

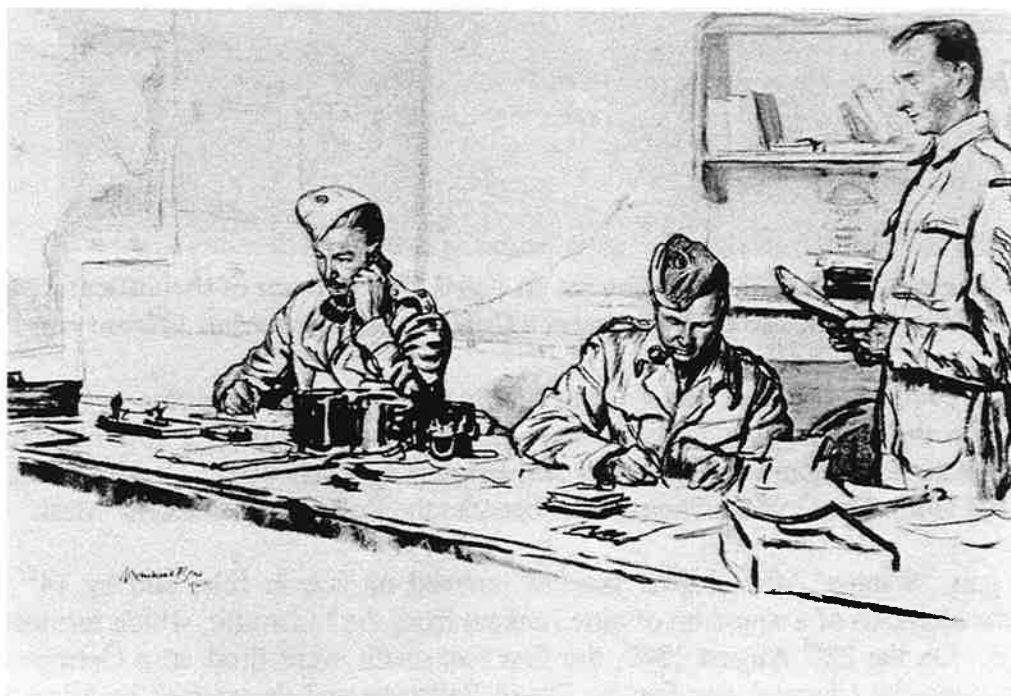
The Royal Marine Siege Regiment 1940-44

by **Michael Peretz MBE**
(Sometime Temporary Major RM)

Having survived the three months Thurlestone OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit) course, I arrived at the RM Siege Regiment on October 1st 1941, very conscious of my new status as a Temporary 2nd Lieutenant. I had been given this posting because at the ripe age of twenty-four, I was designated a relatively senior citizen (unlike most of the other members of my Thurlestone batch, many of them straight from school or University). The younger ones were mostly drafted to the RM Battalions, later to be converted to Commandos.

The Siege Regiment, by mid-1941, consisted of two batteries of Long Range Guns, all capable of firing across the Channel to the Pas de Calais area, and whose chief purpose was to discourage the then anticipated German invasion. The Regiment was commanded by a thirty-five year old regular officer, Lt Col H D (David) Fellowes, later to become a Major General with a CB and a DSO after service with RM Commandos in SE Asia.

The other officers were a curious mixture of elderly RM Artillery Officers brought back from retirement from World War 1, and a motley collection of temporary gentlemen like myself. Another odd phenomenon was that we were officially designated as one of H.M. Ships, thus entitling us to duty free tobacco (including the famous Ticklers) but not, as I remember, duty free liquor or rum.



Lt Col David Fellowes, the CO of the Siege Regiment, and his Adjutant Capt 'Nap' Andreae, in the operations room. (sketch by war artist, Sir Muirhead Bone)

The Regiment had been officially formed on the 7th September 1940 at the personal instigation of Prime Minister Winston Churchill following the evacuation from Dunkirk in June of that year. It was known at that time that the Germans were collecting lines of barges along the harbours of Calais, Boulogne, Dunkirk and Ostend, with plans for an imminent Cross Channel invasion. By July, they had also established four long range guns in the Cap Griz Nez area, as well as bringing forward several railway guns as support for such an attack (the Germans had always been expert on long range guns – remember Big Bertha).

The Guns

Winston Churchill knew from his time at the Admiralty that the Navy held several 14 inch BL Mk VII naval guns as spares for the World War 2 *King George V* class battleships, which had been cut from the navy's building programme, and as two mountings were also available, plans were quickly put in hand to install these guns near the village of St Margaret-at-Cliffe near Dover. By supercharging these guns using a charge of 485lbs of cordite instead of 400lbs, the effective range of these guns was extended to some 27 miles or 48,000 yards. The disadvantage was excessive wear and tear on the rifling which in effect meant that only some 50 rounds could be fired before the gun barrels needed replacing.

