

A Survivor's War

14316026 Lance Corporal Don Trayhurn RASC 31st Tank Brigade, 79th Armoured Division

Don Trayhurn was born in March 1921. He enlisted in October 1942 and was in the Royal Army Service Corps, the branch of the army responsible for logistics and administration. He was attached to 31st Tank Brigade in 79th Armoured Division. This was a specialist division created as part of the preparations for D-Day. It handled the modified tanks known as 'Hobart's Funnies'. Don is John Trayhurn's father.

The development of the modified tanks of 79th Division was nurtured by its commander, Major General Sir Percy Hobart, after Field Marshall Alan Brooke, Chief of Imperial General Staff, foresaw the need for such specialised armoured vehicles. They were intended to assist with the landings on the D-Day beaches, and were used subsequently throughout the north west European Campaign.

SOME OF 'HOBART'S FUNNIES'



Mine Flail to clear a path through minefields



A Bobbin tank to lay a canvas track over soft ground.



Don and Doreen Trayhurn on their wedding day
June 17th 1943



Sherman tank using an Armoured Ramp
Carrier to scale obstacles



Fascine Carrier to fill ditches

There were many different designs, each for a particular task. There were even amphibious tanks - Duplex Drive tanks or simply DD (nicknamed Donald Duck) tank with canvas sides to keep the water out. They could be disembarked offshore with a propeller to take them to the beach. Their use on Omaha Beach was a disaster, as they were dropped too far offshore in a considerable swell that swamped them.

79th Division did not operate as a single division, but as small units across other infantry divisions to solve specific tasks in a particular operation or battle. They returned to 79 Division when their task was completed, to be reallocated to another part of the campaign. Regular infantry commanders initially did not see the need for such bizarre contraptions and were reluctant to use them to best effect. Later experience proved their worth and reduced casualties by overcoming obstacles that were pinning troops down.

Don Trayhurn was an RASC driver with 31st Tank Brigade, which operated the special tank known as the Crocodile, a modified Churchill tank with the forward machine gun replaced by a flamethrower capable of throwing a jet of flame over 120 yards, much further than a man-carried flamethrower. An armoured trailer was towed behind carrying 400 gallons of fuel. With its incredible roar and sheet of flame it was a powerful psychological weapon, and proved highly effective at clearing bunkers, trenches and other fortifications.

