



Captain Edgar C. Atkinson  
and the  
854 Quarrying Company, Royal Engineers  
In the Second World War



Captain Edgar C. Atkinson R.E. and Major Tommy W. Owen R.E.  
On Bomb Disposal Duties At London in 1940/41

David and Joan Atkinson  
Llandudno  
January 2005



# 854TH (North Wales) QUARRYING COMPANY ROYAL ENGINEERS

The above Quarrying Company is now being formed in the North Wales Area for Service at Home or Overseas.

Men are required for the following Trades and Duties :--

Blacksmiths.	Driver Mechanics.	Engine Artificers.
Fitters.	Quarrymen.	Rockdrillers.
Engine Hands.	Lorry Drivers.	Platelayers.
Carpenters.	Masons.	Quarry Labourers.

Age limits will be 20 to 50 years.

The Company will be paid at Royal Engineers Pay, ranging from 2/- to 5/- per day, with the usual family allowances.

Men registered or registering under the National Service (Armed Forces) Act, 1939, are eligible.

~~The Schedule of Reserved Occupations~~ may possibly be waived in respect of men wishing to join.

The probable date of formation of the Company will be July 1st.

Men wishing to join should send in their names, as soon as possible, to :--

TO  
ATKINSON  
STORIA BLDGS  
GANWY.

T. W. OWEN,  
854 Quarrying Company, R.E.,  
Caerblaidd Offices,  
BLAENAU FESTINIOG.

Office Hours : 10 to 12 ; 2 to 4 ; 5 to 6.30.



Major R. E.  
O.C. 854 (Quarrying) Co., R.E.

**Major Tommy W. Owen**  
**Royal Engineers**  
**Of Blaenau Ffestiniog**  
**Founder and Officer Commanding 854 Quarrying Co. R.E.**  
**1940 - 1942**



**Colour Sergeant Edgar C. Atkinson, M.S.M.  
17th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers  
Of Llandudno  
1914 - 18**



**Captain Edgar C. Atkinson M.S.M.  
Royal Engineers  
Second in Command 854 Quarrying Co. R.E.  
1940 - 1945**



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**Captain Edgar C. Atkinson  
and the  
854 Quarrying Company, Royal Engineers,  
In the Second World War**

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper is produced to fill a gap in the quarrying history of the Blaenau Ffestiniog area. Much has been written about slate quarrying generally and about individual mines in north Wales. One of the recent publications is a history of the Blaen y Cwm and Cwt y Bugail Slate Quarries, 2003, by M.J.T. Lewis, supported by the Snowdonia National Park Authority Study Centre at Plas Tan y Bwlch, Maentwrog and largely based on the research of Fforwm Plas Tan y Bwlch. It was this work which sparked off our interest which is shown as follows.

The omission, which we feel strongly should be recognised, is the part played by north Wales Quarrymen in the 1939 - 45 war. Our father, Captain Edgar C. Atkinson, was fundamentally connected with the 854 Quarrying Company, Royal Engineers, from its formation until the cessation of hostilities in Europe. We are in the privileged position of having most of his letters to his family - wife, children, father, sister throughout the period and also some connected material. This is augmented by a summer holiday spent in the vicinity of the Company near Halifax when it was initially training in the summer/autumn of 1940, two summer holidays spent at Stranraer in 1941 and 1942 when the Company was stationed there, and some post war contacts.

The Company was predominantly, but not exclusively, formed from Blaenau Ffestiniog and Tan y Grisiau volunteers. This paper is intended as a tribute to the brave men of the area who played their part in the conflict but whose efforts seem to have gone unrecorded locally.

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## BACKGROUND

The story really begins in the 1914 - 18 war. Edgar C. Atkinson of Llandudno and Tommy W. Owen of Blaenau Ffestiniog were both Company Quartermaster Sergeants in the 17th Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. They saw out the war together and remained close friends during the inter-war years. 'Uncle' Tommy was a regular visitor at weekends to Marl Lane, where Edgar lived, when the two of them would go out for a drink on Saturday evenings and reminisce on 'the old days'. Tommy retained his post first world war friendship with our mother's family and was best man at her brother, Emrys Phillips', wedding. Emrys had also been a Quartermaster Sergeant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, but a different Battalion.

David remembers well a short holiday which he spent with his father at Tommy's home in Blaenau, and particularly a trip up the line to Cwt y Bugail Quarry in about 1938. For Tommy, we understood, was the manager of the Quarry in the 1930s. Another holiday well remembered by both of us was spent as a family at Llan Ffestiniog. Resulting from this a favourite game was '*Lord Newborough's Grave*' (which is on a hill outside Llan Ffestiniog) when David would play the Lord and lie under the bed while Joan, acting as nurse, tried to bring him back to life ! Ah ! growing up in the 1930s !

Tommy had his Company Office in the centre of Blaenau at the Caerblaidd Office. Edgar as Managing Director was in business with his father in painting and decorating as 'Atkinsons Deganwy, Ltd.', when at times they had over 200 employees.

## FORMATION AND TRAINING 1940

In 1940 the War Office decided to recruit four Quarrying Companies of the Royal Engineers for the production of stone in support of military activities. They asked Tommy Owen to recruit and command, with the rank of Captain, one of the Companies from the north Wales area, to be formed by July 1940. This he agreed to do and asked his friend, Edgar, to become Second in Command with the rank of Lieutenant. A copy of the poster used in the recruiting drive is attached.

The volunteers were first taken to Halifax for their initial military training. We, our father's family, spent part of the school autumn holiday, 1940, at the village of Shelf, between Halifax and Bradford. We remember well attending a Harvest Festival in the village church with local people and members of the Company, where the Company Choir under the conductorship of J. Lloyd Williams, as the regular conductor Sgt Woolford was unavailable, entertained the congregation. The calm before the storm !

Some of the members of the Company, whose names we can remember, although a few of these are later joiners, including those who were only part for the bomb disposal role, are:-

Capt. later Major Tommy W. Owen, Officer Commanding 1940 to 1942  
Capt. later Major Archie Freeburn, 2nd Officer Commanding 1942 to 1945 + ?  
Lt. later Capt Edgar C. Atkinson, Second in Command 1940 to 1945  
2/Lt. A. E. Smith (of Nant y Gamar Quarry, Llandudno)  
Lt. D. Marshall (Quarry owner of Halifax)  
Lt. Gray (Quarry Manager of Bangor)  
Lt. H. Spencer  
Lt. J. M. McCallum  
Lt. W. K. Turner (Taffy)  
Lt. Powell  
Lt. Talbot  
Lt. Griffiths  
Lt. Fry (of the Chocolate Family)  
Lt. Beer  
Lt. Carroll  
S/Sgt. C. E. Parker CQMS  
Sgt. J. Ellis Williams, Chief Clerk ( Schoolmaster and Author)  
Sgt. G. E. Woolford ( Company Choir Leader)  
Sgt. Bob Parry (of Chester)  
Sgt. Frank Jones  
Sgt. Mclure  
Cpl., later Sgt. R. Harvey (of Barclay's Bank, Llandudno)  
Sgt. R. Lloyd Jones (Section Sergeant)  
Cpl. B. E. Jones  
L/Cpl. Hugh E. Owen  
Sapper Ben Jones (Batman)  
Sapper H. C. Williams (Harry Bach)  
Sapper Douglas Francis  
Sapper ? M. Bowering

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Sapper Richard Jones (Tenor)  
Sapper A. J. C. Cannon  
Sapper ? Pritchard (Baritone)  
Sapper ? J. Edwards (Bass)

It had been the intention of the War Office originally to send the 854 Quarrying Company R.E. to France in support of the British Expeditionary Force. But before the Company could be formed, trained and despatched, France had fallen. The Blitz on London had begun and there was a desperate need for Bomb Disposal Units with explosives experienced men to deal with the unexploded German bombs falling. The Unit was hastily sent to London in this role. It was War Office policy that only volunteers should be used on bomb disposal. The Company volunteered to a man for the duty.



Edgar shortly after recruitment



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#### LONDON 1940/41

The Company was posted to London, billeted in the Mill Hill area, and was given unexploded bomb clearance duties in the Northwest Quadrant of the City.

In the first few months after the return of the British Expeditionary Force, few bombs were dropped in the United Kingdom and the urgency of dealing with unexploded bombs was not recognised. Little expertise in the work had been developed and the early procedures used were those of trial and error. By May, 1940, the situation had changed. The basic organisation of the Royal Engineers decided upon was the 'Bomb Disposal Section', consisting of one officer and fifteen other ranks, divided into two sub-sections, one for 'removal' and one for 'sterilisation'. Company Headquarters each to control twelve sections were set up. The four Quarrying Companies were included in those Royal Engineer Companies allocated to the work. Planning of the organisation came just in time, for intense bombing began in July 1940.

