

A Private on the Public Stage: Examining My Grandfather's War at El Alamein



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My grandfather, Eric George Laker, was captured at the Battle of El Alamein, North Africa, on October 27, 1942. He was held in a succession of prisoner of war camps across central Europe before the war ended in 1945. For the duration of his captivity he kept a diary, which he titled “Summary of Events: From 27th October 1942 to 24th May 1945.” At the time of his capture, he was 22 years old. Repatriated to England on May 24, 1945—he arrived home in Sussex at age 25, having been a prisoner of war for two years and seven months.

While the bulk of the diary reflects upon his time as a prisoner of war, of chief importance and interest to me, however, is the specific focus that comes from the initial pages of this diary—The Battle of El Alamein. The Second Battle of El Alamein took place over a period of 20 days from October 23, 1942, until November 11, 1942. The second of the two great battles in North Africa, this latter engagement resulted in the Axis forces retreating and conceding defeat, despite Hitler’s insistence that Rommel “show [the German forces] no other road than that to victory or death” (Rommel and Hart 321). It was this battle that turned the tide of the second World War in favor of the Allies, marking a distinct revival in the morale of the Allied forces and

commanders—it was the first major offensive victory against the enemy since the start of the European war in 1939. Such was the significance of El Alamein that Winston Churchill later “purred memorably, ‘Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat’” (qtd. in Dimbley 2)

Set within this grand and overtly significant historical sequence of events, then, was my grandfather—a private in the 4th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment, 133rd Infantry Brigade, X (10th) Corps. At “about 0900 hrs” on October 28, 1942—seven days after the start of the battle—my grandfather was captured by German troops (Laker 3). This research focuses simultaneously upon the minute and the massive—on my grandfather’s detailed account of his capture and the events of his own engagements that lead to it, and it also examines these small and personal details within the larger context of the first week of the Second Battle of El Alamein. This is not, it must be stressed, a cross-examination of my grandfather’s account against that of official record. What I hope shall emerge from this research and writing is a comprehensive portrayal, personal and public, of the events of that aforementioned battle, allowing us (myself included) to answer the question posed by the late American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “What’s going on here?” (224).

Given that my grandfather’s diary details the events before his capture as well as the capture itself, I hope to draw upon “multiple and evolving” realities (Fishman and McCarthy 88) that exist within the memory and portrayal of the events surrounding my grandfather. This approach leads me to touch upon the research method and the analytical framework that I both have used and shall employ in the

research and writing of this paper. This paper is an ethnographic one, and I freely admit that parts of this work verge into auto-ethnography. This, obviously, comes about as a result of my personal investment and relationship to the author of my central source, that being my grandfather and his diary. Due to this personal relationship to my subject, in an aim to provide some academic distance for analysis and ease of approach, I shall hereafter refer to my grandfather as Private (Pte.) Laker.

In addition to Pte. Laker's war diary, the source material I have garnered more recently for this project took me to the West Sussex Record Office (WSRO), where I was able to view sources from a wide selection of public and private material. This material includes, among other things, news articles, the records from the chaplain of the 4th Battalion, Regimental gazette copies, another soldier's diary, and the battle notes of Laker's commanding officer (Sir Lashmer Gordon Whistler) from the Second Battle of El Alamein. It is worth mentioning that without ordering a comprehensive military record of Pte. Laker's service it was incredibly difficult to garner additional information specific to him and his own engagements.

What I have found over the course of my research is a variety of different narratives of the events of El Alamein, as well as several documents that speak to the larger political context in which the battle was set. These include an account of the role of the 4th Battalion as part of the 133rd Infantry Brigade during the Battle of El Alamein, copies of newsletters from Grace Line Shipping Company, and a brief series of newspaper articles published in Sussex in 1979. While much more material was available, the specificity of my focus in terms of

time frame and involved personnel excluded much of what was available to me. Therefore, the context in which this work is being produced is one of both primary and secondary sources—with great variance in the latter of those two source types. This variety of source material, as well as the significance of the events that take place in the diary, have allowed me to triangulate my focus. Lastly, I do not claim to present the entire history of events in this essay, but rather to simply expound upon the initial incidents portrayed in the wartime diary of my late grandfather.

