

Robert Charles Tims, search-light operator in and around Branscombe

as recounted by his son, Mervyn W. Tims



Dad was born at Cowes, Isle of Wight in December 1916 to William Tims and Amelia née Driver. His parents had lived at Beer and married there in 1903 and his father had worked at Hoskins bakery in Beer as a baker/confectioner. Dad's two elder sisters Lily and Irene were both born in Beer and it was very soon afterwards the family moved to Isle of Wight where his father found work as a merchant seaman. His mother bore three other daughters before Dad was born but each in turn died in infancy.

When Dad was 4 years old his father abandoned the family and emigrated to America. His mother raised the three surviving children alone until she returned to Beer in 1923. With no money to support her family she worked in service at some of the big houses in Beer while Dad lived with his grandparents Robert and Mary Driver in their two-up, one-down cottage in Beer, while his two sisters found work in Middlesex. His mother paid 5 shillings a week towards his keep. Dad's first two years of schooling was at St Mary's in Cowes; he started at Beer school in December 1923 when he was aged seven.

When Dad was aged 12 his mother got a council house in Beer and it was then he went to live with her in Park Road. She still had to work but to help out Dad got work as a milk delivery boy at Rock farm, carrying his milk pails and pint and half-pint measures from door to door each morning before going to school. Upon leaving school at 14 he worked as delivery boy at Trumps Store in Beer. He was only given a pay rise when he was aged 19 following his mother tearing the shop manager off a strip and telling him how tight he was. Dad got a pay rise at the end of that week and was soon after promoted to work in store as grocer's assistant.

He was 23 years old when he joined the army on 15th July 1940. He was first sent to Camborne in Cornwall for basic training, followed by a spell at Winchester. He was posted with the 3rd Ulster Searchlight Battery, Royal Artillery as a gunner, and trained as Search Light Operator. The 3rd Ulsters had been in France since January 1940 and had recently arrived in England after evacuation from Dunkirk.

Dad was the only Englishman amongst this unit of Irish soldiers, who, in his words, all got on fine through the week, but at weekends they all went out drinking and before the end of the night all hell would break loose amongst them with Irish fighting Irish. Being the only Englishman Dad was not involved in their quarrels but usually his call for them to behave was enough to bring a halt to their drunken squabbles and they would apologize to him, then to each other before falling into their bunks. Most weekends one or more of them would be skint and always turned to Dad to borrow a 10 bob note so they could go out for a few pints. They always paid him back but the performance would be repeated the following weekend.

There was a certain amount of regard towards Dad, because he was the one who read out "letters from home" to those couple of guys who could not read.

The Searchlight crew consisted of ten soldiers. Number 1, a sergeant, was the detachment commander. He, along with Numbers 4 and 5,

worked on the searchlight. Number 4 was responsible for the care and maintenance of the outside of the searchlight and when in action was responsible for tracking and keeping the beam on target with assistance from the sound locators and the spotters.

The Number 5 was responsible for the care of the lamp, the electrical circuits and the inside of the projector barrel. When the searchlight was in action he was responsible for the efficiency of the arc unit and to make sure the carbon stayed alight. Numbers 2 and 3 were the spotters deployed about 30 to 50 yards each side of the searchlight. Their role was to search for targets and to direct the beam on to target via phone to Number 4. Numbers 6, 7 and 8 were the sound locator detachment, with their secondary duty to man the Lewis light machine gun on orders from Number 1. Finally, Number 9 was responsible for maintenance of the generator. The generator was always placed 200-300 yards away from the searchlight, usually behind farm buildings or in a sunken lane behind dense hedges so its noise would not interfere with the sound locators. His job was to make sure the generator was able to take a full load at a moment's notice and had to hand-crank the generator into action during the night to keep it warmed up and ready to go.

Number 1 was in contact with Troop Command Post by radio, but when the searchlight was in action this post could be filled by Number 10 the cook. The searchlight had 210,000,000 candlepower.

Dad was stationed at various places in southern England throughout the war. He had training and regimental drill at Winchester in 1940 before going to Wookey Hole and then to the hamlet of Stawell, Somerset. Another place was near Pewsey in Wiltshire in 1941. Their searchlight command worked in conjunction with the RAF night fighters. Their job was to illuminate enemy aircraft as they flew overhead at night so RAF fighters or anti aircraft guns could pick off their targets. Another very important task of theirs was to act as Homing Beacon for stricken aircraft. Working with other searchlight units they aided RAF planes that were damaged or lost due to mechanical failure, to find their way safely back to an airfield.

In February 1941 Dad got 48 hours leave to return home to marry my mother Violet Chick. They married 15th February 1941 at St Michael's church in Beer. For their honeymoon they stayed the night at Dad's aunt Dorothy and uncle George Bricknell's house in Higher Meadows in Beer. The next morning Dad returned to his unit.