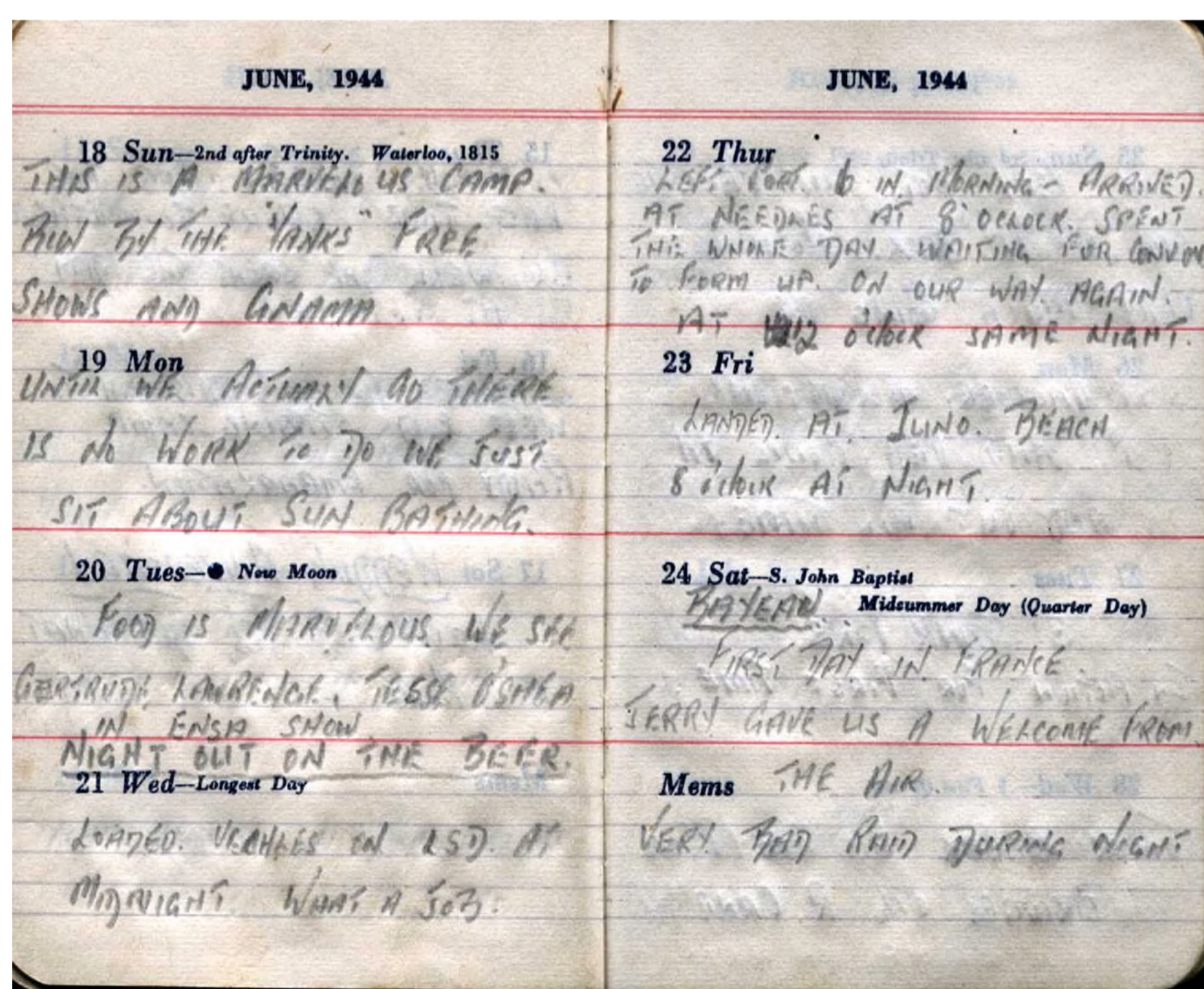
Although regulations meant that servicemen were not to keep a diary, we are fortunate that Don did, and his diary for 1944 still survives. This shows he landed on Juno beach in Normandy at 8pm on Friday June 23rd 1944. The following day he reports being in Bayeux, where 'Jerry gave us a welcome from the air. Very bad raid during night'. On 26th he was in St Gabriel, a few miles east of Bayeux, and the following day 31st Tank Brigade goes into action for the first time as part of Operation Epsom. They accompanied 15th Scottish Division, and made good progress, securing four bridges across the River Orne. A counter attack was beaten off. By 18th they were on the outskirts of Caen, but this did not fall until August. Like any true Brit abroad, he regularly reports on the weather - 'Sun very hot' 'Still raining, very heavy thunderstorm' 'Weather still grand' etc. Don suffered badly from midges and mosquitos, in one instance he was hospitalised.



A Crocodile flamethrower in action

On August 31st he crossed the Seine, and reported the further inland they got, the more pleased the locals were to see the British. Don was a slaughter man in civilian life, and on September 13th he reports 'Kill a pig for B.O.O [an officer?]. He gives me a fore end and Canvas Tent. Now fixed up for winter'. He also notes the rate of exchange for commodities; '1 bar of soap or 10 cigs = 3 eggs'. On 22nd the platoon complained to the CO about the food, who sacked the cook. Late September is very wet and their location is like a mud bath. They spend a lot of time pushing trucks out of the mud. At this time he receives the happy news he has a son, Michael. His joy was short lived when further news reaches him that Michael only lived three days.

