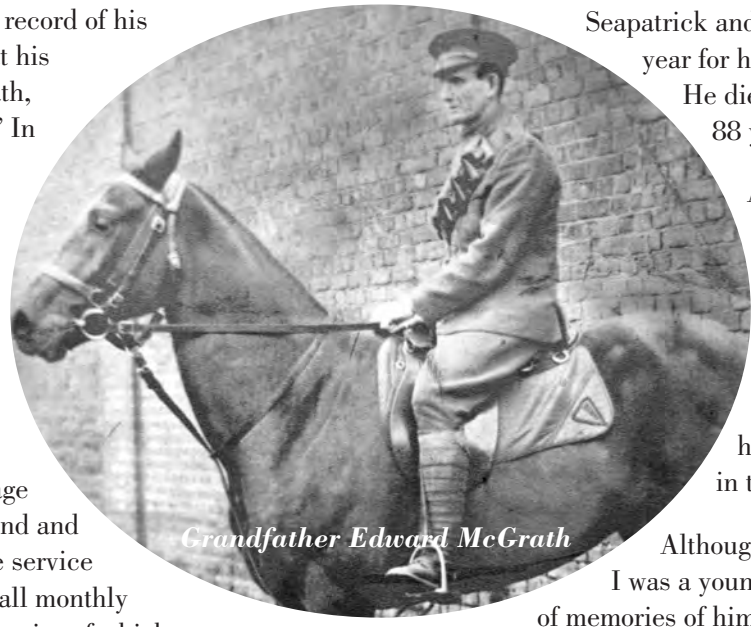
MY FAMILY AT WAR

By Dermot McGrath

When asked by the Local History Society to present a talk about my family's involvement in the armed services, I sat down to write out what I already knew. It just about covered two pages of an exercise book and raised many more questions than answers.

My great-grandfather was John McGrath. He lived at Banbridge and appears to have had no military connection whatever. When he married Eliza Jane McKay in St Patrick's Church in Banbridge on December 30th 1879 he declared himself to be a 'stable-helper' However, on that same record of his marriage, he stated that his father, Anthony McGrath, had been a 'Pensioner.' In the days before the coming of the Old-Age Pension, the word 'Pensioner' signified an army or military pensioner, that is one who had been honourably discharged from the services, invariably because of age or disability of some kind and as a result injury in the service and who received a small monthly payment or pension, the size of which depended on various factors.



Grandfather Edward McGrath

I learned that my great-great-grandfather Anthony McGrath had served in the army. He was born around 1782 in the Banbridge area and at a young age enlisted in the 15th Regiment of Foot. According to information I obtained from the Chelsea Pensioners Service Records he served up to 1812 in a variety of locations, including the West Indies. This was the Napoleonic era and hostilities between the British and the French occurred not just in Europe, but all over the place.

The 15th Regiment of Foot was posted to the West Indies and it was there, apparently, that he received the injury which led to him becoming a 'pensioner'. To become an army pensioner at such a young age, it seems certain that the nature of his injury was both permanent and serious – probably an amputation - but there is no way of finding out what his disability was. That he was otherwise healthy can be gauged from the fact that he lived for a further fifty years or more. According to Griffith's Valuation of 1863 he lived at Seapatrick and paid ten shillings a year for his cottage and garden. He died there in 1870 aged 88 years.

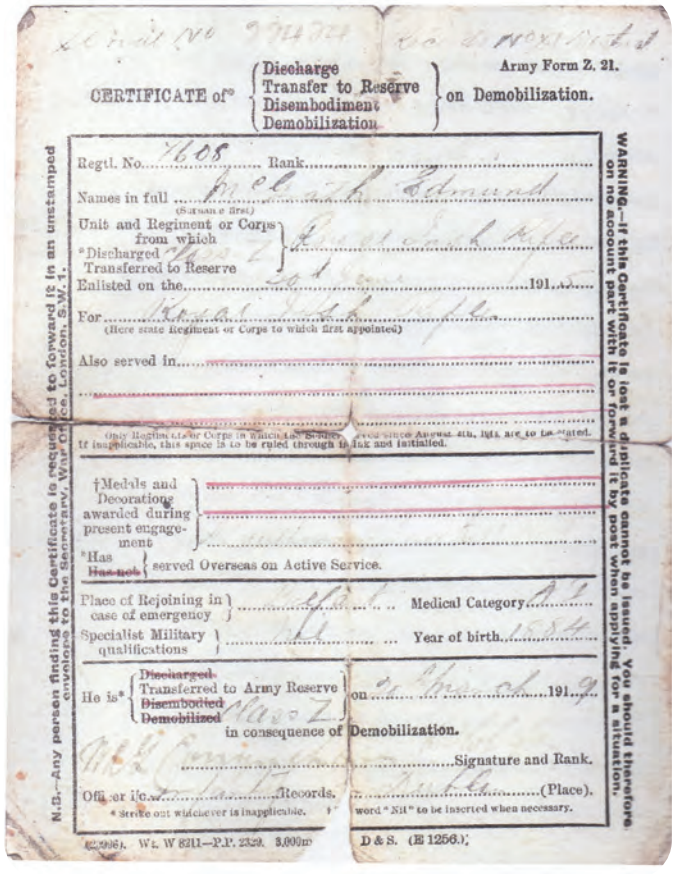
As I said earlier, Anthony's son John had no military involvement but his son, (Edward) Ned McGrath, my grandfather, inherited his grandfather's interest in the army life.

Although he died in 1963 when I was a young teenager I have lots of memories of him. I particularly remember having to hold his pipe while he lit it because of the tremor in his hands. I can't remember him ever talking to me about his experiences during his soldiering career; I expect those memories were too painful and I was too young. However, sometimes his next door neighbour Walter Morrow, would bring him a bottle or two of stout and they would spend many an hour talking about old times.

Ned was born in 1882 in Banbridge, so he never knew his grandfather Anthony. He seems to have been interested in serving in the army from a relatively young age. The family story is that he joined up during the 2nd Boer War, probably to the Royal Irish Rifles, as Co. Down and Co. Louth were their main recruiting areas. Having completed whatever training they did in those days, he left for

South Africa. However, by the time his ship arrived after the relatively long journey, the war was over and, it seems, that they more or less turned back, without getting involved in the conflict. An interesting point which I recently read concerning recruitment for the Boer War Armies was that two thirds of the recruits were *'unfit for service because of ill health'*. I presume that while they set out healthy they were in poor health by the time they got to South Africa. It certainly was a cause of concern. There followed a number of years for which I haven't found a clear record, but at some stage, it is possible that he may have left the army and, if so, probably came back to the Loughbrickland-Banbridge area. Then, shortly after the beginning of the 1914-1918 Great War, he re-enlisted. At this point, thanks to my grandmother's love of keeping momentos of all types in various boxes, we have some more concrete evidence of his military history, including his certificate of demobilization.

