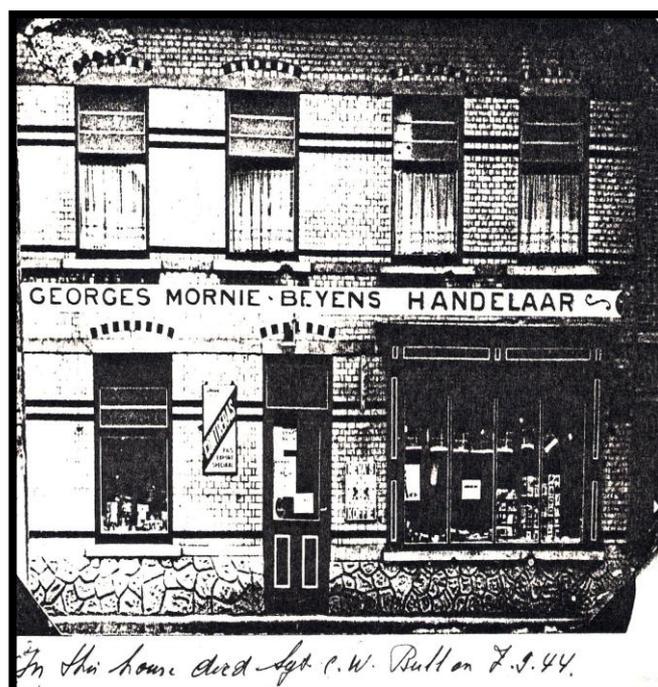
substantial number from such close range. Casualty statistics only tell part of the story. It is the end result that counts and to that extent we won because not a single enemy soldier crossed the all-important bridge.

I have often wondered why I remember the events of that night in such detail. There were many other engagements but I have either forgotten them entirely or have only a vague recollection of them. The engagement started before dusk but did not end until after dawn the following day. Throughout that time, more than twelve hours, I experienced a continuous rush of adrenalin.

Perhaps adrenalin has an effect on the memory?

I am a self-critic and I have wondered whether I could or should have done anything differently. At various times during the night I was tempted to emulate the Light Brigade and charge at the enemy. However, it would have been heroic but foolhardy to charge blindly at an unseen force of unknown size and strength. We could not have fired accurately on the move and the tanks would have been compelled to stay on the road so one would have been behind the other.

If the leading one was hit the others would have had to stop and would have become easy targets. Failure would have left the bridge completely undefended. So I have come to the conclusion that, lacking infantry support, our cat and mouse tactics were the right ones; attacking was not an intelligent option. In analyzing the confrontation I liken it to both a chess game and a boxing match. In a chess game certain squares on the board become critical as the game progresses. Initially I thought that the crossroads was the critical square; it was only when we were followed to Gavere that I knew that I had been wrong; the bridge was the critical square. In the boxing match scenario the first round at the crossroads was a draw. They surprised us but we were on the alert. They dislodged us but failed to damage us. Above all, they lost valuable time. We lost the second round when we failed to find our infantry, but we won the third round when they stupidly marched into range of our machine gun. Then I suppose it could be said that we lost the fourth round when they killed Sergeant Bull. We won the last round because we prevented any of their men or vehicles getting on the bridge, let alone crossing it. So when dawn came they were compelled to retreat.



The shop in Gavere where Charlie is reputed to have died

APPENDIX 1.

The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry retained its cavalry role between the wars and went to the Middle East as a Mounted Cavalry Regiment in 1940. It then served as lorried infantry in the Iraq, Syrian and Persian campaigns, one Squadron served as searchlight troops at Tobruk. At Gadera the regiment was converted to armour in time to feature in the initial breakthrough at the Battle of El Alamein as part of 9 Armoured Brigade supporting the 2nd New Zealand Division. "A Squadron" and "C Squadron", gave tank support to the NZ Infantry. Delays in the minefield and Mechanical problems resulted in only 5 A Squadron tanks reaching Miteiriya Ridge by first light. C Squadron with 4-5 Grants then backed them up, after suffering similar problems. After A & C Squadrons lost all their tanks the reserve armour (3rd Hussars) were in their firing positions. Suffering heavy losses, the Regiment was withdrawn, subsequently taking part in the Italian campaign.

A sqdn RWY website - www.royalwiltshireyeomanry.co.uk

E-mail from Donald Egremont who's father knew Charlie in the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry

Dear David,
Thank you for your e-mail.



Lieutenant General W G Holmes, GOC 9th Army, stands by a Sherman tank of the Wiltshire Yeomanry to watch a gunnery display, 5 April

I have just spoken to my Father who remembers Charlie Bull vividly, he said, "jolly nice chap, one of the best and we always joked he was ideal for tanks, because he was built like one".