Dad spent five years in England as a search light operator, passing his T.T. Search Light Operative Class 3 on 28 September 1941. The Part 2 for Search Light Operator D3 he passed on 21 May 1942.

Dad spent most of 1941 at the hamlet of Stawell in Somerset - the searchlight battery to which he belonged had its H.Q. at Wookey Hole some miles to the north. When on weekend leave Dad would cycle from the camp the five miles into Bridgwater and there for the price of sixpence could leave the bicycle in a householder's shed until his return. He would then catch a bus into Taunton, then another to Seaton, and catch another or walk the last mile and a half home to Beer.

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For Dad, his arrival back in Devon came as a surprise because apart from the officers none of the soldiers of his searchlight command had any idea where they were being posted. They had travelled down from Somerset into Devon in the back of an army lorry, then the sergeant ordered a stop for a tea break. The back of the lorry was opened up and the men jumped out, Dad amongst them and he looked around at familiar surroundings and realised he was in Honiton High Street. The other men went into a cafe while the sergeant perused a map on the bonnet of the lorry. Dad asked the sergeant where they were going. His answer was, "Nowhere you would know. A place not far from here called Honiton Common." Dad pretended indifference. Of course he knew where it was. It was only 5 or 6 miles from his home but he wasn't going to let on in case he got posted elsewhere.

Their first camp on Honiton Common was under canvas for several weeks until they got a load of hut material delivered. But before their new huts came they experienced so much rain that the whole camp was under water. When the hut partitions arrived they were piled up to await a crew to come to build them. But after several wet days the men could wait no longer and asked their sergeant if they could go ahead and build the huts themselves, and he agreed. One of Dad's mates, Tony, took charge and worked out where they should be built. He took it upon himself that they should build their own accommodation first. "The bloody cookhouse can wait," he said.

For a while they had to fetch their water from Higher Wiscombe Farm, a quarter mile away, and then a hose from the farm carried water to their camp until they got a water wagon on site.

Dad's mate Tony kept a couple of ferrets which he used on the quiet, for rabbiting. He often supplied the cook with fresh meat. In fact he caught so many rabbits that Perryman's the butcher from Branscombe used to call at the camp regularly to buy rabbits from him. He always had a few extra shillings for his beer. One morning as he walked around the fields he was met by the farmer. "Wass-on yer then?" he asked. "Just taking the dog for a walk," said Tony hiding the ferret inside his coat, but away from the rabbit stuffed in the other side. The dog was their camp dog, a

bull terrier that seemed to follow Tony around everywhere; likely because it enjoyed its early morning ramblings around the fields while Tony perused the hedges.

One day an army officer turned up at camp in a car driven by a woman of the ATS. While waiting for the officer who was busy talking to the sergeant, she was preoccupied with attention from some of the soldiers, and Tony slipped one of his ferrets into the vehicle, then slowly walked away and waited. A couple of minutes later there was an almighty scream. The poor woman suddenly leaped from the car, slammed its door and ran off screaming, making all in her way jump back in astonishment. In relating this tale Dad remarked how he thought the poor woman had probably never seen a ferret before. It was some time before she could be coaxed back into the driver's seat. Tony had already hidden the offending creature before the officer appeared on the scene.

Their camp dog not only followed Tony around the fields and hedges upon the common but also used to follow him when he cycled to the Three Horseshoes pub about two miles away. One night when Dad was on guard duty the local Home Guard from Farway came along and asked him if they had a soldier and a dog missing from camp. Dad informed them that Tony had cycled to the pub earlier and the dog had followed, as usual. The Home Guard informed Dad that Tony had crashed into a hedge trying to get round a bend and was laying unconscious. They had tried to help him but the dog growled and kept them at bay. There was nothing they could do to help, they said. Dad said he would go to find him. He roused one of his mates to take over guard duty while he went off to find Tony.

After a mile and half walk in the dark Dad found him. But first he heard the dog growl as he approached in the darkness . "Ah shut up you silly bugger, its only me," said Dad. As soon as Dad spoke the dog recognised his voice and came out of the hedge wagging its tail to greet him. Dad found the bicycle in the ditch, then found Tony flat out in the hedge. He pulled him out. He stunk of booze. It was then a long struggle back with Tony's arm over his shoulder, him stumbling and mumbling as drunk as a lord.

When he got his burden back to within earshot of camp Dad called out to the guard on duty to come give a hand. Between them they got Tony back into their hut then dropped him unceremoniously upon his bunk "Aren't you going to cover him up?" asked the soldier. Dad answered, "Not likely. He can bloody freeze for all I care. At least it's a better bed than he had an hour ago."

Another time the Farway Home Guard came around to their camp they were accompanied by a local policeman who told them to be on the look

out for a German pilot because an enemy plane had been shot down over Beer and he had baled out. Dad was worried about his family and asked the policeman if anyone in Beer was hurt, and explained he had family there. But he was reassured that no one had been hurt. The next day they were informed that the German pilot had been captured; he was found walking down Quarry Lane towards Beer during the night.