This certificate was given to all servicemen and was a short summary of their service that included time of enlistment, medals received, health on leaving and where they went to on demobilization. From this certificate I discovered that he had



CERTIFICATE of { Discharge / Transfer to Reserve / Disembodiment / Demobilization } on Demobilization.

Army Form Z. 21.

Regtl. No. 1608 Rank

Names in full (Surname first)

Unit and Regiment or Corps from which *Discharged / Transferred to Reserve

Enlisted on the ... 191..

For (Here state Regiment or Corps to which first appointed)

Also served in

Only Regiments or Corps in which he served since August 4th, 1914, are to be stated. If inapplicable, this space is to be ruled through in ink and initialled.

†Medals and Decorations awarded during present engagement

*Has / ~~Has not~~ served Overseas on Active Service.

Place of Rejoining in case of emergency ... Medical Category

Specialist Military qualifications ... Year of birth

He is* ~~Discharged~~ / Transferred to Army Reserve / ~~Disembodied~~ / ~~Demobilized~~ on ... 191..

in consequence of Demobilization.

Signature and Rank.

Officer i/c ... Records. ... (Place).

* Strike out whichever is inapplicable. † Insert word "Nil" to be inserted when necessary.

WARNING.—If this Certificate is lost a duplicate cannot be issued. You should therefore on no account part with it or forward it by post when applying for a situation.

N.B.—Any person finding this Certificate is requested to forward it in an unstamped envelope to the Secretary, War Office, London, S.W.1.

(2,996). Wt. W 8311—P.P. 2329. 3,000m D & S. (E 1256.).

Certificate of demobilization

enlisted in the Royal Irish Rifles on 30th June 1915. This was one of the three existing regiments in Ulster at the time of Lord Kitchener's appeal for volunteer armies in 1914. The others were the Royal Irish Fusiliers and the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. These were the original battalions of the Ulster Division which later became known as the 36th Division. They were joined by 13 additional battalions made up of the members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The division served on the Western Front as a formation of the 4th Army.

With this information I had, I visited the Royal Ulster Rifles Museum in Belfast to inquire further. Talking to the curator of the museum confirmed what I knew of my grandfather's service in former time. This confirmation came from the fact that he enlisted on 30th June 1915. The database showed that he was actually serving in France by the 15th July 1915. Normal time for training soldiers for front line duty was two to three months e.g. the greater numbers of the Ulster Division received training in various centres here and then moved to England in July 1915 to receive artillery and undergo further training. In September the division moved to France – ready for front line duty by October 1915. The speedy advancement of Ned to the front lines indicates that he had previous experience in the army and was considered ready for such an engagement.

My grandfather had in his youth worked for a while on a farm as a stable-hand and it was highly likely that this familiarity with horses led him to working with them in the army. Horses still played a large part in the armies of the 1914-1918 war. They were used for troop transport and as draught animals for the artillery and regimental transport wagons.

The actual proportion of horses to men was 1:3, i.e. one horse for every three men. A total of ten million horses were used in this war on all sides. One of the difficulties that cropped up in training the cavalry regiments was that the riders had great problems riding and shooting at the same time – no John Waynes there! However, in the type of trench warfare that developed the majority of the cavalry regiments only used the horses for transport to the front lines and then acted as infantry.

Finding out exactly where my grandfather served in the front lines has proved well-nigh impossible. We

eventually discovered the reason for the difficulty in the Royal Fusiliers Museum in Armagh where we were told that some records in the National Archives at Kew had been destroyed during the London blitz. Also the various battalions defending the trenches were rotated between the front and rear of the lines on a two weekly basis and the divisions were also intermingled.

“ ten million horses were used ”

However, we know that the Ulster Division in which he served was involved in the following battles:-Battle of the Somme – 1916 (July 1st – November 18th); 3rd Battle of Ypres – 1917 (July 31st – November 18th); Battle of Ypres – 1918 and Battles of Cambrai -1918 (8th – 10th October) so it is certain he was involved in some, if not all, of them.

From the National Archives I discovered that he had been awarded three campaign medals – the ‘1914-1915 Star’, the ‘British War Medal’ and the ‘Victory Medal’. The ‘1914-1915 Star’ was awarded to those individuals who saw service in France and Flanders from 23rd November 1914 to 31st December 1915 and to those individuals who served in any other operational theatre from 5th August 1914 to 31st December 1915. The ‘British War Medal 1914 -19’ was awarded to service personnel and civilians. The ‘Victory Medal 1914-1919’ was issued to all who received the ‘1914-1915 Star’ plus other categories. The award of the ‘1914 -1915 Star’ confirmed that he had been in the war zone shortly after re-enlisting.

According to his *‘Certificate on Demobilization’* my grandfather continued serving in the regular army until 20th March 1919, when he was transferred to the Reserve. On this certificate my grandfather’s medical category at this stage was described as ‘A1.’ This category seems to have been conferred on those more or less able to walk. No recognition was given to the after-effects of injury, gas or shell-shock.

Gas was first used as a weapon by the Germans in October 1914, but the types used were ineffective. By April1915 the Germans decided to try the lethal agent chlorine against the French in the 2nd Battle of Ypres. It was also used by the British. During 1916 mustard gas became the agent commonly used. Occasionally lethal, its principal effect was to disable and to pollute areas inside enemy territory.

Although hundreds of thousands of soldiers were affected by gas during the war, those killed amounted to only about three per cent of gas casualties. After-effects, however, were persistent and a great many veterans were troubled by breathing difficulties for the rest of their lives and were prone to common respiratory diseases.

My grandfather’s ill health was certainly a legacy of his experiences during the war. He suffered from nerve tremors and shakes, which were attributed to ‘shell-shock’ and injuries during his service. Today it is known as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ and results from prolonged exposure to high levels of extreme pressure.

After the war my grandfather met and married my grandmother, Annie Rafferty from Dromintee, in south Co Armagh. They went to live in England for some time and went on to have three sons, James, my father, Owen and Eamon.

In the years after the war Ned maintained an interest in keeping up contact with old comrades from his service years and, having returned, in 1931 he was a founder-member of the Loughbrickland branch of the British Legion.