At the beginning of October they moved to Dunkirk and later in the month are around Antwerp, where Don reports 'Flying Bombs!!!' on 31st. Antwerp was battered with both V1s and V2s, the city being hit with more V2s than all other targets combined. On November 13th they go into action with 9th American army near Eindhoven, close to the border with Germany. An interesting note on November 19th states that he saw his first German plane since they left Caen in August, confirming the allied command of the skies. On 24th he reports the tanks had a very rough day, only 6 returning, although objective gained. On December 2nd they enter Germany.



Don Trayhurn's diary for w/c 1 June 18th 1944 showing details of the voyage and arrival in France

He liked the US embarkation camp with its free shows (Gertrude Lawrence and 'Two Ton' Tessie O'Shea) and cinema.

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In the second week of December the tanks are refitting. On December 16th began the 'Battle of the Bulge', and Don writes 'Very bad night, Jerry breaks through'. It appears they were somewhere north of Aachen, and the main German thrust was only 20 miles south. Don refers to their unit getting 'more than our share of Jerry mortar and shell fire'. After travelling south west all day on December 23rd and 24th, they arrive at the Belgium town of Huy at 11pm. This is only 25 miles NW from the besieged town of Bastogne. Christmas day was all work, being on detail until 10pm and living on hard rations. On 28th he notes flying bombs again and roads very bad with snow. This was a bitter winter. If he wrote a 1945 diary, sadly it has not survived. His 1944 diary has a note that he had a week's leave in the UK during April 1945, arriving home at 3am Friday April 6th and leaving for Germany on Friday 13th, which he described as 'best leave ever'.

Don witnessed the unconditional surrender of German forces in North West Europe at Luneberg Heath on May 4th 1945, a prelude to the Instrument of Surrender on May 7th. Don recalls it was very atmospheric with the sound of drums approaching, getting louder and louder before the actual signing.



Field Marshall Montgomery (second from the left) greets the German Delegation
left to right: Admiral von Friedeburg, General Kinzel and Rear Admiral Wagner



Field Marshall Montgomery signs the surrender document, watched by Rear Admiral Wagner and Admiral von Friedeburg



Churchill Crocodile tank spitting flames at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp



Crowds watching the destruction of the last camp hut at Bergen-Belsen on May 21st 1945

Perhaps the most harrowing of tasks was when his unit was given the coordinates for the following day and arrived at Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, about 20 miles south of Luneberg Heath. This would have been the middle of May. By this time, most of the survivors had been moved to more sanitary conditions. His unit had been given orders to burn the concentration camp to the ground because of the fear of typhus epidemic and louse infestation. His service book confirms he received several typhus inoculations in 1945.

Don left the Army in November 1945 to raise his family in Thornbury. They spent many holidays in Port Isaac and Port Gaverne from the 1950s onwards. His son John came to live here in 1982 and taught at Wadebridge School until 2010. John was a member of the lifeboat crew for five years. Don died in 1996.

Sources

79th Armoured Division: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/79th_Armoured_Division_\(United_Kingdom\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/79th_Armoured_Division_(United_Kingdom))

Hobart's Funnies: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobart%27s_Funnies

Royal Army Service Corps: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Army_Service_Corps

Liberation of Bergen-Belsen: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergen-Belsen_concentration_camp