The 854 Quarrying Company was enlarged in numbers, both in men and in subalterns to cope with the work. Captain Tommy Owen was promoted to acting Major and Edgar Atkinson to acting Captain for this period.

There were incendiary bombs with an explosive device under the tail fin designed to explode when the fire had taken hold, to spread the flames and to deter would be extinguishing people from getting too close. There were the usual high explosive bombs of varying weights, some with delayed time fuses to enhance their danger. Many of the delay action fuses were operated by clockwork and stethoscopes were used to hear if they were still ticking, or if the disturbance caused by the digging work started them in action again. Some bombs had attachments to the fuse which caused the bomb to detonate if attempts were made to withdraw the fuse. But the worst type of bomb was the huge so called 'land mine', which came down by parachute and was capable of destroying whole streets when it went off. The above did not all go off. When they didn't, they had to be dug for, exposed, fuses extracted, bombs raised and transported to safe areas for detonation or destroyed in situ. The total number of bombs dealt with in the United Kingdom by all agencies up to the end of hostilities amounted to 45,441. It was extremely dangerous work and the men involved in clearance were treated as heroes - which they were. It is not surprising that such cold-blooded heroism, displayed under the eyes of the population, should have captured the admiration and affection of the public. It was an advantage to social life to be seen in the pub, club or party with the explosive bomb 'flashing' on the uniform sleeve and a cause to be 'treated'!

A more comprehensive description of Royal Engineer Bomb Disposal history is contained in <http://www.army.mod.uk/royalengineers/association/reabd/history.htm>

With the dwindling of the Blitz the Company reverted to its original role, size and ranks of personnel. Quarrying became their business as originally intended.

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Some of the Officers of  
854 Quarrying Company Royal Engineers  
When on Bomb Disposal  
In London 1940/41

Major T. W. Owen R.E. OC  
Captain E. C. Atkinson R.E. 2i/c  
Lt. Beer R.E.  
Lt. Carroll R.E.  
Lt. Fry R.E. ?  
Lt. Marshall R.E.  
Lt. Powell R.E.  
Lt. Talbot R.E.



## SCOTLAND 1941/43

### Gareloch

The first move was to Gareloch just north of Glasgow. Here the Company were billeted in the vicinity of Rossneath Castle, where they sometimes had the company of the first Royal Marine Commandos in training. The officers were accommodated in the Castle which had been the home of Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria. They were engaged in quarrying stone for construction of No 1 Military Port, Fastlane, subsequently abbreviated to Faslane. The Royal Engineer work was split between the Quarrying Company, Dock Construction Company and Dock Operating Company - showing the versatility of the Sappers.

There were substantial differences between quarrying for slate and stone. Slate required cutting and splitting. Stone needed to be crushed, graded and moved by mechanical shovel, tippers and dumpers, using hoppers and mobile belting (where available). But the Slate Quarrymen easily adapted to the changed procedures.

An interesting reference to the site is contained in the book "The Ferries To Anglesey", by T. Meirion Hughes, (no date), part of the series "Caernarfon's Yesterdays, Vol 2," which says :-

#### *"The Ferry's Last Years*

— In September, 1939, it was reported in the Minutes of the Council's General Purposes Committee that the 'Sussex Queen' needed to have a new 36 h.p. engine fitted, and on Oct. 27, it was minuted that she also needed a new shaft, and that the total cost of repair would be £304.17s. The Committee approved the expenditure, but one Councillor suggested that the Council should consider selling the boat.

It was May 1940, before the work on the boat was completed and before the Board of Trade finally licensed her to carry passengers, and from then on, references to the possibility of selling the 'Sussex Queen' appeared in the Minutes of the General Purposes Committee. In a meeting held on July 7, 1942, the Surveyor stated 'There is a possibility that a certain Ministry will buy her'.

On September 14, 1942, the same person announced that the Ministry of War Transport had requisitioned the 'Sussex Queen', and on Oct. 6, 1942 the Town Clerk presented a letter from the Ministry offering £1,200 for the launch.

The quotations from the Minutes of the General Purposes Committee disprove the rumour that was spread in the 1940s, that the 'Sussex Queen' had been used to evacuate soldiers from Dunkirk in May 1940.

Mr. David D. Jones, Caernarfon Pilot (Retd.) kindly submitted the following information regarding the launch after she left the town. In 1943, Mr. Jones, then a member of the Royal Engineers, was responsible for a Tug Boat named 'Widop' in Gareloch Head, Scotland, and was about to pull into a jetty, known as No 1 Military Port, FASTLANE, when he noticed a boat anchored nearby. She appeared familiar to him and, he mentioned it to her Skipper, who invited him on board. On close examination, he came across the name 'Sussex Queen' under the stern. It was most observant of him for, by then, the launch had been painted grey, as were most naval vessels. She was employed as a 'Fire Boat' to extinguish fires on craft in the vicinity of FASTLANE. Mr. Jones explained how the jetty came to be so named. It was from there that ships which sailed in the Russian Convoys started their journey."

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This all happened well after the 854 Quarrying Company had left the area, but if it had been earlier and the lads of the Company had known the local connection, maybe they would not have felt so far away from home. But at least the Scottish mountains took care of some of their 'hiraeth'.

Another comfort for the troops away from home was provided by the Entertainment National Service Association (E.N.S.A.). We are fortunate in having young Joan's Autograph Books, a hobby which was all the rage in those years. One of the entries from the Gareloch period is from the E.N.S.A. Vereylights Concert Party with signatures of the performers and counter signatures of 854 Company officers in February 1941.



The E.N.S.A. Verelight's  
Concert Party

Babette	-	Dancer
S. M. Rosedale	-	Manager's wife
Byron Gordon	-	Comedienne
Frances Light	-	Soprano
Henry Arthur	-	Piano Accordion
Charles King	-	Light Tenor
Billy Brown	-	Comedian
George Weston	-	"

Dan Mackinnon <sup>Pianist</sup>  
 Bernard Collier <sup>Banjoist</sup>  
 Thorold Rosedale - Manager

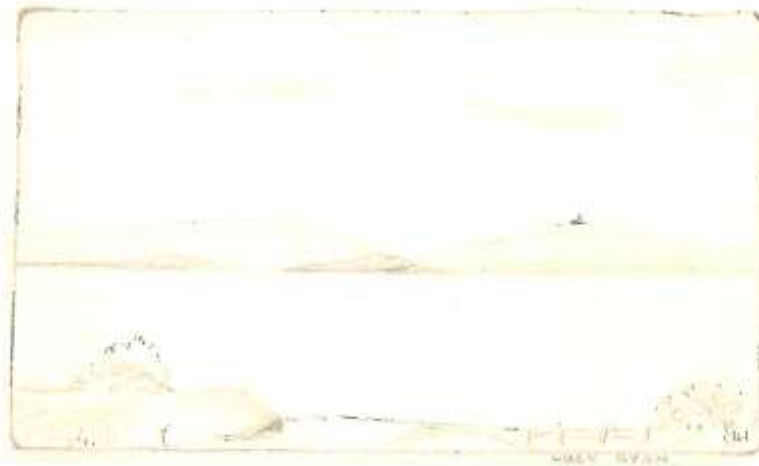
D. H. MacCall LT. R.E.  
 J. E. Smith Lt. R.E.  
 W. D. Wells, Major, R.E.  
 Capt. C. C. C. R.E.  
 854 (QUARRYING) COY. R.E.

Rosemeath Castle  
 Rosemeath  
 Duinbarlonshire  
 1st Feb. 4. 1941.

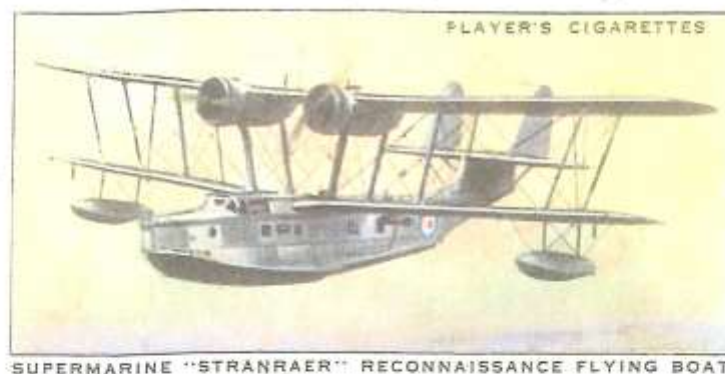
### Stranraer

On completion of the quarrying work at Gareloch the Company moved to Stranraer (Cairnryan) where No 2 Military Port was to be built. At the time of building the Port the Loch was used as an air base for sea planes. Sunderland, Catalina, London and Stranraer aircraft were always to be seen there. The Port was in post war years converted to become the present ferry terminal.