He served on the branch committee from 1931 until his death in 1963 and always took a keen interest in the work of the British Legion. His contributions to meetings are mentioned in several occasions in the minutes. (Thanks to Alan McKea for relevant minutes’ information)

From committee minutes of Loughbrickland Royal *British Legion: “On attaining the age of 70 years, Comrade Edward McGrath, a foundation member of the Branch, was excused all further Branch membership subscriptions and it was hoped that Comrade McGrath would be with us for many years to come.”*

My father, James McGrath, was born in Birkenhead in December 1920. At some stage in his early years the family returned to live in Northern Ireland in the County Down area near Poyntzpass, where the boys grew up. At the start of the 2nd World War in

September 1939, James, or Jimmy as he was known, decided to join the army and enlisted on the 14th October of that year. Having been a driver in civilian life, he joined the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC), a corps of the British Army existing from Napoleonic times. It had been granted the 'Royal' status in 1918 in recognition of its achievements during WW1. It was responsible among other things for land, coastal and lake transport, air transport, supply of food, water and fuel, but not ammunition or armaments. It was divided into Transport and Supply branches. Dad was in the Transport branch. Before and during WW2, the RASC were organised into companies although they were not formally organised into a battalion. The various units were assigned to work with many regiments and divisions of the army. RASC personnel were considered to be combatant personnel and by the end of WW2 one in ten soldiers wore the RASC cap badge.

My father was a member of the 1st Division of the RASC and served with several different regiments. His first attachment was the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). This was the British Force in Europe during the early days of the war in 1939-1940. It was deployed mainly along the French-Belgian border during the so-called 'Phoney War' leading up to May 1940.

The BEF did not commence hostilities until the invasion of France by German forces in May 1940. James was a dispatch rider at this time which probably suited him down to the ground as it seems that like many young lads of his age he was mad about motor bikes.

Dispatch riders were used by the armed forces to deliver orders and messages between headquarters and military units. They had a vital role where telecommunications were very limited and insecure.

James did not forget his family when he was so far away from them. In fact he brought a honey-pot money box from Arras in France as a souvenir for his youngest brother Eamon.

The 'phoney war' was a relatively quiet time for the armies of Britain and France. In fact it was considered a boring time by some soldiers. However, when the Germans commenced hostilities and surprised the command, by attacking on a different front from that expected, things changed suddenly. The BEF and their French and Belgian allies were driven back through France forcing their eventual evacuation through several points along the French coastline, most notably Dunkirk.

The Dunkirk evacuation commonly known as the 'Miracle of Dunkirk', codenamed 'Operation Dynamo', started on the 26th May and ended in the early hours of the 3rd June 1940. It was aimed at rescuing the British, French and Belgian troops who were cut off by the German army in its advance through France. My father was amongst the 338,226 soldiers who were rescued by the fleet of 850 boats. Many of the troops were able to embark from the harbour onto the British destroyers and other large ships. But others had to wade from the beaches towards the ships waiting for hours to board, shoulder deep in water. Others were ferried from the beaches to the larger ships and thousands were carried back to Britain by a flotilla of little ships.

I think everyone is aware of the dreadful situation that the troops found themselves in as they awaited rescue. From the 29th May they were under heavy aerial attack by the Luftwaffe. My father related the story of how, on arriving at the beach area, he flung his motorbike down and made a dash to get under the nearest truck for safety. However, he was politely, but firmly informed that there was no more room under this truck, so he was forced to shelter under another further away. Shortly afterwards there was an almighty explosion and the first truck and those under it were totally blown to pieces by a falling bomb. He really felt his luck must have been in that day. I think he must have been very relieved when he saw the white cliffs of Dover.

Whilst the British army had lost a great deal of its equipment and vehicles, including 20,000 motorcycles, it still had most of its soldiers and was able to assign them to the defence of Britain. Once the threat of immediate invasion was over they were transferred overseas to other theatres of conflict.

One of the original *'little boats of Dunkirk'* which rescued so many of the trapped soldiers, was bought and renovated by my cousin Moira and her husband David. The eighty five year old boat was originally a lifeboat in service with the RNLI in Ramsgate, was manned by her own volunteer crew and had a major role to play in the BEF evacuation.

She was responsible for rescuing 2,800 soldiers both British and French. Moira and David use it as a holiday cruiser and take part in various 'Little Boats of Dunkirk' events.

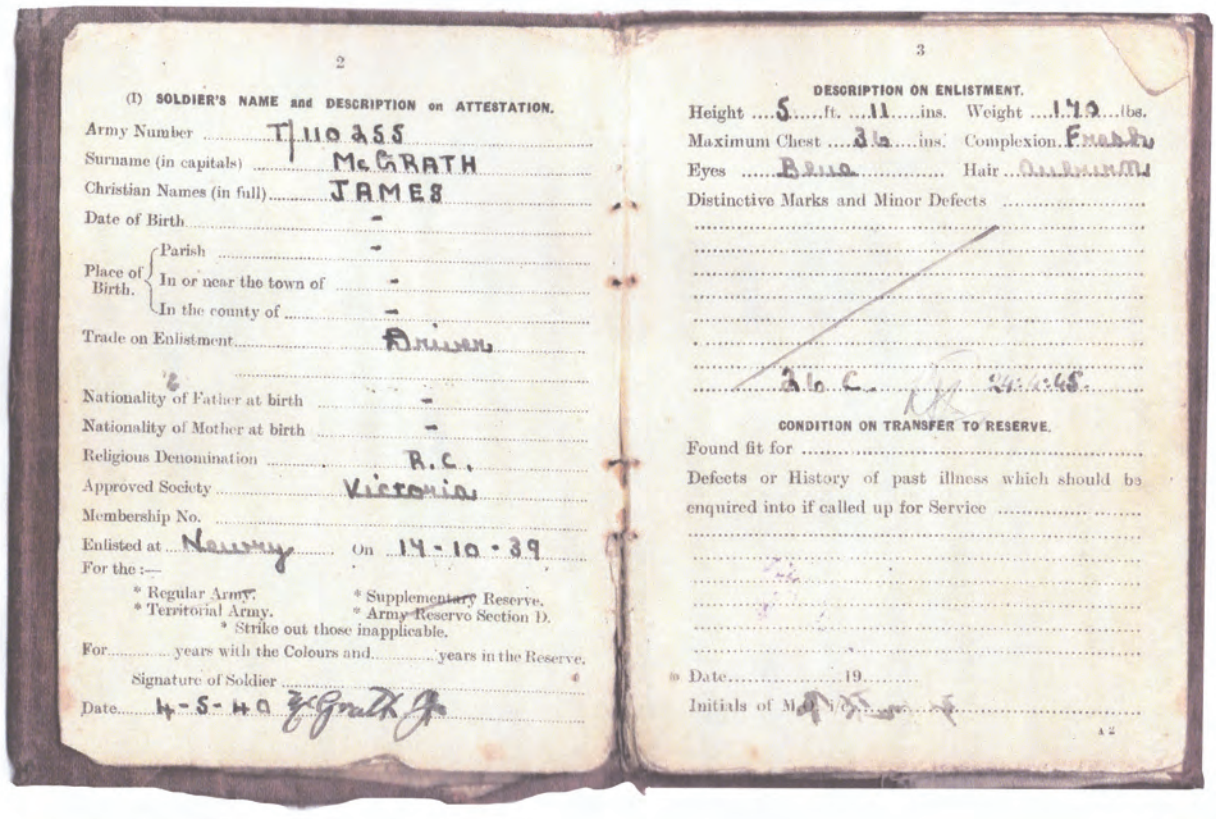
My father's next attachment was to the 7th Armoured Division who were serving in North Africa. In preparation for going overseas to this war-front he undertook courses as a mechanic and in handling vehicles in desert terrain. The 7th Armoured Division became famous as the 'Desert Rats'. It had been formed from units already serving in Egypt in 1938 and became known under the nickname in 1940. The Desert Rat divisional-flash originated from a sketch of a jerboa, or desert rat, drawn by the divisional commander's wife after a visit to Cairo Zoo. She thought it would be a 'cute' emblem. The name has subsequently been used to describe the whole of the 8th Army, the most famous British Field Army of the Second World War.