Prior Action

The nature of warfare is one of continual change and upheaval. This is reflected not only in the horrific casualties and losses which any involved people suffer, but also in the structure of those forces involved in the fighting. The resultant military appointments of Pte. Laker are both confusing and messy, but it is seen in my sources that he was drafted as part of the 4th Battalion of the Royal Sussex regiment, given the entry-level rank of private, and allotted the call number “6402116” (“RSR/MSS/4/97—War Diary, Nominal Roll”). Under the command of Sir Lashmer Gordon Whistler, he was one of 232 privates from the brigade, out of 289 men in total (“RSR/MSS/4/97—War Diary, Nominal Roll”). The majority of these men were local to Sussex, “their names often the same as those who had left Sussex in earlier years to defeat Napoleon, fight in the Crimea and Sudan, and against the Boers, before being decimated on the Somme and at Ypres” (“How The Royal Sussex Helped To Defeat Rommel”). Prior to arriving in North Africa, the 4th Battalion had

served across Northern Europe—chiefly in Belgium and France. The copy of Pte. Laker’s diary that resides in the Imperial War Museum in London contains the “Ms copy of his unit’s Operation Order No 9 (2pp, 21 May 1940) for the Petegem area of Belgium”—confirming his active service in the Northern regions of Europe during the early stages of the war (IWM; “Private Papers”).

I could not find any information on the specific theatre of war in Belgium pertinent to him and his regiment, but what I was able to discover follows hereafter. As a private in one of the infantry forces under the banner of the 44th (Home Counties) Division, and thereby a member of the III Corps that formed in France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1940, Pte. Laker would have seen action in the Battle of France. This took place across France and the Low Countries in the spring of 1940, lasting from the 10th of May until the 22nd of June. It resulted in a heavy defeat for the Allied forces and the fall of France into Axis hands. Much of the BEF retreated towards the French coast, evacuating to safety. The most famous evacuation of the entire war was that of Dunkirk—which took place between May 26 and the June 4, 1940. Pte. Laker and the men of the 4th Royal Sussex were on the beaches with thousands of others, waiting in line and wading into the water—hoping to make it to the boats bound for home. Under duress enough already, Pte. Laker had the additional responsibility of serving as the regimental clerk and record keeper. This means, of course, that when the battalion took part in the battle and evacuation at Dunkirk, he was one of the last men to board the boats to England—he had to take note of all those who made it on board. Having spent a brief leave at home, Pte. Laker returned to active service—eventually

arriving in North Africa in May 1942. The 4th Battalion of the Royal Sussex was initially involved in the Battle of Alam el Halfa, as one of the many smaller component parts of Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery's (fondly known to all those under his command as "Monty") Eighth Army. This battle raged from August 30 until September 5 1942. Under the command of Major-General Hughes and Brigadier Whistler, the 44th Infantry Division (comprised of the 131st and 133rd Infantry Brigades) countered what was to be the last major Axis offensive of the Western Desert campaign. Despite this successful outcome of the battle, Pte. Laker's brigade is reported to have performed poorly—failing to hold their designated outposts for the necessary amount of time. The battle plan that German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel had devised was to defeat the British 8th Army and thereby strengthen the Axis, chiefly German and Italian, claims to the North African region. The eventual Allied reinforcements to Monty's army rendered this plan impossible. The resultant retreat by Axis forces compromised the military operations at the German base in Africa and thereby rendered Axis aims in the Western Desert theatre as unattainable. Hereafter, Pte. Laker's 133rd Infantry Brigade was sent to El Alamein to take part in what would become one of the defining battles of the war, and indeed the last century. This is where his diary begins, and my investigation also.

El Alamein

Almost unknown at the time of his appointment, Lieutenant-General Bernard Law Montgomery was determined to "destroy Rommel and his army" and "hit him for six, right out of Africa."

Montgomery's style was informal and not at all in keeping with the air of a commanding officer, and he "inspired the desert army, with his strange military hats, his unorthodox uniform, his habit of chatting to the men, his visits to cookhouses without warning" ("How the Royal Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel").