The Company were quartered in a Nissen Hut camp at Drummockloch on the east bank of Loch Ryan. A sketch of the view over the Loch made by our father at the time is reproduced and also pictures of the less well know flying boats, London and Stranraer. It was here that we family spent two school summer holidays with our father in 1941 and 1942.



SARO "LONDON" FLYING BOAT



It was also here that Tommy and Edgar met Major Bill Evans, Royal Engineers, with wife and daughter Eluned. Major Evans, son of Doctor Carey Evans of Ffestiniog renown, had been a time serving soldier. Before the war he had lived in retirement at Pont yr Afon Gam where Eluned lived as a small child and where he planted the trees close to the building, still to be seen. At Cairnryan they lived in a cottage far up in the hills not unlike Pont yr Afon Gam. Perhaps it reminded them of home. We are still in contact with Eluned who now lives in Dumfries.

Life in an isolated army camp gave time to reflect on nature and develop personal talents as illustrated by Edgar's sketch across Loch Ryan. He also composed the following poem there:-

*Remote Camp (Cairn Ryan, March 1941)*

*I walked this e'en along the plain grey road  
That skirts this camping place of banished men,  
And standing near the waters edge alone I wondered;  
That so near this ants nest of pitchforked humanity  
Why not another mortal was in sight.  
The sun, - tonight a brilliant crimson ball  
Had slowly sunk from sight across the loch,  
And had bequeathed for all to see  
A multi coloured sky as no artist yet could venture to record.  
  
The silence was intense, despite the gentle ripples on the stones,  
Rich golden ripples whispering at my feet.  
  
No mortal did I say ? No living thing could here be seen to move  
Yet here was wondrous beauty that all men in reach might see  
And marvel at, and gorge themselves upon  
And satiation could be never reached.*

*And as I watched the ripples turn to purple  
A thrush piped and trilled out his evensong  
And where silence was before he had for chorus  
The cries of sea fowl up to now concealed,  
And birdsong spread, and filled the air with music,  
Rich mellow song that satisfied the soul.*

*And as I watched and listened here enraptured  
With nature's windows opened to my soul  
The thought persisted that God's humbler creatures  
Could perceive these wonders and rejoice  
Whilst man in his dense blindness revelled thoughtlessly,  
And opened not his eyes to finer things.*

The troops were further entertained by an E.N.S.A. Concert Party on Xmas Day in 1941. The autographs of the participants in the "Singers and Players" Show also appear in Joan's autograph book. Shortly after this the Manager of the Show, Hubert Bath composed music for the film 'Love Story', titled 'Cornish Rhapsody'; one of the most beautiful and loved pieces of the time.

Life for the Company was not all work and no play. They had an active football team, boxing team and of course a choir. They made quite a name for themselves giving concerts locally and even BBC Wales broadcasts. A reflection of these choral activities is contained in the book 'Babi Sam', published on the life of BBC Wales broadcasting personality Sam Jones, edited by Dyfnallt Morgan in 1985:-

*"Yr S.M. Cyntaf*

*gan Victor Williams.*

*Dyna, fwy neu lai, oed y sefyllfa ym Mangor pa dorodd yr ail ryfel byd allan. Am gyfnod, rhaglenni o Lundain yn unig a ddarlledid ond daeth Bangor yn fyw unwaith eto pan gyrhaeddodd yr uned adloniant ysgafn o Lundain ac ymagrtrefi yma dros dro, ond nid oeddwn i'n rhan o'r bwrwm hwnnw. Erbyn hynny roeddwn i yn Stranraer yn yr Alban, yn aelod o'r Llu Awyr ac yn hedfan mewn Sunderland Flying Boats. Un diwrnod dyma ddod wyneb a Sam Jones ar y stryd. "What are you doing here?" medda fo wrtha i. "Well I'm stationed here," medda fi, "What on earth are you doing here?" Yr oedd yno i recordio cyngerdd i'w darlledu gan griw o hogia 'Stiniog a oedd mewn quarrying company yn y fyddin mewn gwersyll cyfagos, a John Ellis Williams yn Sgt. Major arnynt. Wel am noson! A dyna ddechre cyfnod hapus iawn o deithio gyda'r bois i lawer lle diaffordd yn cynnal cyngerddau."*

( Translation:-

*"By now I was in Stranraer in Scotland, a member of the R.A.F. and flying in Sunderland Flying Boats. One day I came face to face with Sam Jones on the street. "What are you doing here?", he said to me. "Well I'm stationed here", I replied, "but what on earth are you doing here?". He was there to record a concert to be broadcast by a crew of men from Ffestiniog who were in a quarrying company of the army in a nearby camp and J. Ellis Williams was their Sergeant Major. Well, what a night! That was the beginning of a very happy period travelling with the boys and holding concerts".)*







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J. Ellis Williams was able to exercise his way with words in giving the choir publicity for their concerts. He was also a regular correspondent to 'Y Rhedegydd', the local newspaper in the Ffestiniog area, from Scotland. He was to leave the Company before their next move, when transferred on appointment as 'Drama Advisor, London Region'; but not before completing two poems to Joan in her autograph book.

*Who makes the chapel organ groan  
And laugh and sing and shout and moan  
Till music tingles every bone ?  
This Joan !*

*So here's more power to her hands,  
That she may soon conduct big bands  
And be renown in many lands,  
This Joan !*

*With all good wishes. J.E.W. Sgt RE. 2,8.41*

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*Why ask me to write my name,  
Joan dear  
On a scroll so rich with fame,  
Joan dear ?  
When I wandered through your book,  
Scores of times I paused to look.  
And I'm absolutely "shook",  
Joan dear -  
so shaken that all I can do is to warn you  
that one day you too will have  
autograph hunters chasing you*

*J. Ellis Williams. 1942*

J. Ellis Williams was not the only poet in the Company. Other budding rhymers in Joan's album were:-

*How sweet it is to hear the Bells,  
That call us to our pews.  
But sweeter still to stay in Bed  
And have another Snooze.*

*Sapper Richard Jones  
Stranraer, August, 1941*

*I know not what in this book to pin,  
But to please your daddy I must save my skin.  
I can think of nothing that will rhyme with Joan  
But I think of daddy and I then write 'moan'.*

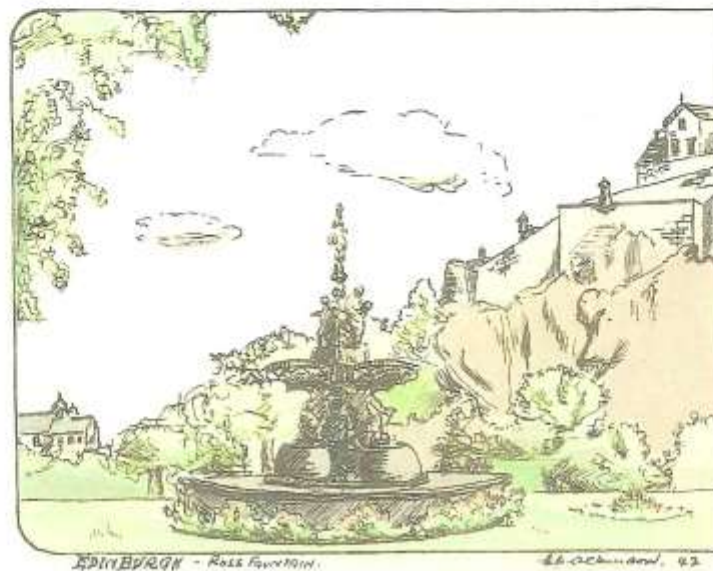
*All the best wishes and a pleasant holiday in Scotland.  
Cpl. B. E. Jones. 3.8.41*

*Never make love in a cornfield  
For even the corn has ears.*

*L/Cpl Hugh E. Owen 12.11.41*

The Company made three or four radio choir concerts from Scotland, in a series titled 'Private Jones Entertains'. They proved very popular, to such an extent that a letter to a national newspaper reads:- "*We were privileged recently to hear an unknown, but exquisite, tenor voice in 'Private Jones Entertains'. The singer was a soldier from Blaenau Ffestiniog in Wales. Before this lovely voice disappears, perhaps for ever, in the maelstrom of war, may we be permitted to hear it again in one of your programmes ?*" I. L. James, Liverpool, 16. All the concerts were given live with the exception of one which was recorded. We have a copy of this recording

While based at Stanraer the Company had a refresher course in military training and for this they went to Edinburgh. We family also went there for this period which gave us a chance to see the lovely city. While there the Choir also gave a concert with great success. It too gave Edgar an opportunity to exercise his talent in Joan's album with a painting of Princess Street Gardens.