> ***"Dad was in the Transport branch"***

The western desert campaign was unlike any other theatre of war. Throughout the campaign, fighting was limited to the coastal plain which was never more than forty miles wide, but extended 1,200 miles between Tripoli in the west and Alexandria in the east. Supply was therefore a constant problem, particularly as the vast Libyan Desert yielded nothing. A quote I came across read *"The western desert was a queer master. The desert had to be fought and conquered before the 8th Army could even meet their human foe"*. This must have proved a nightmare for the men of the RASC as it was down to them to provide food, water, fuel and transport to the divisions to which they were attached.

By July 1942 my father was in North Africa and the courses which he had done would certainly have proved essential to his duties, the first of which would have been to build up the lorries which arrived off the transport ships in a dismantled state or as we would probably call them 'flat packs'.

There were many dangers to be dealt with in the desert in provision of transport. The terrain was difficult; many roads were only tracks and not always in the same place; sandstorms lasting for



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(I) SOLDIER'S NAME and DESCRIPTION on ATTESTATION.

Army Number T/110 255
Surname (in capitals) McGRATH
Christian Names (in full) JAMES
Date of Birth -
Place of Birth: Parish -; In or near the town of -; In the county of -
Trade on Enlistment Fitter
Nationality of Father at birth -
Nationality of Mother at birth -
Religious Denomination R.C.
Approved Society Victoria
Membership No.
Enlisted at Newry On 14-10-39
For the :—
* Regular Army. * Supplementary Reserve.
* Territorial Army. * Army Reserve Section D.
* Strike out those inapplicable.
For ... years with the Colours and ... years in the Reserve.
Signature of Soldier
Date 4-5-40 J McGrath Jr

3

DESCRIPTION ON ENLISTMENT.

Height 5 ft. 11 ins. Weight 140 lbs.
Maximum Chest 38 ins. Complexion Fresh
Eyes Brown Hair Dark Brown
Distinctive Marks and Minor Defects

CONDITION ON TRANSFER TO RESERVE.

Found fit for
Defects or History of past illness which should be enquired into if called up for Service
Date ... 19...
Initials of M...

James McGrath – Service record card

days were common; enemy aircraft constantly strafed convoys or even solitary vehicles; thermos bombs were dropped in wheel tracks and rations were difficult to source, especially water.

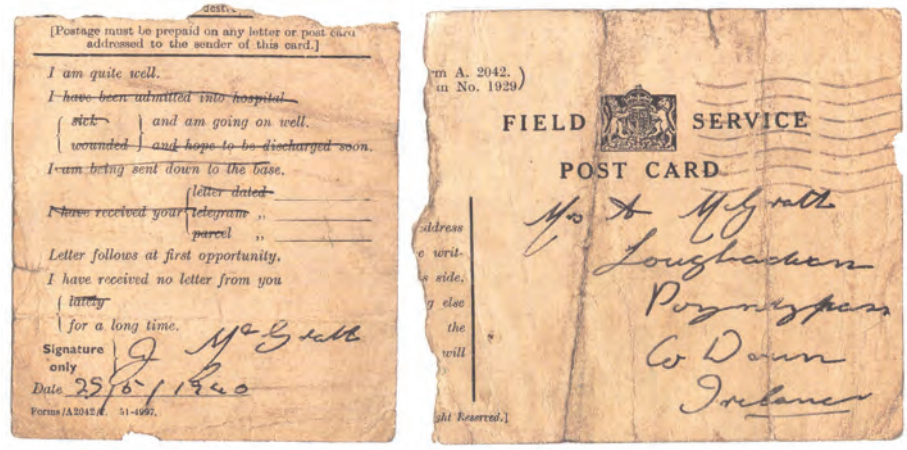
The RASC built up a formidable reputation and received a number of decorations and mentions in dispatches for its hard work.

Normal life in the desert certainly wasn't easy for my father and his comrades for, at any time, apart altogether from the war situation, there were many other hardships to face. This excerpt from a book written by a member of the RASC who served in North Africa illustrates the conditions members of the RASC faced daily:

"Tobruk was our first real introduction to the flea. I think the flea and the other desert insects were worse enemies than the Africa Korps and Italians. … At least the human enemy did have to rest, occasionally. The flea was the torturer supreme and never rested. No matter what we did, it was always with us. At last someone hit upon a partial remedy, at least. This was to keep tame mice. By sleeping with the mice, we found that the fleas migrated, in part anyway, from us to the mice, whom they seemed to prefer. But there was no complete cure. …… Other intimate friends we made in Tobruk were flies, lice, scorpions, centipedes, lizards and beetles, to mention only the most prominent. Lizards were really friends. They kept down the flies, which were easily the most dangerous of our enemies. Lice were, like the poor, always with us. This of course was due to lack of water. Try as we might, we never entirely got rid of lice. …. Flies produced more casualties than the Germans. It is impossible to describe, without suspicion of exaggeration, how thickly they used to surround us. Most of us ate a meal with a handkerchief or piece of paper in one hand and our food in the other. While we tried to get the food to our mouths, free from flies, we waved the other hand about wildly; even so we ate many hundreds of flies. They settled on food like a cloud and no amount of waving about disturbed them. They could clean jam and butter from a slice of bread much quicker than we could eat it!

It can be realised how serious the menace of flies was considered when I say that, even in remote parts of the Desert, one came across notices saying "Kill that fly or he will kill you." Mealtimes were a real torture because of these insects. Most meals were in fact a race between you and the flies as to who could eat most of your dinner.

Several men actually lost their reason because of flies. Their unending presence was nerve-wracking to the strongest of us. To those who disliked insects – and there were many men like that – the pestering became too much for them and they lost their sanity, temporarily.