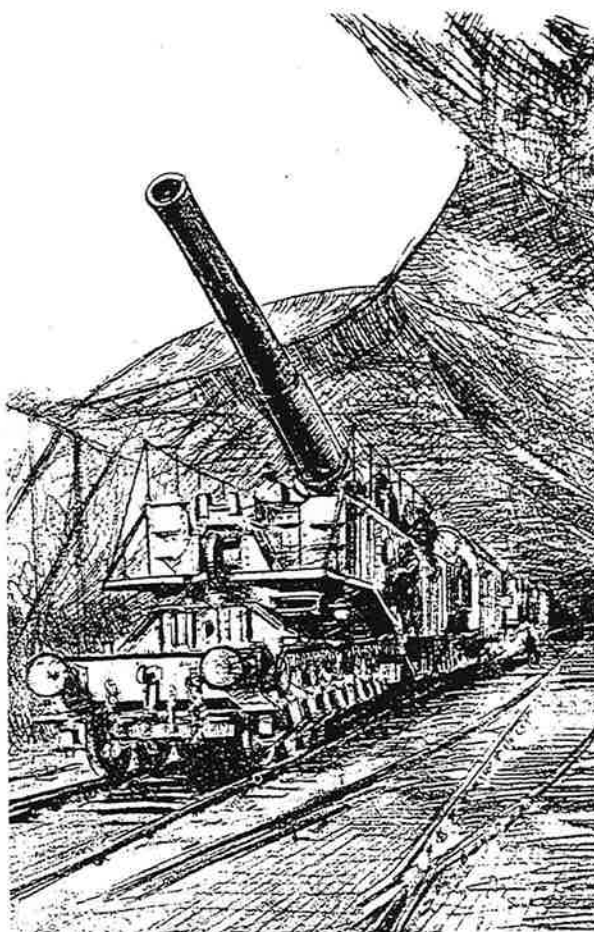


The officers of the RM Siege Regiment in April 1942 in front of the Officers' Mess, previously the Club House of St Margaret's Golf House. The author is front row, right.

By late June 1940, the decision was made to site these guns (later to become A. Battery of the Regiment) on the St Margaret's Golf Course on the reverse side of a low hill facing the Channel. Installation began while golf was still being played (shades of Drake playing Bowls on Plymouth Hoe). The Golf Clubhouse later became the Regimental Officers' Mess.

The first gun, 'Winnie', named after the PM, arrived on site in July, and by 14th August attracted the attention of a squadron of nine Junkers from the Luftwaffe, which fortunately did no damage. On the 22nd August 1940, the first two shells were fired at a German convoy passing through the Channel, the first by David Fellowes and the second by Vice Admiral (Dover), Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay.

By December, the second gun, named 'Pooh' (by association with Winnie) was installed, and later three railway 13.5 inch guns were added to form B Battery. These railway guns originated from railway gun mountings dating back to 1918, which had been discovered in tunnel sidings in Chilwell, Notts. These mountings were capable of carrying 13.5 inch guns which, like Winnie and Pooh, by supercharging, could be adapted to increase their range, in their case to 40,000 yards. However, unlike Winnie and Pooh, they had limited traverse, so that they needed to be fired from specially built curved firing spurs. These railway guns, complete with railway crews, were transported to sidings near Martin Mill, Ashford, and Canterbury East. Their first practice firing took place in October 1940 (there was a rumour that inadvertently, one of the shells fell on the outskirts of Folkestone). A further practice shoot on 10th December 1940 produced an immediate German gun retaliation, one German shell landing within two yards of a railway gun, causing extensive damage.



**One of the 13.5inch Railway
Guns of the RM Siege Regiment**
(sketch by Sir Muirhead Bone)

Siting and Camouflage

Immense efforts were made to camouflage Winnie and Pooh. The work was carried out under the direction of Jasper Maskelyne, a well known stage illusionist. By contrast, the railway guns, after firing, could quickly be hidden in the nearest railway tunnel. As part of the attempt to deceive the enemy a large dummy gun (constructed, I think, of wood and papier mache, and which by the time I arrived in October 1941, had a very definite droop) A story which certainly appears in the official archives and I hope was not apocryphal states that soon after this dummy gun was completed in early 1941, a lone German plane appeared overhead and dropped a wooden bomb, which might prove, if true, that Germans do have a sense of humour after all.

By October 1941, when I became officially 2i/c No. 1 troop A. Battery (Winnie), the threat of a German invasion was gradually receding. Nevertheless we spent much time in installing barbed wire as well as registering potential targets in the Pas de Calais area. One of these, incidentally, was Sangatte, the site of the present day refugee centre, which at that time was one of the places that were expected to be used by the Luftwaffe.

The mathematics of registering such targets was formidable; a knowledge of trigonometry and logarithms was essential, and corrections needed to be made for barometric pressure, air temperature, and, not least, for the curvature of the earth. Spotter planes had been used by the RAF for accurate registration, but were unable to function for long, as they were subject to fierce attack by the Luftwaffe.



“Winnie” drawn by Sir Muirhead Bone

Into Action

Rumour had it, that because of the short life of the gun barrels, none of the guns were fired without direct authorisation from Downing Street. So the first time I saw the guns fired in anger was on the famous occasion on 12th February 1942 when we attempted to prevent the audacious, and sadly successful, Channel dash by the German battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau from Brest to the German North Sea ports, protected by hordes of Luftwaffe ME 109s, and FW 190s. (We missed).