It was at Stranraer that the Company lost their founding father, Tommy W. Owen, who died on 30 March 1942. He is buried in Blaenau Ffestiniog Cemetery together with his parents and brother. It was also the end of an almost lifelong friendship between himself and our father. There was about this time a proposal from the War Office to move our father from the 854 Quarrying Company to another Unit. This would have meant that there would have been no original local officer remaining - a definite blow to the morale of the lads. Under the influence of David Lloyd George the proposed transfer was cancelled.

The death of the first Commanding Officer was a real loss to the Company - his role, age, experience and connection with their home locality had given them a father figure as leader. But the war had to go on and his replacement was Captain (later Major) Archie Freebairn of Scottish quarrying experience. Archie was cousin to David McCallum, leader of the Llandudno Pier Orchestra when it was under Dr. Malcolm Sargent and was uncle to actor David McCallum Junior, (famed for 'The Man From Uncle' series, etc.)

The work at Cairnryan came to an end. What next ?



*A. L. Freebairn R.E.*

*J. M. Callum, Lieut R.E.      Lieut. Freebairn R.E.*

*E. P. Ackemison R.E.*

854 Co. R.E.

STRANRAER 18/1/43

Autograph Book Talent From Scotland And North Africa



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## NORTH AFRICA 1943

Operation 'Torch', the Allied invasion of Vichy French occupied North Africa began in November 1942. American forces direct from the USA landed in Moroccan Atlantic ports as the Western Task Force. American forces from Britain landed in Algerian Oman as the Central Task Force. The British, as Eastern Task Force landed at Algiers and quickly moved to take over Tunisia. Fighting Romel's forces on his Western flank, the Allies eventually won their surrender in May 1943.

The 854 Quarrying Company, Royal Engineers, may not have known their destination when they embarked as part of the logistics back up for the North African campaign, but they would have had a good idea from their khaki drill uniforms issued, which were used in the Mediterranean area. The sea journey in Winter, extended into the Atlantic to avoid enemy submarines and at convoy speed, would not have been pleasant. Our father writes, not quoting dates or locations for censorship reasons:-

*"At Sea*

*I hope you are not worrying about me unduly, because as usual I am in the pink !  
Marvellous appetite and food is good and plentiful.  
No sea-sickness although perpetual motion is no longer a mystery and I have got quite used to walking down corridors and stairs which come more than half way to meet you. I don't know when you will get this and I am not allowed to date it, but I will let you know as soon as I can, directly I reach dry land. Writing isn't easy under these conditions - rather like writing in a bus on a switchback. All the boys are in good spirits and looking forward to new adventures. I myself am as near to being excited as I ever get and my only regret is being parted from you all for a time. However the news is good and the end of the war may come sooner than we expect. So here's hoping".*

As soon as their landfall was known to the family, Edgar's sister Edith did some research on Algeria :-

*"Algiers: chief town of Algeria (ancient Barbary).*

*In the past many nations tried to subdue Algeria; the Spanish occupied it once, then the Romans, Turks, Moors etc. Today the French are in occupation.*

*Algiers has a mixed population of Jews, Arabs, Berbers, Mozabites and Europeans.*

*The principal thoroughfares show French influence - electric lights, motors etc.*

*Indeed France has laboured for nearly a century to Europeanise it - with road building, modern inventions, changing the old names of different quarters to French like Boulevard Victor Hugo, Boulevard Bon Accueil etc.*

*Spiritually, however, Algeria remains obstinately alien to Europe.*

*Down the ancient alleyways the old life goes on; the little booths of the shopkeepers, the veiled women of the harem, as in the stories in the 'Arabian Nights' advertise Mohammed is all powerful. The Berbers speak the same language today as they spoke in the days of the Phoenicians and Romans.*

*Religion, too, has always made the Jews a separate and exclusive community.*

*In the valley and mountain gorges the people of Algeria have preserved the purity of their race and language in a remarkable degree.*



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*The cathedral of Algiers stands in Government Square. It used to be called the Mosque Jama-El-Jedid*

*The building shows a moorish influence (or Spanish really, since the Moors were a body of Spanish rebels expelled from Spain who overran North Africa).*

*The town is built on the side of a hill and is white in appearance for coolness as a protection from the fierce sun."*

Notes made from Edgar's first impressions of Africa on March 20, 1943, made by Edith make interesting reading:-

*"Frogs as big as your boot and baby tortoises, just finished their winter sleep.*

*Fossils of ferns etc. in the quarry.*

*Locusts. Green and black snakes. The first scorpion. Ravens, storks, vultures, porcupines, bats, snakes, lizards, locusts, butterflies - and the ruins of an old Roman arena and two Roman cities with marble pillars and marble quarries near.*

*Arab children:- curly hair, big eyes and white teeth. Don't go to school. No school for them. Most of the children herd goats and sheep and cattle in the valleys.*

*A hot spring at the bottom of the valley and several more in the vicinity - also some sulphur springs which the natives consider very beneficial. Some of the roads are very narrow, running round the mountainsides. Wonderful scenery - most of the trees are olives, cypresses, date palms, orange trees, lemon trees and cork oak. These latter are stripped of their bark up to 12 or 14 feet by the Arabs and it is loaded pannier fashion on the backs of donkeys and stacked by the roadside for transporting to ports where it is shipped away to make corks for bottles, bathmats, linoleum etc. The bare part of the tree is then coated with some preservative and in a few years the bark grows on it again.*

*Soon the hot dry season will begin and then there will not be a single shower of rain for from 6 to 8 months."*

Another letter from Edgar to his father before the end of the fighting gives an insight, as far as censorship allows, into life of the Company before the fighting ceased.

*"British North African Forces.*

*March 11th 1943.*

*After a lapse of seven weeks the first mail from home has arrived and what a thrill ! About twenty letters ! None from you yet but am sure there are one or two on the way. Bet tells me you were looking very fit when she last saw you so I assume you are as usual keeping the old flag flying. I hope you are not being unduly bothered with business matters. Airmail and airgraphs are about to be established to and from here so I will be able to keep in closer touch - I hope. I hope by now you will have received my previous letters.*

*Conditions here are not at all bad for us, and as you can imagine I have found much to interest me. I have got a book for you all about the country we are in and will send it to you as soon as this is possible. It is well illustrated and I know you will find it interesting. Letters, of course, are given precedence over parcels, so it may be some time before you get it. We get hot days and cold nights. Oranges were plentiful but their season is about finishing. Dates, figs and eggs are plentiful and later there will be abundant supplies of grapes, peaches, apricots and almonds. All these grow here in abundance.*



*Bird life includes storks, vultures, ravens, goldfinches, larks, pied wagtails, lapwings. Have also seen locusts, and many new kinds of lovely butterflies and this is still winter with the rainy season not yet ended. Have seen a lot of almond and cherry blossom and blossoms of other unidentified fruit trees. Date palms and all kinds of cacti abound.*

*We also have porcupines, snakes, camels, bats, and arabs - with sheep, goats, donkeys and mules. The arabs are mostly in rags and short of food and clothing through the prevailing conditions and the German - Italian Armistice Commission which has stripped the country bare.*

*I have finished with office work and am a Works Officer with responsibility for stone supply over a wide area. I employ a lot of arabs, and in my main quarry take a personal interest in them and have tried something on them which they haven't previously experienced - decent treatment. They have responded and work as well as my own men - better than some, and I get daily gifts of eggs and milk although they are so poor. The eggs I eat with the help of my batman but the milk is very stealthily and secretly poured into the whatsit because they milk cows, sheep, goats, donkeys and possibly dogs wives. Well its past bedtime and getting cold so good night Dad and all the best to yourself and Edie. Am in the pink and hope you are all the same".*

It did not take long for Edgar, with his ear for music, to catch on to the song of Romel's Afrika Corps, taken over by Montgomery's Eighth Army, equally loved by both battling Forces, 'Lily Marlene'. He got Lt. Spencer to write out sheet music of the ballad which he sent to Joan. It was soon ringing out to the sound of Joan's piano playing in Llandudno, well before it became known generally in Britain. Lt. Spencer had obvious talent judging from his musical knowledge and his painting as displayed in Joan's Autograph Book.