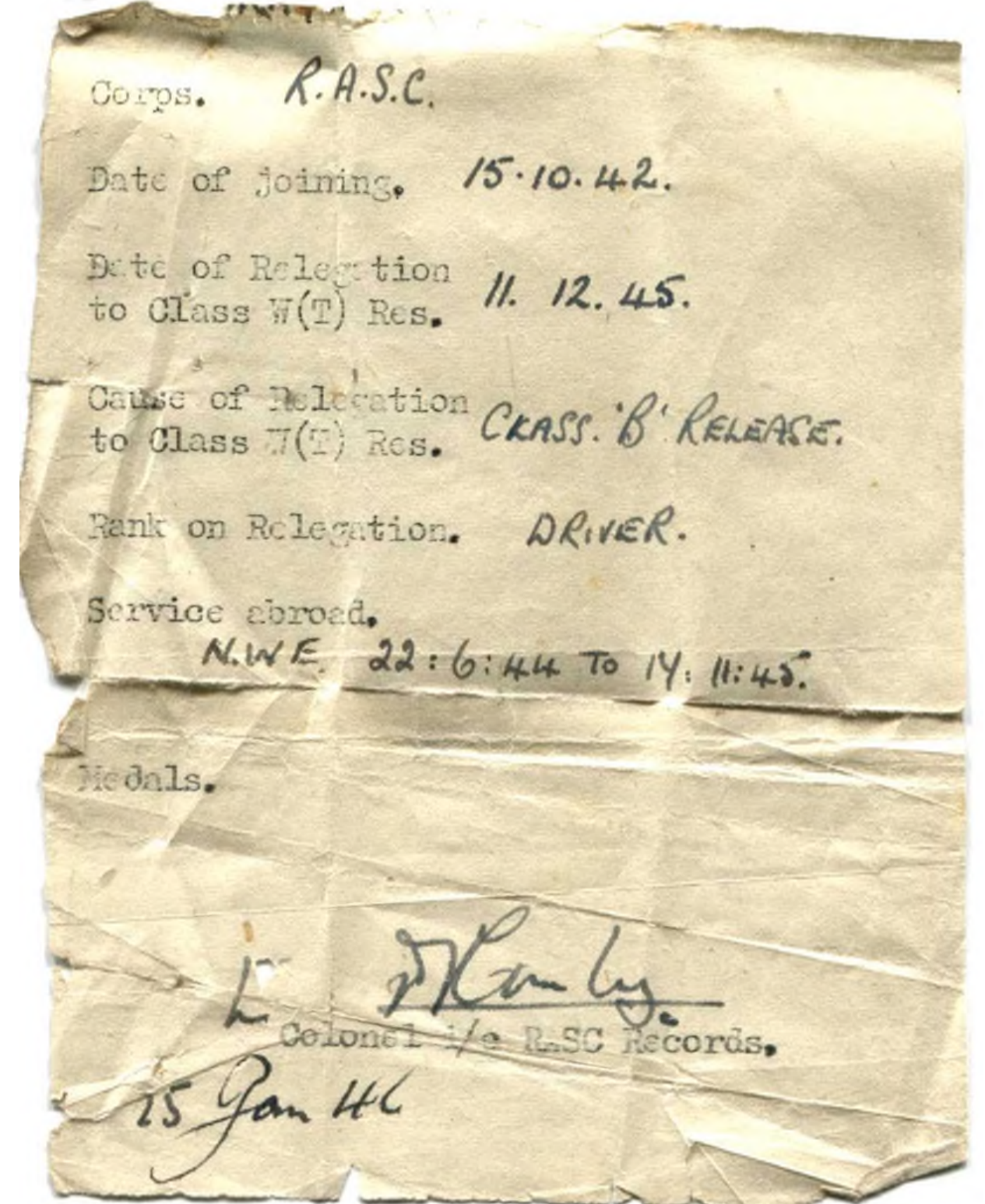
We are grateful to John Trayhurn for the information and mementoes he has provided.