[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

I am quite well.
~~I have been admitted into hospital~~
~~sick~~ / ~~wounded~~ and am going on well.
~~and hope to be discharged soon.~~
I am being sent down to the base.
~~I have received your~~ (~~letter dated~~ / ~~telegram~~ / parcel) ,, _____
Letter follows at first opportunity.
I have received no letter from you
~~lately~~ / for a long time.
Signature only J McGrath
Date 25/6/1940

m A. 2042.)
m No. 1929)

FIELD SERVICE POST CARD

Mrs A McGrath
Loughadian
Poyntzpass
Co Down
Ireland

A post card from James McGrath to his mother in Loughadian.

…. Water was easily the most precious commodity. It had a price. As much as 2s. 6d. would be offered for enough to fill a water bottle. At times it was beyond price.

In those units without much transport, water was even more in demand. With our lorries, we always felt we had a reserve. Many a time we washed and shaved in the water from our radiators and the following day made tea from it! This sounds unpleasant, but in reality the tea was heaven-sent and probably much less dangerous than some of the water we found when travelling.

On one trip I had just completed filling the water truck from a well when I saw two dead Italians lying in the bottom. They were in an advanced stage of decomposition. I had to clean out the water tank and draw water from another source. ("I was an 8th Army Soldier" by John Crawford, RASC, 1944*).*

The campaign in North Africa which had started in

My father's progress with the 7th Armoured Division 1942 – 1945

December 1940 was a see-saw affair with first one side gaining the upper hand, then the other doing likewise. The Italians had been reinforced by the German Africa Korps under the command of General Rommel which really strengthened the Axis side. There was almost stalemate by 1942. When General Montgomery took command of the 8th Army in August 1942 he found that the morale of the troops had suffered from having to move constantly back and forth across the desert and he set about instilling a new spirit in his army. An increased number of troops and modern equipment enabled the Allies to defeat Rommel at the beginning of September. It was the turning point of the war in North Africa. At the 2nd Battle of El Alamein on 23rd October 1942, the 7th Armoured Division was south of the line but moved north at the beginning of November, then through the minefields to join the pursuit of the enemy via Tripoli to Tunis which ended with the defeat of the enemy forces in North Africa in May 1943.

The 7th Armoured Division remained in Tunisia for several months. Dad seems to have made use of his time to add more names to his address book – some service personnel and several local names including young ladies.

My father did not, however, come through the North Africa campaign unscathed for, at some point, he sustained a very serious arm-injury. The wound became very seriously infected and led to him spending some time on a hospital-ship. Surgeons were in favour of amputating his arm, as they feared gangrene but my father resisted this, and although he was able to resume his army

Emblem of The Desert Rats

duties, this injury never cleared up and ultimately contributed to his early death. After the successful campaign to retake Sicily in July/August 1943, the invasion of Italy began on 9th September. The 7th Armoured Division joined the campaign on 15th September coming ashore at Salerno to help repel heavy German counter-attacks. Then as part of the US 5th Army British Corps they moved northwards to Naples which they reached by 1st October. Having entered the city unopposed, Field marshal Alexander ordered further advances northwards towards the river Volturno. The Desert Rats, used to dealing with desert conditions had to adjust to the narrow Italian mountain roads and passes, also the unusually early heavy rainfall which caused landslides and waterlogged ground.

Eventually they crossed the river Volturno by constructing a pontoon bridge which paved the way for many divisions heading north.

At this point in time the division and support companies departed Italy for the UK to prepare for the D-Day invasions of France. They were stationed in Norfolk between January and May 1944 while they prepared for the invasion of Normandy.

His company of the RASC continued to be attached to the 7th Armoured Division for the invasion into north-west Europe. Much training took place during the time before the Normandy landings but early in May 1944 the division moved its assembly areas nearer to the embarkation port of Tilbury.

They set sail for Normandy on 5th June 1944 and landed on Gold Beach near Arromanches starting 6th June and for several days afterwards.

The 7th Armoured Division had arrived in Normandy with the prospect of some very hard fighting ahead of them. The men of the RASC again had to adjust to new terrain.

Getting men, transport and supplies on to the beaches was just the first step. Breaking out into the countryside beyond proved difficult. This area of Normandy 'the bocage' was a maze of narrow sunken lanes surrounded by tall thick hedges that led to small villages or individual farmhouses. It was almost perfect terrain for the German troops to defend. The Allies met hard resistance all along the way.

The 7th Armoured Division was particularly hard hit, losing 25 tanks, 28 other vehicles and a large number of men at one village alone.

By early July the invasion forces were no more than 15 miles inland. The next month proved to be one of the most intensive and destructive periods of the liberation of France. By the middle of August the Allies had progressed northwards across the Seine towards Belgium and Holland. Overall in the last two weeks of August the British and American forces covered five hundred miles. However, the supply situation was becoming increasingly strained because of inefficiencies in the logistics organisation and the fact that many of the Channel ports, for example Le Havre, had been so badly damaged that they could not be used to bring in supplies and replacements.

Other difficulties encountered were the number of bridges blown up; also mines and booby traps left by the retreating Germans. It should be pointed out that the men of the Royal Engineers and those of the RASC were the unsung heroes of the division's rapid advance as they built bridges, cleared mines and brought up supplies under heavy fire at times.

Despite these difficulties the allied armies continued their progress and crossed into Belgium on 4th September 1944 where they received a tumultuous welcome. Soon lorries, jeeps, tanks and armoured vehicles were full of flowers, fruit and bottles of wine and brandy.

Some of the men received injuries of a unique nature for modern warfare from bunches of grapes thrown by well-meaning locals.

The 7th division had been charged with liberation of the city of Ghent and made rapid advances towards it. In fact they moved so fast they were using 70,000 gallons or 70 tankers of fuel per day, all to be transported by the RASC. Although they had to fight their way to Ghent, the German resistance was relatively light and when they came to the city on 5th September, the occupying German troops were already withdrawing northwards. There was sporadic fighting in the surrounding countryside but by the 11th September the division was able to hand over to a Polish division.