By the time Pte. Laker arrived at El Alamein, Lieutenant-General Montgomery had been forced to re-evaluate his plans for the Western Desert theatre. As the fighting had continued across North Africa through September and into October, Montgomery noted in his diary that it was "becoming essential to break through somewhere" (Barr 369). Indeed, he began to have severe doubts about his methods and plans and "feared that me might be asking too much of his 'somewhat untrained troops'" (Playfair et al 6). Hatching a new plan in the early part of October, General Montgomery decided to "alter the design of the battle on the front of the main attack, after the infantry had broken into the enemy's defended zone" (Playfair et al 6). As part of this new plan, and all infantry would be covered by "very strong artillery support" and would "widen the breach to [the] north and south" thereby "methodically destroy[ing] the enemy's holding troops" – a process Montgomery named "crumbling" (Playfair et al 6). This new approach of General Montgomery is reflected in the first paragraph of Pte. Laker's diary:

I may as well give the objective of the attack. The Rifle Brigade was supposed to have taken the position which was classed as a strong point. Apparently they had not done so, and the 88mm guns there were providing an obstacle to our tanks. We

were to go in with the design of putting out the 88s, hold the position until dawn, when our tanks would go through us and we would withdraw, our job done. That was what it was on paper. (Laker 2)¹¹

The armored divisions were to be properly enforced with new equipment so that they could make this supportive action count. This re-equipping affected Pte. Laker's 133rd Infantry Brigade, now under the control of the 10th Armored Division. Many of the armored divisions received their equipment with weeks to spare, time enough to train with it and familiarize the men with the new plan. The 10th Armored Division, and by default Pte. Laker, had no such luck. They were "hampered by the late arrival of equipment, which delayed the reorganization of the 133rd Infantry Brigade as a lorried infantry brigade" (Playfair et al 14). Additionally, there was "no settled or agreed War Establishment or scale of equipment for a lorried infantry brigade, [and] no extra staff or signals had been provided" (Latimer 257). Having been an "ordinary infantry brigade until 8 September," the men of the 133rd Lorried Infantry had their work cut out for them with barely days to retrain, rearm, and reorganize within the confines of General Montgomery's new plan (Latimer 257).

Montgomery's plan then, while far larger in scale, trickled down to the smallest of military levels—the Allied infantry push would be swiftly followed by artillery and tanks, which would in turn force the Axis infantry defenses back and engage their respective armor, unable

¹¹ Throughout Private Laker's diary, all exclamation marks and question marks are prefaced by a period. This is due to a technical function on the typewriter that he used to copy his diary after the war.

to “stand idle while the defences [*sic*] crumbled away” (Playfair et al 6). To make this new plan work, the aforementioned issue of the “somewhat untrained troops” now had to be amended (Playfair et al 6). Montgomery, only adding to his burgeoning reputation as a competent commander of men in the field, had realized that “his Army was badly in need of training, and ... insisted on training for the particular type of battle he had devised” (Playfair et al 6). Pte. Laker’s brigade, the 133rd Infantry, fell under that umbrella of re-training. As noted in the writings that are attributed to the chaplain of the 4th Royal Sussex Battalion, “We had trained strenuously with the 133rd Lorried Brigade for close on six weeks during which time we had learned to find our way, but night and day, across desert trenches using only the compass” (RSR/MSS/4/101–“With the 4th”). The brevity and intensity of this training was not uncommon. Most other divisions underwent “short periods of training, ... mostly by a brigade at a time. Exercises were so arranged that units (unwittingly—for reasons of security) rehearsed their parts in the coming battle” (Playfair et al 14).

The portion of the plan that involved Pte. Laker was not met with overwhelming enthusiasm. Among those doubting the newly trained troops’ ability to execute the new plan properly was the commander of the 10th Corps, General Herbert Lumsden. Described later in his *TIME Magazine* obituary from January 22, 1945, as a “glint-eyed” man, Lumsden warned his men that under no circumstances should they “rush blindly on to the enemy’s anti-tank guns or try to pass through a narrow bottleneck which is covered by a concentration of enemy tanks” (“A General Dies At Sea”; Playfair et al 35). He went on

to write that in the assured state of chaos that would unfold the battlefield, his men must employ “a proper co-ordinated [*sic*] plan” (Playfair et al 35). General Montgomery, despite doubts from his generals, gave word that his orders should be followed “exactly as he had directed,” envisioning the need to “Organise ahead for a ‘dogfight’ of a week. Whole affair about 12 days” (Playfair et al 35).