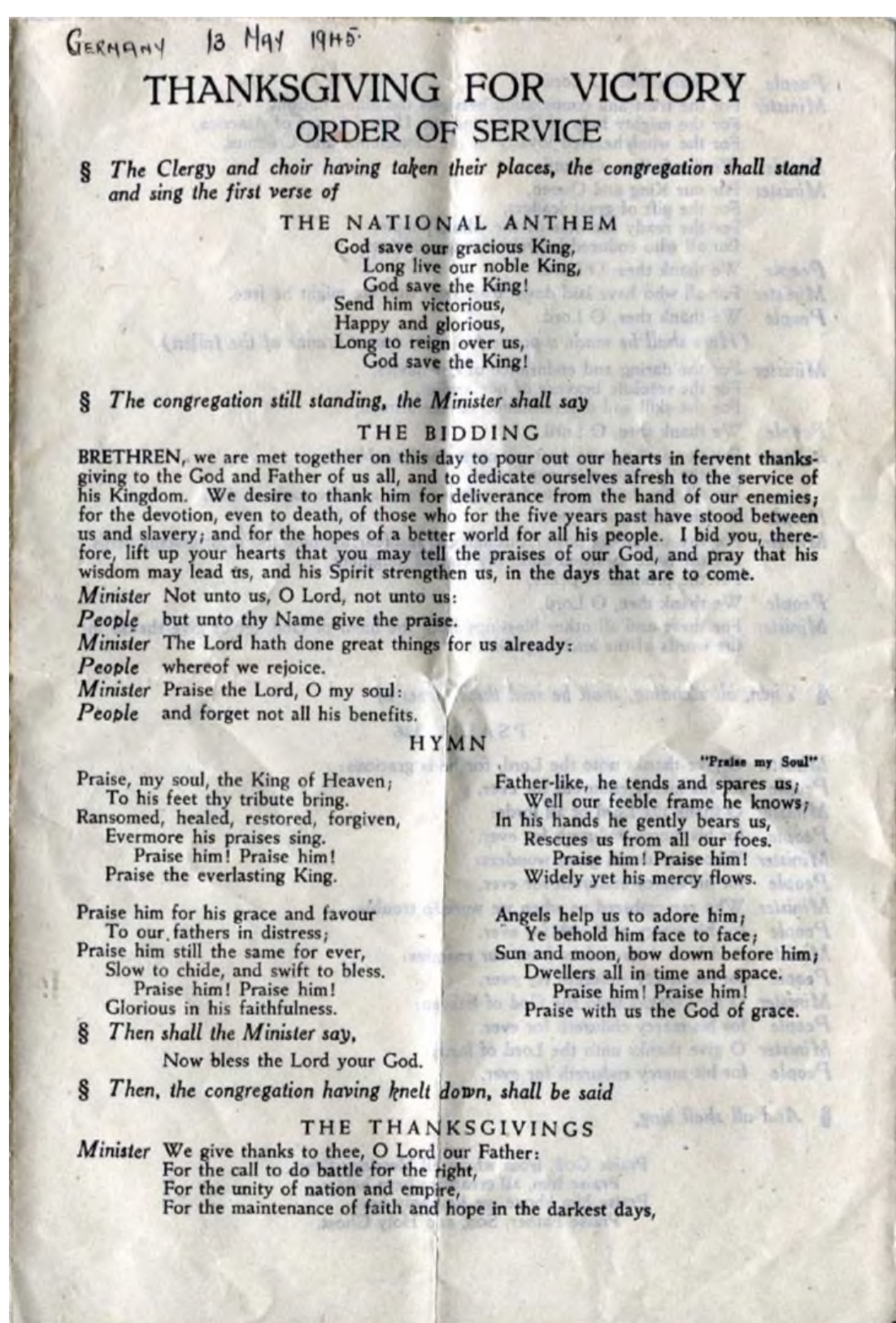
Don Trayhurn's medals, together with their original box and the note inside. l-r 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star and War Medal 1939-45