This photograph shows my father in Tunis looking quite relaxed despite the pressures of what he had been through. "From Jim to Mother with love. 1942"

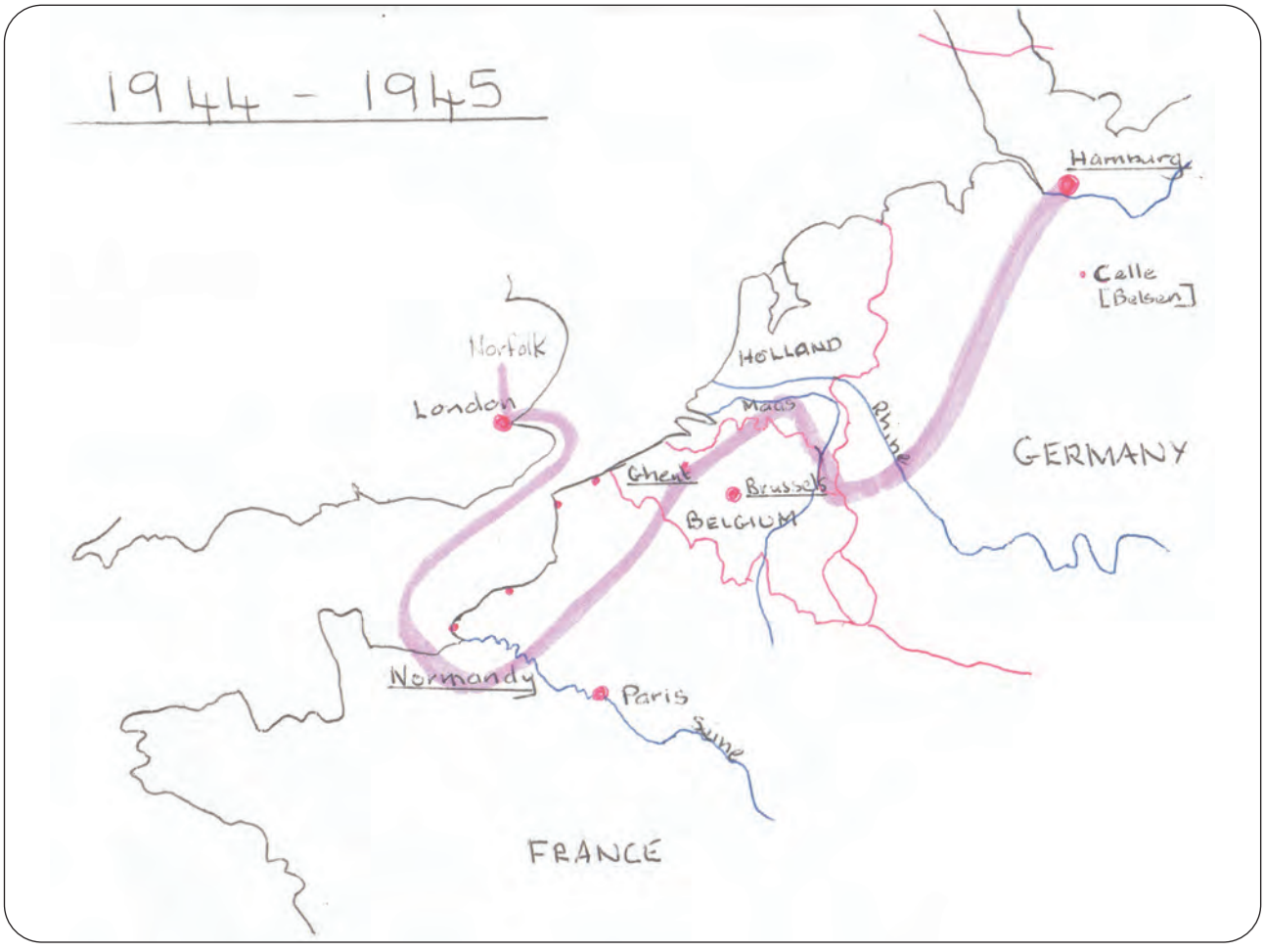
The rest of September was spent in Belgium mopping up pockets of resistance. During October they moved into Holland to the area around the river Maas, where in addition to the usual hazards of pockets of strong German resistance, blown up bridges and mines, they had to cope with icy roads, bitterly cold weather and numerous Dutch canals. It was during his time in Holland that he was injured in a serious traffic accident.

The start of November saw little contact with the enemy and for ten days the troops of the 7th Division had a quiet time enjoying their billets in warm Dutch houses. But it wasn't to last as they had to move further east to relieve other battalions.

There was a relative lull around Christmas and early January and some men, including my father, were allowed off on leave to Brussels.

At this point we come to what I would call *"It's a small world"* story.

It was related to me by a local Poyntzpass lady, Mrs Winnie Jenkins. Her husband, Harold, when he was a young man, had served in the 11th Armoured Division, the first tank regiment into Brussels during the liberation of that city. It seems that one night he met a young lady who invited him back to her home to meet her parents and



France/Belgium/Holland 1944-1945

have a meal. Imagine his surprise when he arrived into the kitchen to find Jimmy McGrath from the 'Pass sitting enjoying some refreshments. My father had met another daughter of the house during his spell of leave and received a similar invitation.

As you can imagine, the conversation centred around Poyntzpass and the girls were forgotten. Having wintered in Holland it was time to start clearing the German army from the south eastern part of the country. It was no easier with the extra difficulties of numerous canals to cross and the snow being churned into thick mud. By the 23rd March the allied troops were ready to cross the river Rhine into Germany. The 7th Division was to move eastwards to Hamburg 190 miles away. Progress was slow, with poor tracks through thick woods containing German troops armed with panzerfausts. Again, many bridges had been blown up and Bailey bridges had to be erected. Transport was at a premium, with even steamrollers being commandeered to carry troops and equipment.

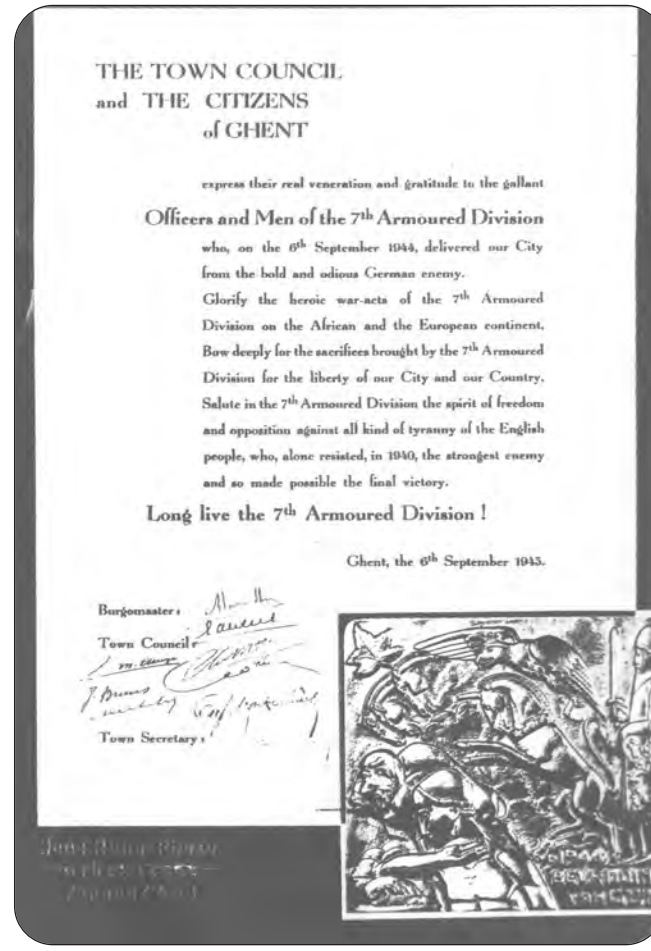
Several weeks of intensive fighting followed as the Allied forces made their way across Germany, but by 28th May the Desert Rats were on the outskirts of the now ruined city and on 3rd May 1945 one day after Hitler's suicide, the general in command surrendered. The division remained in Hamburg for two months helping with the displaced population.