The battle of El Alamein began on Friday, October 23. The chaplain of the 4th Battalion Royal Sussex recorded that “the earth and sky suddenly rocked. This was the moment for which we had waited. The gigantic detonations and explosions increased and soon we were on the move forward to the battle” (RSR/MSS/4/101–“With the 4th”). The men of the 4th Battalion Royal Sussex continued to move forward “with intermittent speeds, sometimes halting or crawling along at slow speed, at other times making a sudden dash forward” (RSR/MSS/4/101–“With the 4th”). These movements would have been made all the more difficult due to the fact that the transportation vehicles of the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade were “entirely unarmoured [*sic*]-unlike the motor battalions’ large scale carriers” and their subsequent “requests for armoured [*sic*] vehicles...had been refused” (Latimer 257). Attacks took place all day and night, pitting the American Sherman and British Crusader tanks versus the German Panzers, all manner of heavy artillery, and infantry insurgencies and counter-movements. The men of the 133rd Lorried Brigade, Pte. Laker among them, were forced to form a “pivot of manouvere” along the southern Miteirya Ridge, under the cover of “Night-flying Hurricanes [that] would again patrol the area” (Playfair

et al 45).¹² These night bombing raids lit up the darkness of the surrounding desert night; “our bombing shuttle service was a picture to behold,” wrote Rifleman Suckling of the Rifle Battalion (qtd. in Lucas 222). Such a sight, the “bright glow” that Pte. Laker makes mention of, is demonstrated in the two photographs in Appendix A (Laker 2). These photographs detail both the opening bombardment of October 23rd and the bombing of the Miteirya Ridge, the same ridge that the men of the 133rd Lorried Brigade had pivoted around on that first morning of the battle.

Such was the importance of this maneuver by the 133rd that General Lumsden wrote in his diary that while “we may get through to where his [*the enemy*] guns are now. It is a tremendous decision. If we don’t do it the battle just fizzles out” (qtd. in Barr 330). Sadly for the men of the 133rd Lorried Infantry, and indeed for Pte. Laker, Playfair points out that the “night’s operations were ill-fated from the start” (45). With far, far “more mines on and beyond the Miteirya Ridge than had been expected,” the clearing of these “amid many distractions” proved incredibly difficult (Playfair et al 45). Furthermore, amid the chaos, “many vehicles were set on fire, and the blaze attracted more bombing and more shelling.” In an effort to minimize casualties, “the regiments dispersed as best they could, but much delay and some disorganization resulted” (Playfair et al 45). Pte.

¹²The use of aerial bombardment was commonplace in the war by this time, and El Alamein was no different from any other theatre of battle. Bombing of Axis targets commenced on the first day of battle, predominantly taking place under cover of darkness.

Laker's diary reflects this disorganization: "Almost from the start the manoeuvre [*sic*] was a fiasco—unfortunately for us!" (Laker 1).

A further example of the disorganization that came with the restructuring of the regiment was demonstrated in the communications systems utilized on the battlefield. Such was the chaotic nature of the Battle of El Alamein that many of the communications networks were temporarily disabled or entirely knocked out during the initial phases of the battle. Such is the complexity of these communications networks that the widespread fighting readily knocks out any method of communications that officers in the field may use to pass on orders to their troops. An example of these networks, one of dozens present at Alamein, is given in the diagram of New Zealand military divisional signals as shown in Appendix B. These networks crisscrossed each other, adding layers of potential disaster to the already incredibly dangerous environment that Pte. Laker and his fellows were fighting in. As the battle continued, the men of the 4th Royal Sussex, and thereby the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade, suffered frequent outages of communications, making all orders nearly impossible to update. This chaos appears across many sources. First of all, in Pte. Laker's diary, he recalls that there were men and Commanding Officers "dashing here, there, and all over the place, trying to put their men 'in the picture' but owing to the rush instructions were perforce of a very much abridged nature" (Laker 1). "Everybody looks shaken for no communication has come from Bn. H.Q.," wrote the chaplain of the 4th Royal Sussex (RSR/MSS/4/101—"With the 4th"). He and his men seem to have lost contact with their commanding officers at some