A letter to Edgar's father from Padre W.G.Humphries, who had been pastoring to the Company and who had been repatriated on ill health grounds gives an insight to Company activity that would normally not have passed the censor if it had been written from a combat area. Although it is dated 29 Sept. 1943, it tells of events much earlier in the year:-

*"Hamilton, Lanarkshire.*

*Dear Mr. Atkinson,*

*Edgar has no doubt told you that I was homeward bound and that you would probably be hearing from me. Well, here I am. I have been home almost three weeks during which time we slipped away into the Western Highlands for a very delightful holiday. And I believe we stole the only sequence of good days the West has known since June. Now I am enjoying a quiet, indefinite spell at home. The authorities do not seem to be in any great hurry to get into touch with me, and I have no special desire to disturb the even tenor of their ways.*

*And how are you all keeping these days ? We imagine that Llandudno is one of the few spots that is being favoured by the sun this year. At least, he very seldom ventures north, according to all accounts, and then only for an odd day trip. That must be one of the results of the cancellation of all excursion fares ! At all events, all our best wishes are with you all.*

*It was a distinct pleasure to come across Edgar overseas. I was very fortunate indeed in dropping in among 'the old gang' from Stranraer. Edgar had two spells with us in*

the Mess whilst some of his boys enjoyed the sights of Bone. Did you know that Edgar was 'up country' at Medges-El-bab (commonly called Medjes) beyond Sukaras, and about 100 miles east of Bone? But, even if it is news, I know you will mention no names to Edgar. He seems to be wonderfully happy in his out-station and surprises everybody with his ingenious ways of providing the boys with a social life all their own. Despite the climate, he was looking as fit as ever: if anything, perhaps a little slimmer but only a little. Did you hear of Edgar's prowess at the darts when he struck a bull's eye on the bulb hanging above the board? We certainly had a happy time together. And did you ever hear of Edgar's detachment making a haul of Jerry prisoners? The detachment was lying in a quarry about 200 yards off the main road. There was a thundering noise through the night as the tanks rolled round the main road - 854 never worried: just thought our boys were getting busy. An armoured car swept up the side road into the quarry, but that didn't disturb the sentry. It continued its career into the camp and up to the face of the quarry. Meantime the alarm had been given and Edgar and Co. followed that car to find it was a Jerry armoured car that had come to a stop and they had the pleasure of taking the Jerries prisoners. And meantime, the Jerry tanks continued to thunder down the road because it was the night of Jerry's breakthrough our lines. But nothing else happened. Edgar is certainly having a good time and is not missing an opportunity of acquiring information that will serve him in good stead when he leads a conducted party through North Africa after the war.

My own health did not stand up to the African climate. I have always been a bad subject for heat - even in a Scottish Summer, and you can imagine the effect of the Equatorial heat of North Africa. All things considered and though it was by no means happy at the thought of leaving the R.E.s., it was considered wise to bring me back home and there is every possibility that I shall be back into 'civvies' towards the end of the year. At present my days are well occupied in establishing contact with the homes of the boys. I have rather a formidable list of letters to write. Still, I am hoping that even a line from one who was longside of them will convey its own happy reassurance. So here is a wee note to let you know one or two little bits of information that might not find their way into Edgar's letters. And now I must be for writing to Taffy Turner's mother. How we teased Taffy!

With every kind regard. Yours very sincerely, W.G.Humphries (Padre)."



Lt. E. C. Atkinson, Capt A. Freebairn, Lt. W. K. Turner in Africa



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After the battle was won the tone of the letters change as can be seen from another letter from Edgar to his father :-

*"British North African Forces.*

*22 May 1943.*

*Was very glad to receive your letter dated March 14th. Ordinary mail takes from 4 to 8 weeks to get here. I don't know how long my ordinary letters take to get home. We are only allowed to send one Airmail letter a week and this I always send to Bet. The airmails seem to get across in from 8 to 12 days. I am keeping very fit and of course burnt brown - face, neck, arms and knees.*

*You will have been rejoicing over the news of the great victory here - but that will be pretty stale news by the time this reaches you. Since it ended here the place has been inundated with German and Italian prisoners. Some of my drivers have been at it for days helping to bring them in in lorry loads. Many have been driving their own lorries filled with Jerries and Macaronies. We are of course all wondering where next? I sent nine of my men to take part in the big victory march through Tunis. It seems to have been a very thrilling spectacle.*

*Bet tells me she has been passing on my letters to you so you will be pretty well informed of my activities up to date. Your surmise of four days sailing to get here would be about right in peace time, but well out under present circumstances, and of course I am several hundred miles from the city of which I sent home postcard views on first arrival. (Bone. D.A.).*

*This is a great country for the naturalist - bird, plant, animal and last but not least insect life ! I'm afraid I've reverted to type and my tent always contains cigarette tins or glasses or match boxes with some livestock or other - the batman never opens any kind of receptacle in case a huge grasshopper or cricket or locust or lizard hops out. Interest in outdoor life has been a great standby for me, as I am the only officer here with my tent to myself, practically nothing to read and there is , of course, no other entertainment or amusement than my men can make for themselves.*

*However we are very fully occupied 7 days a week so the days go by very quickly although it seems an eternity since I was home, and as I operate over a big area am always visiting one or other detachment of my section it prevents monotony".*

Censorship restrictions now started to be eased as can be seen from Edgar's letter to his father of 29 May:-

*"Your letter posted 27 April arrived safely yesterday. Ordinary mail takes about a month, airmail 10 or 12 days. Whatever you may think your letters are always extremely interesting to me and I am very glad to get them. With the ending of festivities (!) here in Tunisia and consequent relaxation of the Censorship regulations it is permissible to mention place names. I am about 70 miles from Tunis but was able to send nine of my men to represent the unit in the big formal occupation of Tunis which will have been showing I suppose in all the home cinemas.*

*Speculation is rife on where we shall go from here but of course I don't know. Am glad Edie finds something of interest also in my letters. I am the only officer here with 50 soldiers and about 100 arabs working for me and am actually on the site of an old Roman city with ruins sticking up still. The arabs interest me very much and you will have read some of my observations in the letters to Bet and the children. They have, like most people, many admirable qualities and some (many in fact) the reverse. I have treated them with fair consideration and they have responded well and are very*

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friendly disposed to me in consequence. They bring me daily gifts in spite of their poverty. Eggs - ( I pass these on to the cookhouse, and have as many as 38 in my box at any one time), artichokes, lettuce, onions, and milk (daily). The milk goes into the slops as their ideas of hygiene are rather primitive and cleanliness isn't one of their virtues - besides as they milk every possible animal (goats, sheep, cows and donkeys to my knowledge) the fact that they all keep a lot of dogs rather puts me off. There is one settlement about 200 yards from my tent and several more in the hills above me (mud huts with thatched roofs). Enquiring from them this morning the cause of a terrific hullabaloo in a hill settlement about one and a half miles from me in the hills including a small bonfire I was informed that there was a feast on and it would continue tonight (this I fancy was rather unique) and I was invited to attend. As, however, their cattle, goats, wives, hens and dogs all live with them in their 'ghourbis' and my stomach not being what it was, I tactfully declined - well I could go on till further orders about arabs, but must stop as I want to tell you of something which to anyone like ourselves - interested in natural history - is a real eye opener to the marvels of nature.

Insect life here abounds and ants are to be found everywhere. The commonest kind in and around my encampment are a fund of interest in themselves. The sizes of them (with my names) are 1. large - supervisors - 2. medium - workers- and 3. small - police. These are just relative sizes. 1 and 3 only work occasionally. You find the three kinds in any one colony, and it is commonplace to see a distinct path from the hole in the ground (main nest entrance) actually worn down and trodden hard for distances of 20 to 30 yards, where they are all carrying seeds etc. into the hole. Today I dug into one and found a network of underground tunnels, each leading to a dead end in which were packed an incredible number of varied seeds, small petals etc., and outside each colony entrance a foot or so away were great piles of husks and kernels which are separated from the seeds down the holes and carried out again. One colony has its main entrance just inside my tent, but as their track leads outside I haven't disturbed them. They always seem to be working - early morning to dusk except for the three or four hottest hours of the day when there are very few to be seen. Now here's the remarkable thing that has kept me thinking for the last 24 hours. Last night on putting out my light there was a glow worm in the tent (a not unusual occurrence) and on shining my flash I found her glow part was hanging over my ants nest entrance and the workers were busy carrying stuff in whilst she was lighting up the scene ! That, of course, could easily be a coincidence, so I went outside but there was only one other glow worm in the vicinity about 20 yards away. Going along with my torch I found she was also standing quite still illuminating the entrance to an ants nest, where the ants were busily working. Tonight a glow worm is again on duty in my tent at the front door of the ants nest, and going outside have found several others doing exactly the same thing. In each case the ants are hard at work ! It is now twenty minutes to midnight - a starry night. The glow worms are rather bigger than ours and a shiny light brown in colour (ours are darker if I remember rightly). The more one considers these things the more one marvels at the works of the Creator. It beats me ! Since writing this a praying mantis has joined my menagerie. At the moment she is working off her nasty temper under an inverted tumbler. She has bitten off the head of another of her specie who had the misfortune to be put with her temporarily in a cigarette tin.



