

AN ESCAPE FROM FRANCE OPERATION AERIAL – 17th JUNE 1940

My father, **Leslie Ernest Heather Chandler**, was born on 1st May 1919 in Teddington. His mother had been born in 1881 into an old Molesey extended family who had lived and worked here since 1833, but her parents had moved to Teddington when she was just a few months old.

Leslie was called up, aged 20, at the outset of the Second World War. On 30th September 1939 he attended for medical examination in Kingston-upon-Thames, was found to be in "A1" health and assigned to 'B' Company of the newly-formed 2/6th Battalion (Territorial) of the East Surrey Regiment.



Unfortunately my father died in 1986 at the age of 66 and like most men, until just recently, spoke little about his wartime experiences, but I have been fortunate to inherit over one hundred letters he wrote to his mother and sister during the course of the War, from his enlistment at Horsham on 19th October 1939, until his release and demob. in Aldershot in February 1946. Although, of course, he does not mention anything of a sensitive nature and there are few clues to either his exact whereabouts or events witnessed, nevertheless, his letters do add some substance to information gleaned from his official army records. *Photo: Leslie Chandler on enlistment 1939.*

My father served with the British Expeditionary Force in France from April to June 1940.

However, the well-known and much celebrated evacuation in May/June 1940 of much of the BEF from Dunkirk and environs, *Operation Dynamo*, by no means brought all home safely and more than two hundred thousand British troops remained in France, trying to fight back the Germans.

On 6th June, several days after the main body of the BEF had been evacuated, a violent attack on the Forges-Aumale area took place with heavy and frequent bombing. Aumale was almost completely flattened and communication between HQ and the Companies was often broken. The next morning the enemy attacked with one armoured and one motorised division. It was, therefore, arranged by the commanding officer that if any unit found itself cut off it should make its way south westwards. Both "A" and "B" Companies of the East Surreys found themselves in this situation and many were either killed or taken prisoner-of-war, but the survivors from these Companies, my father included, withdrew through Rouen. They were told it was "every man for himself".

On 10th June my father was reported missing.

On 12th June the British were finally forced to surrender at St. Valery and the majority of the remaining British soldiers were captured and marched across France and put on to barges on the Rhine from whence they were transported to prisoner of war camps in Germany.

I have a memory, aged about twelve, of my father's sister telling me that at some stage he had fallen off the back of an overloaded vehicle into a ditch and had lain there watching as it was blown up some yards further up the road. It must have been at this point that he joined the throngs of troops and refugees making their way across France to the Atlantic coast, having little to eat during their long walk.

Eventually, another Operation named *Aerial* was planned to evacuate the remaining troops from ports in Brittany in North-western France. Churchill eventually gave the order to evacuate on 15th June and the ports used included Cherbourg, St. Malo, Brest and St. Nazaire. On 16th June, British naval officers arrived at Brest and St. Nazaire to take charge of the embarkation, mainly on large troopships.

My father was eventually evacuated from St. Nazaire in the early hours of Monday, 17th June 1940 and a short undated note written in pencil to his mother upon his arrival back in England must have been received with great joy and relief by the family.

The note reads:

“Dear Mum

Please forgive me for not writing before but we have not been able to just lately. I am quite safe and well in England now and very much hope to see you all again soon. The sea trip was fairly safe. Well I think that has eased your mind a bit so I will close

***With love to all
from Leslie”***

On 21st June he was in a position to be able to write more fully from the Spa Hotel, Shotley Bridge, Co. Durham where he was accommodated for recuperation purposes before returning home, eventually being re-assigned to another Regiment, there being little remaining of the 2/6th East Surreys. It is from this note that I learned for the first time that he was evacuated from St. Nazaire and have concluded that he was transported on either *HMT Georgic* or *HMT Duchess of York* – transatlantic passenger liners during peace time and later troopships.

“Dear Mum

At last I am able to say whatever I like. I left France from a port called St. Nazaire at 2 a.m. Monday morning and arrived at Liverpool about 3 p.m., a large crowd being present to welcome us. We had one or two near escapes on our way across but were untouched in the end. It was a fine boat, easily the best I’ve been on.

I might tell you that I’m very glad to be back in England again. You can’t beat your own country believe me! I’ve been out into this village and up to the town called Consett here. The people are very good to us indeed and it’s almost like a second home already to me. I’ve just heard some good news about coming home and I think it will be soon, so be prepared to see me shortly.

That’s all for now ‘til I see you and then I will tell you all more of my escapades.

***With love to all
from Leslie”***

The communication dated 8th July advising that he had been erroneously reported missing and was now safe in the UK was not received by his parents until long after he returned home.



The photograph shows my father (right) on the beach at Hayling Island in 1940, with his elder brother and wife and a young cousin. He was very emaciated after his experiences. However, he was one of the lucky ones.

Then followed two years serving on the Home Front, until he sailed, now a member of the Royal Fusiliers, for Egypt, in September 1942. He served firstly at the Middle East Forces GHQ in Cairo; later with Paiforce in Iraq for two years from 1943 to 1944, with the exception of two breaks in Leave Camps in Jordan and Palestine; and finally back in Cairo, where he was to remain until January 1946.

My father met my mother, a Molesey girl, in 1948 when they both sang in the East and West Molesey Choral Society which was conducted by Bernard Russell, organist and choirmaster of St. Mary’s Church, a mutual friend. After they married in 1950 he lived in East Molesey for the remainder of his life.

On 17th June 2005 I made a lone pilgrimage to St. Nazaire to commemorate the 65th anniversary of my father's evacuation, without which I may not be here today.

Firstly, I looked at the German U boat pens, eerily dank and dark, walls pock marked from the RAF air attacks which took place here during D-Day in 1944. But it was whilst on the seafront promenade searching for memorials to events which took place here in June 1940 that I came across one detailing the tragic bombing and sinking of the troopship *H.M.T. Lancastria* in the afternoon of Monday, 17th June, with the loss of many thousands of lives. It was a huge maritime disaster with more loss of life than in the sinking of the *Titanic* and *Lusitania* put together and an event which Churchill banned from being reported for fear of it upsetting public morale. He also ordered all official records to be closed for 100 years, so few have heard of this appalling disaster. As I stood reading about this event, two coaches arrived in the car park – they were carrying members of the Lancastria Association, both survivors of the disaster and family of those who had lost their lives. They told me that they came every year to commemorate the event and after a short service by the memorial stone, attended by various dignitaries of the town and a special lunch, they would be ferried out in small boats to the actual wreck site of the *Lancastria* for prayers and the strewing of flowers on the water.

I confessed, with some embarrassment, that I was here because my father had been fortunate to be evacuated on another ship some hours earlier on that fateful day, but nevertheless they invited me to stay for the service and to come out in one of the boats later. Sadly, however, I had to leave after the service in order to catch a TGV back to Nantes to connect with my flight to Gatwick, so was unable to stay longer.

In June 2010, 70 years after those events in 1940, my sister and I attended the Lancastria Association's annual commemorative service held at St. Katharine Cree Church near Tower Hill in London. It was the last one held as the Association has now been disbanded due, inevitably, to declining numbers.

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