point during their offensives, “Where are the company commanders? Where is the C.O.? ...No one seems to know!” (RSR/MSS/4/101–“With the 4th”). On October 28, the official diary of the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade notes that “Communications between the reserve coy and Bn H.Q. had not yet been established and it was impossible owing to the enemy fire even to look over the intervening ridge, it was not possible to prove whether the forward positions had been over-run until darkness fell” (RSR/MSS/4/97–“War Diary” 3).

The Battle of El Alamein rolled on, and Pte. Laker’s 133rd Lorried Infantry moved deeper into enemy territory, having been routed and rebuffed on several occasions. Pte. Laker was put into action on October 25th. The men of the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment, including those of the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade, were put into a night attack and were instructed to capture one of three enemy strongpoints, known as Woodcock (on the right), Kidney Ridge (down the center), and Snipe (on the left). The target for Pte. Laker and his cohorts was that aforementioned “position dubbed Woodcock” (“How the Royal Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel”). The night attack on October 25th had been “preceded by an immense artillery barrage” as per Montgomery’s new plan (“How the Royal Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel”). The three points of Woodcock, Snipe, and Kidney Ridge proved hard to capture, as the “enemy infantry, dug into narrow slit trenches surrounded by scattered mines and barbed wire, put up a fierce resistance” (“How the Royal Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel”). The men of the “2 and 4 R. Sussex were pinned to the ground by the fire ensuing from the armed battles” (RSR 1/138-153–“War Diary” 1). Happily for Pte. Laker, it was seen that “at first light [that] all three

objectives had been gained,” which, in light of the fact that large numbers of “Sussex men had died, or were wounded during the attack,” was a remarkable achievement (RSR 1/138-153–“War Diary” 1). According to the official war diary of the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade, it was reported that at “529hrs 4 R. Sussex were in possession of WOODCOCK” (RSR 1/138-153–“War Diary” 3). On the morning of October 27, the 133rd had been ordered to “relieve the 2nd Rifle Brigade in place on Snipe” (Latimer 257). Sadly, a confusion in the accuracy of the maps that had been approved for military use and planning—a contour in the land being mistaken for what was in fact a “deepish depression”—led the aforementioned 2nd Rifle Brigade “too far left of Snipe,” a move that would “lead to tragedy for the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment”—and Pte. Laker (Latimer 257).

Captivity

The main focal point of Pte. Laker’s diary is his experiences in the succession of Prisoner of War (POW) camps where he was held for the remainder of the war following his capture at El Alamein. The exact events surrounding his capture are murky, depending upon the source being used to determine the truth of the situation. However, my research allows me to dovetail multiple accounts of the same events and draw some conclusions.

According to Brigadier Alec W. Lee, the commanding officer of the 133rd Lorried Infantry Regiment, on the morning of October 28, at “approx 0730 hrs the Bde’s right fwd position WOODCOCK held by the 4 R. Sussex was over-run by the enemy” (RSR 1/138-153–“War Diary” 3). As Barr notes, “the men of the 4th Royal Sussex were not

desert veterans... [and] their inexperience proved costly” (Barr 356). He quotes Lieutenant C. E. Hutchinson, the acting observation officer with the 2nd Kings Royal Rifle Corps, the same corps that the men of the 4th Royal Sussex (specifically the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade) had been sent to help: “40 or 50 inf whom, I was told, were a coy of the 4 Bn Royal Sussex Regt; they were being rounded up by two Mk.III’s and two M.13’s” (Barr 359).¹³ The report of Lieutenant Hutchinson matches “How the Royal Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel” in that it details the suddenness with which the men were “over-run by German tanks” (“How the Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel”). As a result of this surprise cornering, “some 400 men of the battalion” were “marched away across the sand into captivity” (“How the Sussex Helped to Defeat Rommel”). The complications in varying accounts begin here. The war diary of the 133rd notes that two groups of men from the 4th Royal Sussex were taken prisoner that day, but one around 0730 and one later—approximated at 0800 hours or so. Pte. Laker’s diary reflects that he was among the latter group of men taken prisoner:

At about 0900 hrs we received the shock of our lives. We were contently playing with our automatics when I looked up and saw some of our fellows climbing out of their slit trenches with their hands up.! One even had a white handkerchief tied to his rifle. I blinked and then looked around. I saw a tank that had

¹³The Mk.III tank that Lieutenant Hutchinson refers to, I believe, was the Nazi Panzer III—one of the most commonly used Axis tanks of the war. Additionally, the M.13 tank was an Italian Fiat-Ansaldo M13/40, the main tank that the Italians used for the duration of the war.

come over the ridge with others to the right of it. A fellow was sitting on the top with a nasty looking L.M.G. which he was waving around in a most unfriendly manner, and walking beside the tank was another chap with a revolver. He was waving his hands around him indicating to our fellows that they were to come with him and surrender. Then to my horror I saw a black cross on the front of the tank. (Laker 3)

The description that Pte. Laker gives of the events surrounding his capture, indeed the time that he notes it took place, match the time frame of the aforementioned Lieutenant Hutchinson. Given the instability of military communications during the battle, it is no surprise there is an hour difference between the accounts of Lieutenant Hutchinson and Pte. Laker.

Brigadier Lee notes in the diary of the 133rd that “wireless communications...broke down,”¹⁴ and that every battalion was “under continuous fire from small arms, mortars and arty... confined to their slit trenches, intercommunication being impossible” ((RSR 1/138-153–“War Diary” 3, 4). It was only later in the morning when he could confirm, “the whole of Bn H.Q. were among those presumed taken prisoner” (RSR 1/138-153–“War Diary” 3). This group of men, I believe, included Pte. Laker. The losses of the 4th Royal Sussex from the day were totaled at “47 killed and 342 missing,” and Brigadier Lee later complained to his superiors that his brigade had been

¹⁴*War Diary. Copy of the Official War Diary of the 133rd Infantry Brigade, The Royal Sussex Regiment.* Compiled by Brigadier Alec W. Lee. 3.

“completely unsupported by armour” and as a result had easily succumbed to enemy pressures (Playfair et al 47; Latimer 258).

Pte. Laker’s diary, detailing the gut-wrenching confusion that he felt at the moment of his capture, mirrors the frustrations of Brigadier Lee. Disbelief was rife among the men, with Pte. Laker being “convinced that no man living can put into words what my feelings were at that moment” (Laker 3). Interestingly, and perhaps commonplace in such situations, Laker’s diary and his own feelings at his capture remain defiant for a short while: “What had happened? Had our tanks been beaten back? Impossible.! Had Jerry made a counter attack and broken through our companies.? Question after question flashed through my mind as we sat seemingly frozen. Prisoners of war—horrible thought.!” (Laker 3). At the beginning of his diary, Pte. Laker writes that his being a prisoner of war was (at the time),

Funny...really, because whoever I speak to agrees with me that that is the last thing that enters ones head when going into action. The thought that you might stop a fatal one occurs to you, and also that you may get wounded either more or less severely, but that you may be captured never enters your head. Maybe it is just as well. (Laker 1)

Given that he would be held as a prisoner for the next 2 years and 7 months of his life, there is a grim irony at his outrage and somewhat humorous assessment of the previously unconsidered outcome of being on active duty for a nation at war.