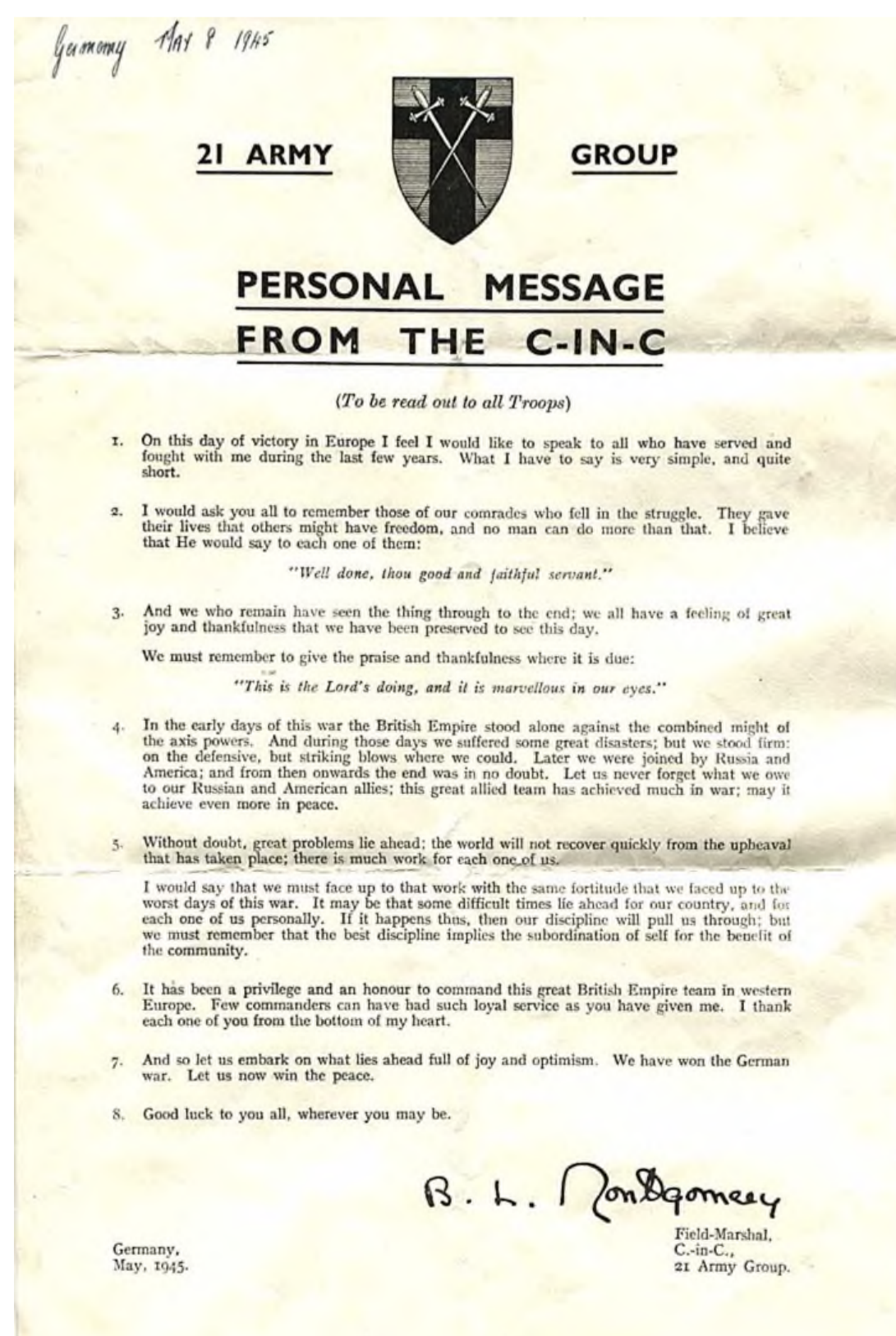
Don's cotton formation badge of the 79th Armoured Division - he never got round to sewing it on his uniform