However, there had been a diversion for some units of the RASC in the middle of April. The horror that was Belsen concentration camp had been discovered on 15th April and several units operating in that area were deployed to help deal with the indescribable conditions that existed there. My mother said that my father never wanted to talk about his experiences of this time.

He remained in Germany for some months as part of the occupation force, coming back to Belfast for demobilisation in February 1946.

For his service in the war he was awarded the 'Africa Star' with the 8th Army, the '1939-1945 War Medal', and the Italy, France and Germany Stars.

In October 1946 My father married Mary Murchan, my mother, in Newry Cathedral.



THE TOWN COUNCIL
and THE CITIZENS
of GHENT

express their real veneration and gratitude to the gallant

Officers and Men of the 7th Armoured Division

who, on the 6th September 1944, delivered our City from the bold and odious German enemy.
Glorify the heroic war-acts of the 7th Armoured Division on the African and the European continent.
Bow deeply for the sacrifices brought by the 7th Armoured Division for the liberty of our City and our Country.
Salute in the 7th Armoured Division the spirit of freedom and opposition against all kind of tyranny of the English people, who, alone resisted, in 1940, the strongest enemy and so made possible the final victory.

Long live the 7th Armoured Division !

Ghent, the 6th September 1945.

Burgomaster :
Town Councilor
Town Secretary :

They left Ghent to much cheering from the citizens of the city, having been presented with this token of gratitude by the Burgomaster.

Like his father before him, when my father returned from the war, he maintained an interest in old comrades. He joined the Loughbrickland Branch of the British Legion in 1946. He was on the Branch committee from 1950 until 1955 and was assistant standard-bearer from 1952 until 1954.

My parents and I moved to Scotland, where, along with his friend Tommy Morrow, he was employed in building an oil refinery. However the arm wound he had suffered in North Africa had never totally healed and in September 1956 flared up suddenly and he died aged 35.

My uncle Owen McGrath was four years younger than my father and was just nineteen years old when he joined the Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve in November 1943. He was posted to the Recruit Centre No.3 at Padgate near Warrington in December 1943, where he received basic training plus the usual ill-fitting uniform and strange

haircut. He then moved on to the Air Gunnery School at the Operation Training School at Montford Bridge in Shropshire. He finished his training in December 1944 at RAF Lindholme.

In March 1945 he joined 150 Squadron as a rear-gunner in a Lancaster Bomber. The Lancaster was the main heavy bomber in Bomber Command and took part in the huge night-time raids over Germany. It could carry up to 22,000 pounds of high explosive with a range of 1,660 miles.

Generally speaking the standard crew of the Lancaster numbered seven but sometimes eight. Each crew member volunteered for aircrew duties. None were conscripted into their jobs. A crew was formed by the pilot picking out each crew member from those available and from an Operational Training Unit.

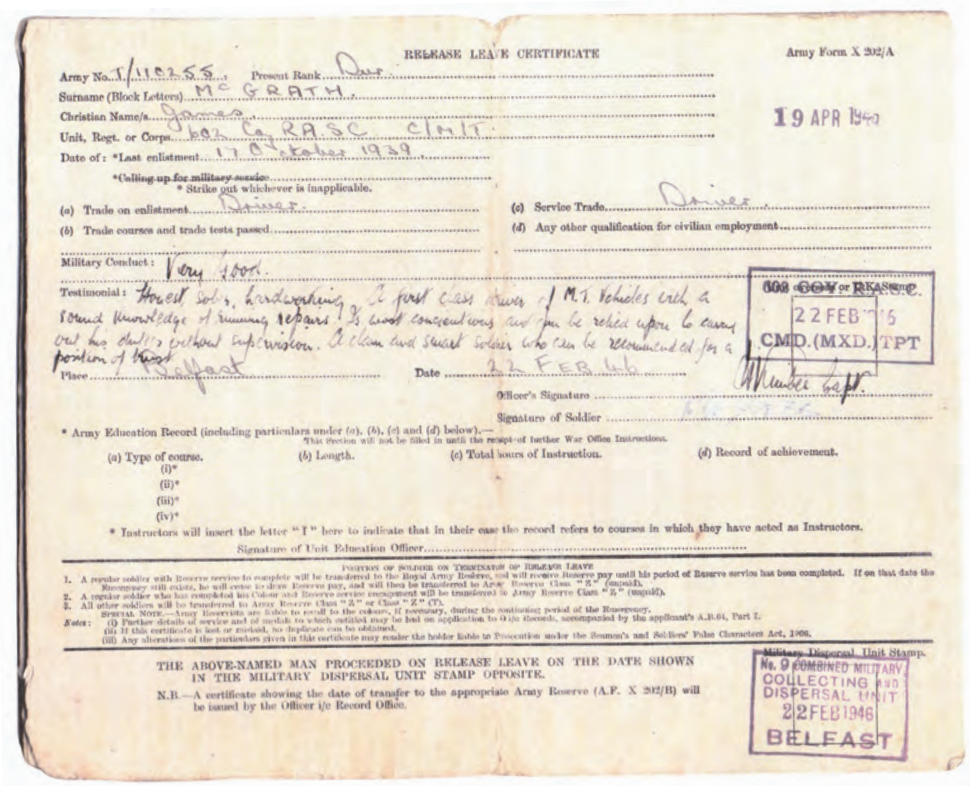
An operational tour for a bomber crew consisted of thirty un-aborted operational sorties. When they completed their tour, the crew would be broken up and rested by being assigned to ground duties such as instructors.

As a rear-gunner or by the nickname "Tail-end Charlie", chances of survival were lowest of the whole crew.

The gun turret at the back of the plane in the unheated section of the fuselage was a separate area, difficult to get in and out of especially in an emergency. Most rear-gunners once in their turrets did not see another member of the crew until the aircraft returned to base, sometimes ten hours after departing. It must have been a very lonely spot.

One rear-gunner described his escape when his plane was hit: *"On my 13th operation we went to Duisberg and were shot down over Holland. We were hit in the port wing and it was a mass of flames. I can still see the Perspex running like water. I don't know how I got out. I think it took 45 seconds for the wing to fall off. In that time I had to centralise the turret, disconnect the intercom, (this got caught up in something and I had to rip it off my head), undo oxygen mask and safety belt. Open the turret door, climb over the tail plane, pick up my parachute (which I dropped), clip it on, open the escape doors and bale out. How I did it I do not know."*
(A Tail-end Charlie's Story)

By this stage of the war i.e. March 1945 the heavy bombing attacks on German targets were beginning to diminish in number, the final raids coming towards the end of May. After finishing bombing operations the 150 Squadron was



RELEASE LEAVE CERTIFICATE

Army Form X 202/A

Army No. T/110255 Present Rank Dvr.