The resultant Allied victory at the Battle of El Alamein was heralded throughout the world as the moment that turned the tide in the favor of the Allied forces. The reporting of the involvement of the Royal Sussex Regiment was far more locally based. An extract from the *Egyptian Gazette* of November 8, 1942, tells of the actions of those brave men. The 4th Royal Sussex Regiment, according to the unnamed Brigadier who was interviewed for the piece, “had captured two vital features, driving a deep wedge into the enemy line. It was certain that the Germans would try their hardest to win back this ground” (RSR/MSS/2/149–“Well Done the Sussex”).¹⁵ The following morning, the Brigadier touches upon the series of incidents concerning the capture of 342 men, including Pte. Laker: “At first light they attacked with tanks and over-ran some of the forward troops. They shelled the Sussex lines and raked it with machine-gun fire. Every weapon they could bring to bear opened up at the slightest hint of a movement. But the Sussex held on grimly” (RSR/MSS/2/149–“Well Done the Sussex”). It was this group of forward troops, overrun by the German offensive line, which included Pte. Laker. The article goes on to quote another Pte. from the regiment, Pte. Harvey. Harvey’s mood, having survived the battle and avoided capture, is optimistic and expectant: “It was our first real battle out here and all the boys are really fighting fit now” (RSR/MSS/2/149–“Well Done the Sussex”). It reads as though Harvey considers El Alamein a training

¹⁵ It is safe for us to assume that these two vital positions were Woodcock and Snipe, the points of attack and movement for the 4th Royal Sussex and the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade.

exercise of sorts, as a warm up for some hitherto unknown larger event.

Conclusion

It is an odd thing to find the events that shaped the life of someone you love have been distilled to words devoid of detail and emotional recognition. Some of the accounts of these events border upon jocular. This is why the diary of Pte. Laker carries such particular resonance for me. Obvious familial bond aside, I find the detail that he writes with and the accuracy of detail he blatantly strives to achieve both refreshing and, more than occasionally, alarming. The large majority of his diary details his day-to-day life in a succession of camps, but my curiosity about the events surrounding his capture afforded me the opportunity to delve further into his past. He was a quiet and reserved man, and barely spoke of his experiences during the war. The details I have included in this piece add flesh to the skeletal description and notes that my grandfather makes in his diary. It is my hope, somehow, that these additions add greater depth to the experiences of Pte. Laker, and also that anyone reading this can gain a tangible sense of the man I knew simply as Grandad.

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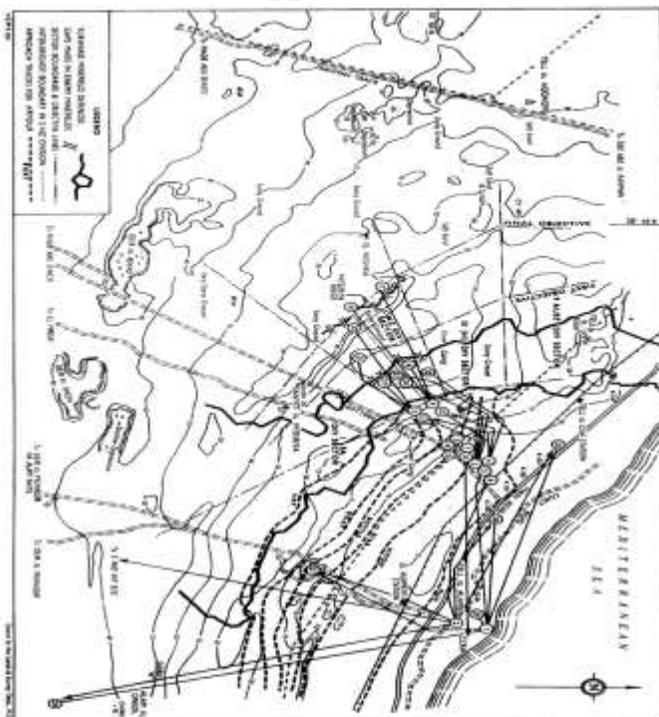
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Appendix A



“El Alamein—Oct 1942: a) Opening Bombardment—10:30 pm, 23 Oct & b) Bombing Motor Transport—Miteirya Ridge, Night 25/26 Oct.” West Sussex Record Office (WSRO). RSRMS 2/146. Print.

Appendix B



- BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN, OCTOBER 1942**
Principal Wireless Communications
1. Main HQ to Camp forward RT control
 2. Main HQ to Camp forward RT control
 3. Main HQ to NZ Div forward RT control
 4. Main HQ to NZ Div forward RT control
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 9. HQ 5 NZ Div forward RT control
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 13. HQ 5 NZ Div forward RT control
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