I said to my father, "now look, unless I am very much mistaken you must be one of the very few people alive that knew Charlie Bull during the war, what can you really remember about him".

"Well said my father, "he was sort of our nanny when we first went into tanks". Charlie was very experienced in tanks, he took us through all the do's and don't, indeed he taught us how to behave in a tank. He taught the gunners how to effectively take out an enemy tank and he was very precise with the drivers and told them exactly how to drive at an enemy tank and/or take 'cover' from enemy fire in the open or to use the lie of the land.

In fact come to think of it, he spent a long time with our driver, Reg Doggrell a farmer from Wincanton with size 14 boots. Told Reg just how to drive the Sherman, probably the reason we got away with it and I am here to tell the tale". My father's exact words. "Oh Charlie was a grand chap" he said, "not typical of the blimpish

sergeant instructors that were about. Of course he was a regular and he had been involved in some fierce fighting with RTR."

Your uncle was senior instructor and instructed the RWY in Sherman's, Honeys and Crusaders. My Father said, "there we were, a bunch of territorials - farmers mostly, all out there for a bloody adventure and bless old Charlie, there he was an outstandingly good regular, dumped on our lot and became part of the team, as if he had milked cows all his life".

DONALD EGREMONT

THE TANKS



Cruiser Mk I tanks of 5th Royal Tank Regiment, 3rd Armoured Brigade, 1st Armoured Division, on Thursley Common, Surrey, July 1940.



Covenanter tanks of 5th Royal Tank Regiment, 9th Armoured Division entraining at Thetford in Norfolk, May 1942.



Light Tank Mk. VIs of 5th Batt. RTR on the ship 'Delius' at Southampton having returned from France during the evacuation of British forces from Cherbourg, 19th June 1940.



Grant tanks of 5th Royal Tank Regiment display for the camera, 17 February 1942



Hand over of New Stuart Honey to RTR



Cromwell Mk IV somewhere in Normandy



7 troop 'B'sqd. 5th RTR somewhere in Europe. The first tank, which is the troop leader's was named 'Everne' and was the tank being commanded by Charlie when he was killed. The date and place of this picture is unknown, but probably before his death. According to Eric Stevenson, 'Everne' was worn out and was sent for repairs shortly after Charlie's death



Sherman Firefly

Cromwell IV tank history

One of the fastest tanks of the War.

The origins of the Cromwell are complicated. They began with an attempt by Morris Motors to design a new Cruiser Tank for the 57mm gun, and ended with Rolls-Royce developing a new V12 engine known as the Meteor (derived from the Spitfire's Merlin) for use in tanks. Designed in 1942 it took nearly two years to rid the new tank of faults and it was not ready for action until June 1944.

By this time it was, in many respects, two years out of date. Firepower had been improved by the fitting of a 75mm gun but nothing could be done to improve protection, and the tank had to rely very much on its speed. In terms of mobility, however, it was excellent. The engine, coupled to a Merritt-Brown transmission, supported on the famous Christie suspension enabled the tank to maintain high speeds across country or spin around in its own length.



Cromwell Mk IV

Cromwell tanks were issued to 7th Armoured Division and the reconnaissance regiments of other armoured divisions. In this role they were superb, heading the six-day dash across Europe which freed Antwerp and Brussels at speeds which prevented the Germans from establishing strong defence lines.

STATISTICS

Rate of fire: 6,35 m
Width: 2,91 m
Weight: 28 000 kg
Maximum speed: 52 km/h
Range: 265 km

Main gun: 75 mm (6 pounds) Mk V ROQF gun

Main gun: 75 mm (6 pounds) Mk V ROQF gun
Secondary armament: two 7,92 mm Besa machineguns
Engine: Rolls-Royce Meteor, 600 hp
Consumption: 199 L for 100 km

Crew: 4 (1 tank commander, 1 driver, 1 co-driver and gunner, 1 radio operator and loader)

Front shield: 76 mm
Back shield: 20 mm

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GAVERE



Charlie's grave in the cemetery at Gavere



Charlie's Smith and Wesson service revolver. It was found in his grave when his body was moved to the new cemetery and is now in the Town Hall at Gavere



Scheldt Bridge, Gavere – A.K.A Sgt. C. W. Bull Bridge



The original Scheldt bridge where Charlie died in 1944



The memorial plaque on the bridge at Gavere



Charlie's grave on the 1st anniversary of his death



Charlie at home at 35 Park Lane Tutbury



In a N.A.F.F.I. canteen, Charlie is at the back

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Self published

All information relating to the campaigns the 5th RTR was involved in from 1940 to 1944 were taken from the excellent website of the 7th armoured brigade produced and maintained by Ian Paterson

www.btinternet.com/~ian.a.paterson/main.htm



THE MEMORIAL IN THE TOWN HALL GAVERE