Surname (Block Letters) McGRATH.

Christian Name/s James.

Unit, Regt. or Corps 602 Coy R.A.S.C. C/M/T.

Date of: *Last enlistment 17 October 1939.

*Calling up for military service

* Strike out whichever is inapplicable.

19 APR 1940

(a) Trade on enlistment Driver.

(b) Trade courses and trade tests passed

(c) Service Trade Driver.

(d) Any other qualification for civilian employment

Military Conduct: Very Good.

Testimonial: Honest, sober, hardworking. A first class driver of M.T. Vehicles with a sound knowledge of running repairs. Is most conscientious and can be relied upon to carry out his duties without supervision. A clean and smart soldier who can be recommended for a position of trust.

602 COY. R.A.S.C.
22 FEB '46
CMD.(MXD.) TPT

Place Belfast Date 22 FEB 46

Officer's Signature [signature] Capt.

Signature of Soldier

* Army Education Record (including particulars under (a), (b), (c) and (d) below).—
This Section will not be filled in until the receipt of further War Office Instructions.

(a) Type of course. (b) Length. (c) Total hours of Instruction. (d) Record of achievement.
(i)*
(ii)*
(iii)*
(iv)*

* Instructors will insert the letter "I" here to indicate that in their case the record refers to courses in which they have acted as Instructors.

Signature of Unit Education Officer

Position of Soldier on Termination of Release Leave

1. A regular soldier with Reserve service to complete will be transferred to the Royal Army Reserve, and will receive Reserve pay until his period of Reserve service has been completed. If on that date the Emergency still exists, he will cease to draw Reserve pay, and will then be transferred to Army Reserve Class "Z" (unpaid).
2. A regular soldier who has completed his Colour and Reserve service engagement will be transferred to Army Reserve Class "Z" (unpaid).
3. All other soldiers will be transferred to Army Reserve Class "Z" or Class "Z" (T).

Special Note.—Army Reservists are liable to recall to the colours, if necessary, during the continuing period of the Emergency.

Notes: (i) Further details of service and of medals to which entitled may be had on application to O i/c Records, accompanied by the applicant's A.B.64, Part I.
(ii) If this certificate is lost or mislaid, no duplicate can be obtained.
(iii) Any alterations of the particulars given in this certificate may render the holder liable to Prosecution under the Seamen's and Soldiers' False Characters Act, 1906.

THE ABOVE-NAMED MAN PROCEEDED ON RELEASE LEAVE ON THE DATE SHOWN IN THE MILITARY DISPERSAL UNIT STAMP OPPOSITE.

N.B.—A certificate showing the date of transfer to the appropriate Army Reserve (A.F. X 202/B) will be issued by the Officer i/c Record Office.

Military Dispersal Unit Stamp.
No. 9 COMBINED MILITARY COLLECTING AND DISPERSAL UNIT
22 FEB 1946
BELFAST

James McGrath's Demobilization Certificate.

employed in dropping food supplies to the starving Dutch people, transporting ex POWs from Belgium and forces personnel from Italy back to the U.K.

By the end of 1945 my uncle was back on the ground and stationed at various RAF bases. He completed a General Service Training course and

A Lancaster Bomber

in December 1946 returned to his starting point at RAF Padgate Recruiting Centre as a drill instructor.

He was discharged from the RAFVR on 22.10.47 and re-mustered as Fighter Controller 23.10.47. He remained in the RAF for the next twenty three years serving as a Fighter Controller in Germany, Cyprus and several bases in England.

He was awarded the 1939-45 War Medal; France and Germany Stars, and RAF Long Service and Good Conduct Medal.

On leaving the RAF in 1970 my Uncle Owen worked for three years in Saudi Arabia as a civilian trainer for fighter controllers. After that he was employed by Thomas Cook Travel in London as a courier for ex-American Forces' holidays. Subsequently he returned to the Middle East, joining the Sultan of Oman's Air Force as a Flt. Lt. Fighter Controller.

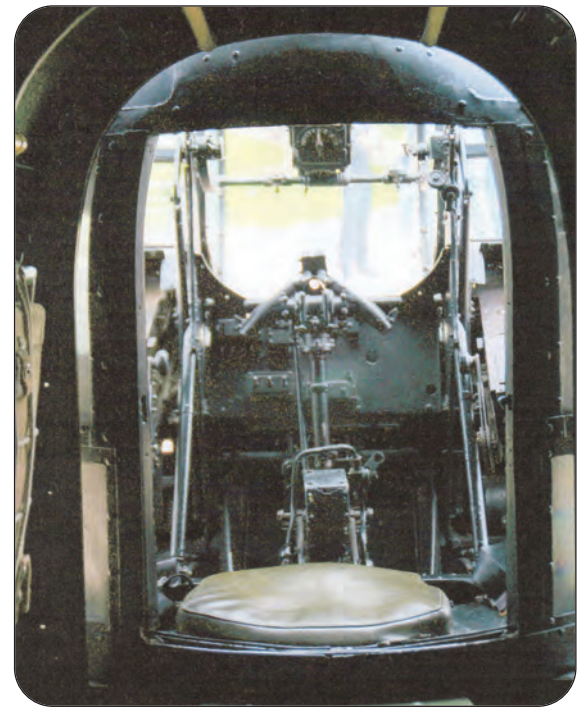
Sadly, whilst in Saudi Arabia, he had contracted a rare illness which affected his health permanently and he died in 1978 aged fifty four.

The final member of my family who served in the forces is my cousin Kevin McGrath. He followed in his father Owen's footsteps by joining the RAF in 1968 when he was eighteen years old. He trained as an Aircraft Electrical Engineer.

Unlike our grandfather, my father and his father, he was not engaged in active warfare, as his main occupation was the maintenance of various aircraft including Vulcan Bombers, Buccaneers, Pembrooks and Nimrods. Some of these names were familiar during the Falkland and Iraqi Wars.

Kevin was discharged from the RAF in 1997 and worked as a civilian field engineer on the Nimrod Fleet at RAF Kinloss until 2010. He has now retired, having been awarded the RAF Long Service and Good Conduct Medal.

As I said at the beginning, this was quite a journey of discovery for me, and I couldn't have anticipated how many different paths I would follow trying to discover the part members of my family played in the various conflicts in the past three centuries.



The gun turret

The Crew – Owen on the left in fur boots

Owen at the head of his platoon