The Regiment was frequently visited by Winston himself, as well as such famous people as Harry Hopkins, General Smuts, the Prime Minister of Canada, the King of the Hellenes, and U Saw, the Burmese Premier.

Another visitor in early 1942 was the famous war artist Sir Muirhead Bone (see *Sheet Anchor* Vol. V No.8 and Vol. XXIV No. 1) who recorded us for posterity. He wore a 1914 Royal Marine Officer's uniform heavily impregnated with cigarette ash. On reflection, perhaps part of the attraction of visiting us was the availability of duty free cigarettes. He was, incidentally, the doyen of all World War 2 war artists, and had been the very first war artist to be appointed in the Great War in August 1914.

On a more personal level, my life had become a good deal more eventful, as by December 1941 I had met and eventually married Third Officer April Corbett WRNS, a Cypher Officer, billeted in the Dover Wrennery, in peacetime the well known boys' public school, Dover College. April worked for the Vice Admiral (Dover) in the deep and damp dungeons below Dover Castle. And when in April 1942, by which time we had become engaged, I presented myself before my Commanding Officer David Fellowes to ask permission for leave to get married, I was somewhat taken aback to see him immediately pick up the phone to his wife, the erstwhile Rosemary Keyes, and April's Commanding Officer, to decide when we could both be spared from our war duties. So an immediate date was fixed for May 11th 1942 for

our marriage. It was also explained to me that no respectable Royal Marine Officer could possibly be married without a sword, and the Colonel offered to lend me his providing I promise to do nothing silly, such as using it for cutting cake. Thus, duly equipped with two swords, one lent by the Adjutant for my best man Bernard Tozer, a great friend from my Thurlestone days and like me a Temporary Lieutenant in A Battery, we both set off by train to Kingswear in South Devon with our two swords suitably camouflaged in a golf bag. Apart from a little difficulty with the sword whilst I was in a kneeling position, the wedding went off without a hitch. On returning after our brief honeymoon, I was introduced to the Admiralty arcane mysteries of L & PA (Lodging and Provision Allowance) for which apparently April qualified but I did not, and which enabled us to rent a tiny flat in Dover. It was here that we managed to conceive David, our son, born in late May 1943. Later in my Royal Marine career I qualified for such additional useful allowances and perks as Hard Lying Money, and, best of all, Survivor's Leave and Extra Clothing Coupons.

Although we were extremely sparing about firing our guns, because of the necessity of changing barrels after only 50 rounds, the many German long range guns seemed to have no such inhibitions. They were often in action, with Dover itself, (uncomfortably near our flat), the local RDF installations and our own gun batteries being the main targets. This accounts for the then popular description of Dover as Hell-Fire Corner. There seemed to be no particular pattern about their firing, which we put down to occasional visits by their VIPs.

The Threat Recedes

By mid-1942, the threat of a German invasion had retreated, and a number of the younger Siege Regiment Officers, including myself, were sent off to undertake initial training with 25 pounder Army guns preparatory to setting up the Royal Marine Divisional Artillery Unit, and in my case the appointment as Captain and Troop Commander of an RM Field Battery. It is, I think, fair to say that when this was disbanded in 1944, by which time I had been despatched to attend the Army Long (War) Gunnery Staff Course at Larkhill, these remnants of the Siege Regiment provided the nucleus of what later became the RM Armoured Support Group (See *Sheet Anchor* IV No. 6), which distinguished itself on the D Day landings in Normandy. Later still in early 1945 many of the same Officers and men were employed in the Royal Marines 34th Amphibian Support Regiment in the Far East.

By November 1943, the railway guns were handed over to the Royal Artillery and the RM Siege Regiment was reduced to one battery of Winnie and Pooh commanded by Major L L Foster MC. (ex World War 1). However, its finest hour was yet to come with the retreat of the Germans along the Channel Coast in August 1944, Winnie and Pooh, by special request from the Army, carried out a heavy bombardment of the German gun batteries and railway guns still in existence in the Calais area, and provided great danger to the advancing British troops. With the help of RAF Spotter planes Winnie and Pooh fired some 100 rounds (their maximum life) and were reported as having achieved not only direct hits but also a large explosion at a German ammunition dump. So perhaps the last words to be said of the RM Siege Regiment by the spotter plane pilot should be recorded for posterity as the Regiment's epitaph. *'Congratulations to your gun crews on excellent shooting'*.

And as a footnote, by late summer 1944, I was preparing for my own major war experience of World War II, aboard LCGM 101, which took place in the Battle of Walcheren in November 1944. But firing 17 pounder guns was a far cry from the 14 inch guns of the Royal Marine Siege Regiment.

With acknowledgement to articles volume XI Nos. 1 and 2 *The Sheet Anchor* by David G Collyer. Articles on Sir Muirhead Bone also appeared in *The Sheet Anchor* Vol V No 1 and Vol XXIV No 1