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*Have got a very elaborate German mosquito net and sundry other Axis gadgets - the place has been swarming with prisoners and our trucks have been helping to bring 'em in !"*

Edgar's sister Edith made notes from one of his letters to Bet, his wife. He says:-  
*"We have caught the thief who stole the kitbags and binoculars and have recovered some of the stuff, and I think we shall probably get it all. He has been sitting very disconsolately in the quarry all day with 87 pairs of arab eyes watching he didn't bolt and waiting for the Gendarmes to collect him. My arabs caught him themselves. I'm afraid their method of getting his confession was a little crude but quite effective. They assured him I would shoot him on my return to camp and picked him a nice site for a grave and gave him a pick and shovel and set him digging it. He started all right but after a few spadefuls his nerve broke down and he spilled the beans. They have been very hangdog and ashamed since the theft and their usual amiable grins for me in the morning had disappeared but tonight they were full of glee when the bad lad was collected and it was as they had previously assured me 'none of them' but a stranger from a settlement 12 miles away right up in the hills".*

Edith made another note from a letter of Edgar's mainly for the children dated September 9th 1943 :-

*"No 1 Canvas Grove, Africa.*

*The trouble about my post war novelty farm is that the stock is arriving before I am ready for it. For instance, there's Tinker, Blinker and Stinker. Nice lads, all of them, but I simply haven't the housing space or conveniences for them yet, so their future is uncertain. They came to me this morning as a gift from a large deputation of the relations of an arab I sent to jail yesterday for stealing. All their legs were tied together when they arrived - not the Deputation's legs of course - I mean Tinker, Blinker and Stinker's legs. I wish your advice could arrive in time to tell me what you think I should do about them, but you don't write often and then by surface mail so I'll have to think it out and decide for myself. All I have done up to now is to christen them and give them food and drink. I'm quite puzzled about it, because as well as those three, I've got Domino tied to the tent pole. Now I know you'd love Domino. His first two names are Double Blank because he's black all over and quite the nicest kid I've ever met out here. When I want him I don't shout 'Double Blank'. I just call him Domineo for short. When we had a big blast in the quarry this morning he got the wind up and broke the string round his neck and bounded off up the mountainside to join a lot more kids who were running away. But when the noise died down they wouldn't have anything to do with him as he was a strange kid from a village about 10 or 12 miles away and they were pushing him about all over the place till my batman Ben Jones rescued him. Up to now he has only eaten two pieces of blotting paper and a few old envelopes and the rinds of a few melons, but I think he is a bit homesick. I understand his kind are passionately fond of lurching off old socks and cigar stumps. He is, of course, a four month old baby billy goat and the other three are cockerels. In the daytime I can't have them wandering all over the camp and at night they are used to going to sleep with the arabs in their mud huts. But really, besides myself there is only room in my camp bed for a few fieldmice and even if I bring Domino into the tent he will probably eat my socks before morning. But if I leave my menagerie outside they will just attract the foxes and jackals and then the sentry will fire at them and keep waking me up. You will see it is quite a problem What would*

*you do about it ? By the way the gifts of chicken and kid from the relatives were not tokens of gratitude for sending the man to prison, but to try to get me to get him out again. I told them the matter was out of my hands and now in the hands of the French Gendarmes and Arab Police, but they left the gifts just the same. Perhaps because it was a long way to carry them back".*

Where next ? everyone asked. The answer was - Italy !





## ITALY 1943 - 45

The Allies launched their attacks on mainland Europe across the Mediterranean on 9th Sept. 1943 at Taranto on the southern coast of Italy and Salerno on the western coast just below Naples. On the 10th Sept. attacks were made by Patton's American 7th Army forces on the southwest coast of Sicily and Montgomery with the British 8th Army on the southeast. By the 17th Aug. the last of the Axis Forces withdrew across the Messina Straits and Sicily had fallen to the Allies. The Italians had in the meantime negotiated an armistice with the Allies on the 3rd Sept., which was announced on the 8th Sept. The German Army occupied Rome on the 10th Sept.

By the 25th Sept. the Allies had advanced to the Naples - Bari Line. Naples fell on the 1st Oct. and Kesselring fought a retreat to the Winter Position (the Gustav Line) by the 4th Nov. via the Volturno Line, Barbara Line (2 Nov), just south of Monte Cassino. The Germans destroyed all bridges and damaged roads and railways as they withdrew northwards. A typical feature of the work of the Royal Engineers was the building of a Bailey Bridge at Battipaglia near Salerno in September. Allied success relied greatly upon Support Services. Quarried stone for road, bridge and rail work was an essential part of this support.

Progress northwards was extremely difficult because of the nature of the country - mountains and rivers. The best known example of the problem was at Monte Cassino which took from Jan. to May. to solve. But gradually the Allies advanced with a beach head at Anzio (22nd Jan 1944) with Rome being taken on 4th June. Movement north continued to the Trasimene Line by the 20th June and the Arno Line at Florence by the 4th Aug., and the Gothic Line south of Bologna by 15th Aug.

At this point some Allied Forces were withdrawn to take part in Operation Anvil, landing in the south of France. In Italy the British advanced along the east coast capturing Rimini by the 21st Sep. and Ravenna by Jan. 1945. The Americans advanced in the centre of the country to just south of Bologna by the 27th Oct. The front line remained here during the winter until the Genghis Khan Line was over-run in Apr. 1945 when American Forces broke out into the Po Valley, reaching Verona on the 26th Apr. The British moved along the eastern flank past Venice on the 26th Apr. and on to Trieste by the 2nd May. On the 29th Apr. the Germans asked for an armistice which became effective on the 2nd May 1945.

During the whole of the Italian Campaign the need for Royal Engineer Services was paramount. The main functions of the Corps were minefield breaching and clearance, road and airfield repairs, bridge construction, watersupply, bridgehead and docks maintenance. For most of these activities quarried stone would have been needed. 854 Quarrying Company would have been a very busy unit. The Company would have been broken down into detachments and local labour and facilities used as far as possible. Exact locations at which they were based are difficult to identify because of censorship rules. Some of the names of places which have been mentioned in post war conversation are:-

Salerno  
Foggia

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Naples  
Nocera Inferiore  
Perugia  
Rimini  
Florence  
Amalfi (Rest & Recuperation Centre)  
Isle of Ischia (British R & R)  
Capri (American R & R)  
Rome  
Avellino

Edgar's first indication of a change of location dated 29 Dec 43 says,  
*"Please note change of address - no longer B.N.A.F. (British North Africa Force), but C.M.F. (Central Mediterranean Force), as our travels have brought us back to Europe".*

One other change is noticeable, and this is that the War Office has decided that the Officer Commanding the Company shall hold the rank of Major and the Second in Command shall be Captain.

On 1 Feb. 1944 Edgar writes to his Father:-

*"Have just received a long surface letter from Joan enclosing half a dozen drawings and paintings for me to see and she seems to be shaping pretty well at this. Music, Art and English seem to be her strongest subjects. She will be fifteen in June and by then I shall have been away from the family for nearly four years !"*

On 6 April 1944 he writes :-

*"Some of the airmails are coming very quickly now - one from Bet arrived within five days of posting ! Am glad to say that my move to H.Q. has not confined me to the Orderly Room as I thought it might - I still have to go out supervising the administration of Sections and Detachments which takes me over hundreds of miles every week with just an occasional day of Orderly Room work.  
Well, in my travels I see much of interest and just now the countryside is beginning to look really marvellous - excluding of course the hundreds of square miles which have been covered by the volcano with lava, ash and clinkers. It is a snorter when you have to wear a tin hat for protection from falling clinker varying in size from hazel nuts to small apples and that 15 miles from where they were shooting up. Ash has of course reached a distance of 200 miles, but I expect you have been reading the full details. It was a wonderful sight by day and night. Well, out of the track of this there are now hundreds of acres of wonderful fruit blossom - white and pink and this with lovely blue sky and snow covered peaks and picturesque villages present some lovely sights. Unfortunately when you reach the villages you find lots of rubble and debris, but this is war. The Ities are very chastened and realise to the full how they have been led up the garden path.*

*Last year I sent some Army Newspapers to Arthur Harris to add to his collection and put him in touch with the Editor of the Chief Army Official Newspaper out here - who published an account of his collection of amateur mags. As a result he has had many*



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additions to his collection and a few days ago I got a letter from him and a bundle of periodicals.