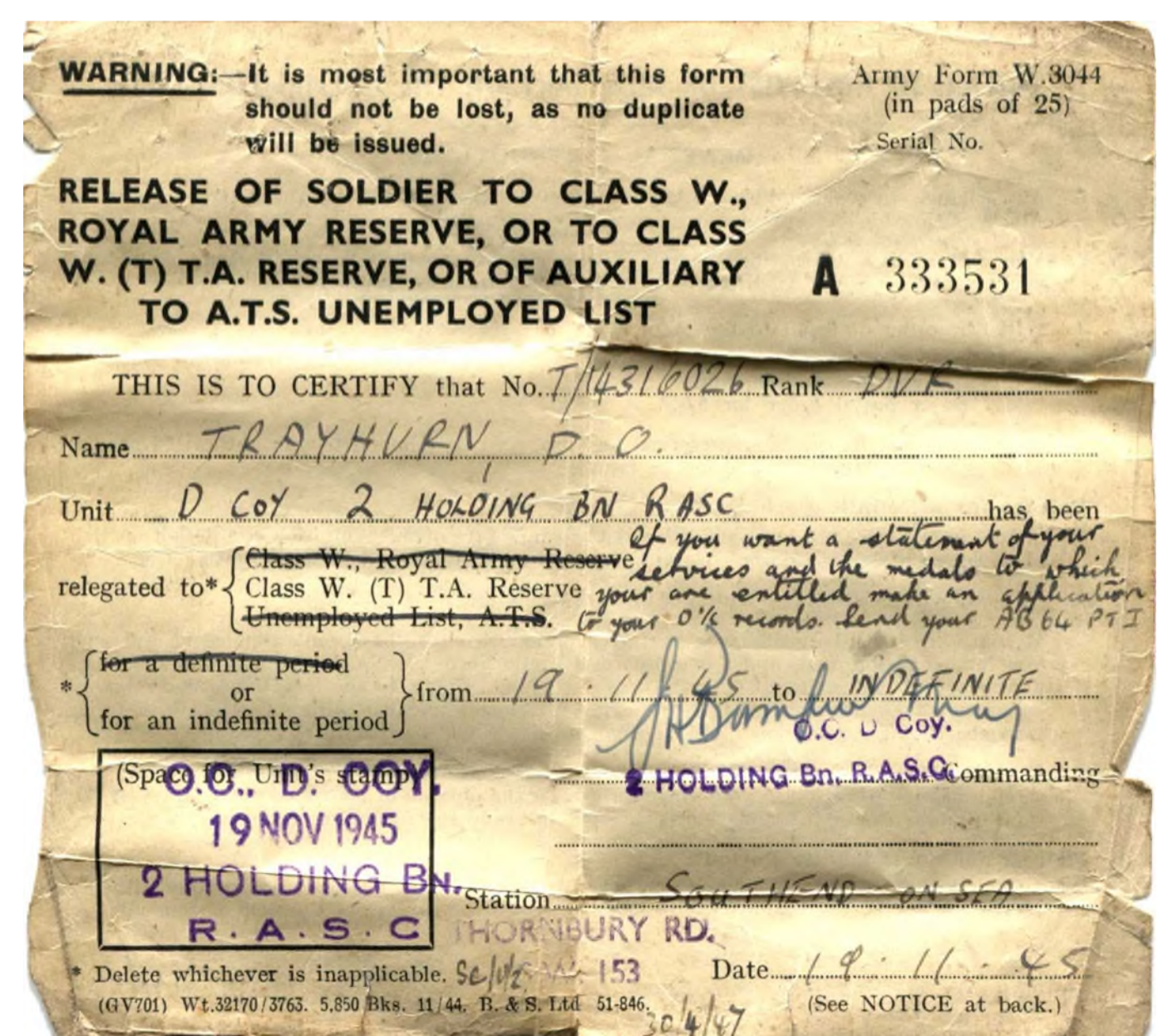
Details of his service.



First page of the 'Thanksgiving for Victory Order of Service' held in Germany on May 13th 1945



Personal message from Field Marshall Montgomery to be read out to the troops in Germany on VE Day (copy 'liberated' by Don)



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