For a weekly bath or shower, the troops were driven in a lorry to the RAF radar station at Kings Down Tail farm near Branscombe Cross, on the Sidmouth road. There were better amenities there with water laid on and electricity. A large generator in a field across the road was earth covered and turfed over and well camouflaged from enemy planes. It was manned by my grandfather George Chick (Dad's father-law) who kept the power going. He used to walk to work from Beer. On his days off he often took fresh fish to Dad's unit. The fish he earned by hauling up the boats on their return to Beer beach each evening. So with fresh rabbit and fish brought to the cookhouse Dad's unit fared pretty well despite the rationing.

A tragic incident occurred one night while the searchlight crew were on exercise at Honiton Common. An RAF bomber was part of the exercise, its intention to try to manoeuvre out of the searchlight beam, while the searchlight crew did its best to keep it on target. And this they did, keeping their beam on target all the while as the plane tried to escape it. Unfortunately the pilot was so blinded or bewildered by the beam that he lost control and the plane crashed near Exeter. Dad and the others learnt the following morning that the plane crew had all been killed.

To Berry Farm - probably 1943

After several months at Honiton Common, Dad got an order from the sergeant one morning. "Pack up your kit Tims, you're been moved." Dad's heart sank. He guessed that he was now to be posted miles away from home. He had had it fairly easy these past months, being so close to home, able to visit family whenever he had free time, and now was going to miss it. "Where be I off to then searg?" he asked. The sergeant shrugged and told Dad he had no idea where he was going but a lorry was on its way to pick him up.

Twenty minutes later Dad was in the lorry been driven through country lanes with no idea where he was going, then it stopped.

The driver turned to Dad and said, "This is it mate."

Dad was amazed. "What here?" he asked.

The soldier nodded. "Yep. Was told to fetch you here. This is it."

Dad could not believe his luck. He was at a searchlight battery at Berry Farm in Branscombe, less than three miles from home. He reported to the camp sergeant and introduced himself. He was told to put his kit into

the hut and as it was not busy he could take the rest of the day off but must be back by evening. Dad dumped his kit and decided to walk home to Beer to see the family. As he walked down through Branscombe a van stopped beside him and a voice said, "Hello Bobby, where be off to then?" It was the butcher's delivery man from Beer, and he gave Dad a lift home.

After some weeks on the searchlight at Berry Farm Dad was again told to pack his kit ready to move. And again no one could tell him where he was going. But to his surprise it was another short drive to his next searchlight, at Bovey Farm on the outskirts of Beer.

The soldiers who manned the searchlight at Bovey had met Dad many times when they had been drinking at the Dolphin in Beer, and when he walked into their Nissan hut they all pulled his leg. "Look here, the lucky bugger's come home," they said.

At Bovey Farm they were stationed in a corner of a field called 14 Acres. There were two Nissan huts there for the soldiers, one for accommodation for the 10 man team and the other, their canteen which was also cookhouse and recreation room with table tennis and darts. (Both Nissan huts were still there during 1960s. During late 1950s - 1960 one was home to a tramp; known to us boys as Bill Hayley because of his "kiss curl".)



The photograph above shows the site of the nissan huts where the soldiers were stationed at the Bovey Farm Searchlight Battery. The photograph below shows a close up of this area with lumps of concrete rubble. Mervyn remembers the huts had concrete floors. Please note this site is on private land.



It was at Bovey they got their new searchlight with radar. It was a great improvement on their earlier lights. The beam was stronger and there were seats for the operators. Planes were loaned by the RAF to fly overhead at night so the men could practise on their new radar equipment.

On Dad's free time he had less than 2 miles now to walk home to see family, or to go for a drink with the lads.

Late 1944 - early 1945.

By late 1944, Dad had moved on to Sway in Hampshire. It was here in March 1945 that he received the telegram informing him of my birth. All leave for army personnel had at that time been cancelled but Dad managed to get 48 hours compassionate leave. When he had at first asked his unit officer for leave to visit his wife and baby son, he was refused on the grounds that all leave was cancelled. But upon asking to see their commanding officer, Dad was permitted to see him and asked for leave. The commanding officer explained to him that leave was cancelled for all except in compassionate circumstances.

"Is it your first born child, Tims?" he asked Dad.

"Yes Sir," Dad lied.

Upon relating this tale years later Dad said if there was anything you wanted in the army, you either had to take it, or lie to get it. He got his 48 hours leave on condition he told no one else at the camp.

Dad started on his long walk to Southampton station but before he had walked far he was luckily picked up by an army lorry. The driver was going to the same station.

Dads regiment was later transferred to the Northamptonshire Regiment Royal Artillery, where he became batman to a captain Wilson. After 5 years in England he was sent to Norway in June 1945 where for the next six months they became the most Northern based troops in the world, in charge of a German POW camp at Langfjordbotn.