*Things seem to be going all right with my little family at Maes Glas - at this time I suppose they will be breaking up for the Easter holidays. I don't suppose there will be the pre-war streams of motor traffic going into Llandudno for Easter".*

He is not able to divulge locations because of censorship restrictions, but at this time the Company H.Q. was based at Nocera Inferiore, close to Pompeii and Naples with the eruption of nearby Vesuvius in 1944 causing lots of problems. This town was the home of the Company Interpreter, Gino Battipaglia. Edgar befriended him and his family, giving his sweet ration to the children and Gino became a pen-friend of Joan. After the war he resumed his career in law and when we visited Naples in 1956 Edgar met up with him again. Joan also met him in 1985.

On 18 May Edgar writes:-

*"I bought myself a Neapolitan mandolin a week or two ago, but shall only play it by ear. I hope it never meets the same fate as did my banjo in France. I got this instrument in Naples and it has a very good tone. Quite pure on the top notes. There is a very charming letter from Gino on the way to the children and a few stamps".*

Not only did Edgar equip himself with a mandolin (which now sits on the piano in Joan's lounge), but he also found sheet music for the song 'Return To Sorrento' which he sent to Joan. The lovely ballad was soon ringing out from Edgars family home long before it became popular after the war. It was like a link between two parts of the family, so far apart and yet joined together by a beautiful melody.

While the Company was stationed in Italy, probably about this time, Richard Jones, (the marvellous tenor), had the temerity to go and visit the world's greatest tenor, Beniamino Gigli at his home. He was invited in and given a free singing lesson ! - by now Gigli, who was suspected of having been a Mussolini supporter was trying to ingratiate himself with the Allies !

On 15 Sep. Edgar writes:-

*"Am sending you a few rather nice pictures of Rome - a city I have seen a lot of lately. It is very beautiful and except for the outskirts not damaged by the war. I have sent some similar ones to Maes Glas. We are all waiting very patiently for the 'cease-fire'. Hitler seems to be playing against his own side now, as the longer he keeps it going the greater the destruction and loss of life in his own country - with no very obvious advantage to themselves. I hope by the time this reaches you it will all be over although there is no telling to what extremes the Nazis may go in their fanaticism.*

*This is a very beautiful Autumn Sunday - comfortably cool but sunny. On the hill overlooking me is a typically picturesque Italian 'hill top' town. They always remind me of the 'Gibbs Dentifrice' Ivory Castle towns - mediaeval - with their campaniles and towers outlined against the blue sky. I must admit (regretfully) that even Wales must take second place against the loveliness of most of Italy - and I have seen quite a*

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*lot of it ! What a pity such a lovely country should be inhabited by such a scaly lot of scoundrels as have been gathering and battenning on it for years. The people are of course undergoing severe hardship all the time and this will increase as the winter weather approaches. We are all wondering where we will go next, but of course I do not know and couldn't tell you if I did. By tonight's radio it seems we are making big paratroop landings in Holland. Well - the sooner it's over the better".*

We think this letter may have been written from Perugia, a hilltop town, where the Company was stationed for a while. It was at Perugia that the Company became involved in setting up and running "The Welsh Circle, Perugia". This came to our attention from a letter written to Edgar but which did not reach him until after his 'demob'. It reads:-

*"Pte J. G. Davies, R.A.P.C.  
No. 22 Fwd. Base Pay Office, C.M.F.  
20 May 1945.*

*Dear Capt. Atkinson,  
In acknowledging the receipt of 750 lire as the funds in hand of the Welsh Circle, Perugia, I would also like to take this opportunity of thanking you for your very kind letter.*

*Your letter came to hand three days ago, but owing to a great deal of work at the office, which keeps me busy till late at night, I was not able to reply as soon as I would like to have done. For this delay, please forgive me, but I'm afraid that it was unavoidable this time.*

*Since receiving your letter, I have given some thought as to the disposal of the money. I am sorry now that the matter was not discussed at one of the meetings so that the opinion of the members could have decided. Unfortunately the End to our meetings came sooner than I anticipated and what should have been seen to was left over until too late.*

*At the same time, I've been thinking that it would perhaps be a good idea if the money in hand was forwarded to one of the Welsh Societies that have done so much for the troops abroad, namely the people who have sent us Welsh newspaper 'Cofion Cymry' to all troops serving away from home. The Editor of this paper is no other than the noted Welsh person Mr. D. R. Hughes, Colwyn Bay, and I'm sure that the donation sent on behalf of the Welsh Circle, Perugia, would be very much appreciated. Before forwarding this money, I will allow a week or two to pass, so that if you have any objection to sending this money to 'Cofion Cymry', I will abide by your request. Maybe that you find difficulty in having time for letter writing like myself these days, and should this be the case and you cannot reply, I hope that in taking this matter into my own hands it will meet with your approval.*

*To have to come away from Perugia as I did without being able to return to bid you and other members farewell was a great disappointment to me, but I suppose the fortunes of war are like that. Under the circumstances, I would like to say 'Thank you' for your very ready manner in helping - and also to all the boys of your Company. In days to come, there will be some happy memories to recall of the enjoyable evenings spent in your Company. With the war in Europe over, my sincere wish is that I may have the pleasure of meeting you back home, as well as paying a visit to look up some of the lads of Blaenau Ffestiniog.*



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*Should you ever be at Carmarthen I hope that time will permit you to call on the wife and myself when I assure you there will always be a welcome awaiting - And who knows we may yet be relating of the 'Welsh Ailee' days over a cup of tea !!*  
*As soon as I have the time I will write to Frank Jones, but if in the meantime you will see him or any of the other 'boys', I would be very much obliged if you will convey to all my very kindest regards and the best of wishes.*  
*Again many thanks, with the sincerest wishes for the future.*  
*Sincerely yours*  
*J.Glan Davies*  
*Pensarn, Carmarthen".*

On 6 Oct Edgar writes:-

*"We have an army daily paper published over here which gives all the latest news although it isn't a very big paper. The weather has properly broken here now - heavy rain and floods - bridges washed away. Jerry of course demolishes all the bridges as he goes back and we have to build temporary ones, and some of these were only intended to see the dry season through. The Hun is making a very desperate stand here and it is ideal country for defence.... Yes we are back in winter clothing again now and it is needed as it is often cold at nights by our standards".*

On Nov 4th he writes:-

*"Thanks for the Daily Mail page on the release scheme which has arrived since I think I told you in my last letter that we have a small army newspaper published daily in this theatre called Union Jack and this is an extremely good medium for telling the troops all they like to know, and of course the release scheme was published immediately. Thanks very much though for the Daily Mail account. Despite all the heavy German reverses it looks as though they may keep it going till the Spring now. Certainly out here the rain and mud make the fighting very difficult and the country is ideal for the defenders, and the enemy are fighting well.*  
*I am frequently in Rome. It is a very beautiful and interesting city and I have included a book of views for you in a Xmas parcel I have sent to Bet. I don't know whether you ever read 'The Story Of San Michele' by Dr. Mumthe. It is a good book and of particular interest to me now I am so familiar with many of the scenes he described. The trees in these parts have been looking very beautiful lately in their Autumn colours and I can imagine they also do in the Conway Valley.*  
*I hear from Bet that her brother Arfon (the butcher) is back home from Iceland and looking very fit. He may serve in the Home Station now for a spell before going abroad again. He has been able to send quite a lot of stuff home as there is no scarcity or inflation in Iceland as there is here - where the lowest prices for shoes are from £7 to £10 and sausage (for the civilians) yesterday's price here was 22/- a lb. It makes it futile for me to buy and send anything home except guide books and picture postcards. Fruit and flowers are always plentiful. Vegetables are now very dear. It is largely due to racketeering to which every born Italian is predisposed. Honesty is practically an unknown quantity in commercial dealings of any kind. I'm afraid the civilians are in for a thin time this winter and although the people are to a great extent to blame for allowing themselves to be led up the garden path, one cannot help being sorry for the children. Much donkey meat is on sale in Rome for those who can*

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*afford it. I have tasted horse and goat but haven't tackled donkey yet. Our rations are of course British and adequate. Well, Dad, I think that is all this time. I am in quite good quarters and keeping very fit".*

On Dec 1 he writes:-

*"I'm afraid I'm getting a bit behind in my letters to you but since last writing have been in the throes of a major move which doesn't leave much time for letter writing and I know Bet keeps you well informed of my continued existence. The quarters I am in now are really smashing compared with the last, as all the windows and doors and roof are intact. Lighting, heating and water are a bit of a headache but when lights fail one can always go to bed, or even tinkle away on the mandolin. Going to bed also solves the heating problem quite effectively as I have a sleeping bag and four blankets when needed.*

*Bet like most other relatives at home has been wondering what the leave chances are, but these are remote as there are plenty of people here who have been out 3 or 4 years in Middle East and African and Italian Theatres without leave, so they should go first. Again we are not like infantry and normally have very few risks to take, not at all like the last war for me.*

*It was a remote hope to try to be home for Xmas but thank goodness a few thousand will manage it - I sent one from this Company, but he had been out nearly four years. There is one other from Llanfairfechan who has been out three years then the remainder are all approximately the same service as myself. It is only fair that all the long period people should come home first".*

We think the major move may have been up to the Florence area where the Company spent most of the remaining months of the war quarrying in the nearby marble hills.

On 20 Dec he writes:-

*"Thanks very much for your Airletter posted Nov. 28th. In a few weeks time we shall no longer be limited in the number of air letter cards we may send, so that will cut the surface (boat) letters down to a minimum and airmail will go up proportionately. We shall be pretty well off in the grub stakes this Xmas, as in addition to the normal beef issue, there is to be a supplementary issue of frozen pork and tinned turkey or chicken, also tinned Xmas pudding and mincemeat. We have saved our very meagre beer ration (two pints every three weeks) so that the men can have up to three pints on Xmas Day if they wish".*

On Jan. 12, 1945, he writes:-

*"The Xmas cards from everyone got here after Xmas although they were apparently posted in good time. They were very nice just the same. On the 30th I went to Rome on leave for a week and had a very good time meeting many old friends including the Doctor who treated poor old Tom and sent him to hospital. Doc and I are old friends and hadn't met for nearly two and a half years although at one time I received a message from him in Tunisia asking me to call at his hospital which wasn't too far away. But on calling the first time I was in that neighbourhood he had been transferred elsewhere. Rome is a most interesting place and you will read a few of my*



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*experiences there in Bel's letters. I hope the whole war business will end soon as it has gone on far too long already, but we mustn't let up now that the end is in sight".*

On 14 Feb. he writes:-

*"We have borrowed (!) a radio set here so are in constant touch with the news and are following it with much interest and it can assure you. It would seem almost impossible for Jerry to carry on much longer. There is certainly something cooking for him if he does. Our radio set was the property of a Fascist Club in a nearby village but we have it in protective custody just to see that the mice don't get into it !  
It was interesting to hear of your decorative experiments and wish you could see some of the work in our line that is done in this country. There seems to have been practically no wallpaper used in peacetime even - all painted decoration and design to ceilings and walls, and a lot of mural paintings, good, bad and indifferent, but quite interesting.  
Glad you liked the Rome book. It is a very interesting city and the Vatican Art Galleries are wonderful".*

On 11 Mar. he writes:-

*"The way things are going it doesn't seem so long before I will be rejoining you. Things seem to be very satisfactory on all fronts. You mustn't get the impression that I am undergoing hardship and suffering lots of discomfort. This isn't like the Infantry, so you don't need to have any anxieties on that account.  
Last Autumn I sent home my khaki drill and Summer underclothing not thinking I should be overseas long enough to need it again, but as the official change over date from Winter to Summer clothing is 1st May, I'm afraid I shall need it again for a short time anyway. Although I am in an early group for release, I expect even when hostilities end in Europe it will be a month or two before I can get home. I'm hoping I shall be able to get in some of the school Summer Holidays with the children.  
Here now the almond and early fruit blossoms are an unforgettable picture - the purply pinks of the almond against a deep blue sky with snow capped peaks in the distance, being indescribably lovely. The larks are singing and every sunset there is a really rowdy chorus of twittering by the sparrows and starlings in the cypresses to the left of my window."*

On 4 May he writes:-

*"Tuesday night the Ities were celebrating the capitulation of all Italy by ringing all the church bells, firing rockets and sticking out all their flags. And the following day none of them turned up for work as the celebrating continued. On May 1st they had another 'Festa' to celebrate - Mayday with lots of Labour and Communist demonstrations and processions. I suppose it will be some Saint's Day tomorrow. They love these 'Festas' and would have one every day were it not for the fact that we don't pay them on those occasions.  
I should be home pretty soon as we are expecting daily to hear that all European hostilities are ended. I think I told you my 'Age/Service Group' is 1 which has 'Overriding Priority' (official wording) and only for extremely important operational*

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*reasons can this group be retained and even then must be sanctioned by very high authority.*

*Spring seems about a month earlier than it is at home by the vegetation etc.*

*Hawthorn, lilac, laburnum, wisteria and many other things came into blossom late March and early April. Bird migration seems about the same. There doesn't seem the variety of bird life we get at home, but butterflies are far more profuse in number and variety. Cherries are now quite ripe. Well, that's all this time. Very best wishes to old friends and hoping to see you soon."*

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## PEACE MAY 1945

And soon it was to be. Within a few days of the cessation of hostilities Edgar was on his way home. For nearly five years he had been Second in Command of the Company. The role of this post was mostly administration - accommodation, rations, clothing, records, discipline, stores, welfare, transport etc. He had managed all this and also been able to get around the work detachments. The 2i/c is really the hub of a Company and his devotion to the 854 Quarrying Company was like looking after the lads of his own area back home. But he had to leave them behind when time for demobilisation came. One of the first of his acts on returning to the UK was to go to Blaenau Ffestiniog to talk to the families of the men still out in Italy and reassure them that all was in order. It must have been quite a thrill to move from the marble quarries near Florence back to Wales and its slate, granite and limestone. His was a middle aged volunteer action to help his country in time of need and worthy of the highest praise. To have fought for nearly all the years of hostilities in two world wars was indeed commendable. His nine medals are now in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers Museum at Caernarfon Castle.

The British 8th Army on cessation of hostilities moved quickly across northeast Italy and into Austria where they met up with American and Russian Troops coming in from the north and east in Carinthia and Styria. From northeast Italy the Royal Engineer Movement Control Organisation developed a cross country link with the U.K. for personnel movement, first by road and then by rail - the MEDLOC Route (Mediterranean Lines Of Communication), but that is another story in the Corps History. The 854 Quarrying Company would have continued to produce stone for as long as the Army required it for their repairing of roads, bridges and other lines of communication features that were not only destroyed by the retreating enemy but also by Allied bombing of enemy supply routes. When Royal Engineer Works Services were eventually able to organise the quarrying activities and supply of stone through normal local civilian channels, there would have been no longer a need for their services and the final servicemen would have been demobilised. The volunteer service of the brave men of Blaenau Ffestiniog, Tan y Grisiau and other localities filled a very important role in the conduct of the war both in bomb disposal and logistical support.

We hope that even with the lack of more substantial information on dates, names and locations we have been able to record an outline of the fine efforts of these men which seem to have been missed in the quarrying history of the area. May this paper serve in perpetuity as a memory of their gallant service.

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## THE PEACETIME SEQUEL

It did not take long for our father to settle down into the throes of Managing Director of his business, which his father, Arthur, had kept going in his absence. His joy in his family was obvious as he made up for nearly five years of absence, even riding at the rear of a tandem with David steering !

His social life took off and his organisational ability was obvious in his commitment to local organisations. He became a member of the Llandudno and Colwyn Bay District Field Club and on their demise became first Chairman of the Creuddyn Society, taking us children on excursions with both organisations. He served on the North Wales Branch of the Master Painter's Federation, the Regional Executive and was later President. He joined the local branch of Toc H, became Chairman of the Clwyd-Conway Division, Chairman of Toc H for Wales and a member of the London Central Council. He was also Chairman of the Llandudno-Conway and District Branch of the Royal Welch Fusiliers Comrades Association. He became a member of the Advisory Committee of the National Assistance Board, the Bangor and Llandrillo Technical Colleges. He also served for a while as Secretary of the Llandudno Association of the Boy Scout movement. He frequently lectured on Ornithology and Entomology.

Between the two world wars he had been involved in organising reunions of the 17th Battalion of the R.W.F. But when asked by us if he were going to organise a reunion of the 854 Company he maintained that most of the lads who served saw each other regularly in their home location so it was not necessary. He did on occasions go out for a beer with ex Sergeant Chief Clerk Ron Harvey at Llandudno.

In 1956 all four of us family went on an organised coach tour of Italy. It was a splendid opportunity for Edgar to point out to us some of the places he had served and visited. A highlight of the tour was when at Naples we met the former Company Interpreter Gino Battipaglia and were given a tremendous welcome.

A comment on his character, taken from the Master Painter's Quarterly Review of April 1953, which could also serve as an epitaph, might well be :-  
"Captain Atkinson is well known throughout the Region for his modesty and reticence, and yet, as he has proved on so many occasions, he has a flair for logical and fair minded reasoning. Perhaps more than anything else he is known and respected for his toleration of the other man's point of view".

Captain Edgar C. Atkinson died in 1968.

**David and Joan Atkinson**  
**Llandudno. Jan 2005**



