



Corporal Charles Samuel Hardiman

CHARLES SAMUEL HARDMAN

1922 - 1995

Charles Samuel Hardman was my father.

He was born in 1922 in a poor part of Liverpool and was one of four children. His father, also Charles Samuel Hardman, was a carter by trade – he was employed by the Rank Flour company (which later became Rank Hovis McDougall). He had to arrive at about 5 o'clock in the morning at the flour mill at Liverpool docks and go to the company's stables. There he had to collect his cart horse, feed it, clean it and fit it with the equipment needed for the horse to be backed into the shafts of a cart, ready to start work at 6.00am. He would load sacks of refined flour onto the cart and take them to the bakeries dotted around Liverpool and beyond. He would then have to take the horse back to the stables, clean and feed it and settle it for the night before he was allowed to go home. Of course, the buses were not running so early in the morning and that meant that Grandfather had to leave the house at 4.00am and walk three miles so that he would arrive on time. Being late for work meant instant dismissal and poor men, like my Grandfather, with a family to support, could not be without work, like so many other men in the 1920's.

My Gran looked after the four children and, in an effort to increase the family's low income, she took in washing. This is an alien concept in this day and age when most people have an automatic washing machine or take their washing to a launderette. She did not have any kind of washing machine and would boil greasy overalls and the like in a metal tub with a fire underneath it to heat the water. When the washing was clean, she would dry it, iron it and take a bundle of clean ironed clothes back to their owner and be paid about six old pence or 2 ½ p in today's money.

Like many poor families in Liverpool, they had no money for doctors or drugs so when epidemics of scarlet fever swept through the city, they, like other families, lost two of the children to this disease.

The main escape from this poverty was education. My Dad worked hard and passed the equivalent of the old 11+ and went to a grammar school. There he got his School Certificates, roughly the equivalent of GCSEs and he became the first member of his family to have a white collar worker job – he worked as a Junior Clerk in a shipping office – a most prodigious position in those days. Even though there were now only two children and Dad was bringing in a small wage, the family was still poor. Dad had never been on holiday and, at work, he heard about the Territorial Army. The TA would pay you a small training allowance and took you away for 2 weeks intensive training to summer camp. Dad thought that this was marvellous and wanted to join up straight away so he could get a summer holiday. But you had to be 18 to join and Dad would not reach that age till October 1940. So he falsified his birth certificate and became a member of the TA. Sadly, in the summer of 1939 when Dad was still 16, it was obvious that war with Germany was inevitable and all summer camps were cancelled. He never did get his holiday.

Before war broke out in September 1939, Dad, along with other members of the TA, was the first to be called up. It was during his early days in the army, that his falsified birth certificate was discovered and although he continued training, he was too young to be sent overseas to fight.

At the north end of Liverpool, there is an affluent area called Crosby and it has many large Victorian houses. Several of these houses were requisitioned by the military and they were used for various purposes, including the planning for the defence of Atlantic convoys. My Dad was put on guard duty to defend a group of these houses. He had only been there a day or so and he was on night duty in thick fog. As he turned a corner on his patrol, a dark figure loomed out of the fog towards him. He challenged the figure to say who he was. No reply. He

challenged again. No reply. So with fixed bayonet he charged forward and stabbed a post box. Many years later, my sister had a flat in one of these houses and my Dad took her to see the still scarred box.

I know very little about what my Dad did during the first two years of the war, except that it involved him travelling to different locations in the UK, including the north east of England in the Newcastle area. He was a member of the 46th (Liverpool Welsh) Royal Tank Regiment. In 1941, he was put on a ship with a great many other squaddies and it sailed down the west coast of Africa. It stopped in South Africa and he thought he had landed in Heaven. The people there were so pleased to see them, took them into their homes, fed them exotic food, arranged dances and afternoon teas. If he had been given the choice, I'm sure my Dad would have stayed there! But of course, it was not to be and he sailed up the east coast to Egypt to arrive in May/June 1942.

He became a corporal in charge of his Matilda tank which was a standard tank for his regiment. It was underpowered, under armed and under protected. It constantly broke down. He had a scar on each hand where he was fixing his broken down tank and had put a wrench on the cover of his tank tracks for some time. Completely forgetting about the heat of an Egyptian summer, he picked the wrench up and burned his hand. He didn't learn his lesson as he did it a second time on another occasion and had a burn on each hand.

Not long after his arrival, with his regiment, he went out to fight Rommel's Desert army and their allies, the Italians. He was in one skirmish when his tank brewed up as it was known amongst the soldiers. In other words, it was hit by enemy fire and destroyed. He managed to escape his ruined tank with only minor injuries. He was soon back in another Matilda and involved in July 1942 in the fighting the Italians at the First Battle of El Alemain.

Unfortunately, his tank was hit and severely damaged. His crew was killed and he was seriously injured with shrapnel wounds all over his body, particularly his legs and neck. He was captured by the Italians and became a prisoner-of-war. He was treated by the Italian medics and very nearly had his legs amputated. However, a British medic who was also a POW managed to save them. My Dad hated the Italians from that day forward. Some time after his capture, he was in a convoy of vehicles heading for the North African coast where they were to be placed on an Italian ship for internment, initially in Italy. For some reason, the convoy missed the sailing time and the wounded POWs were not placed on the ship. This was fortunate in the extreme as the British allies attacked and sank the Italian ship.

However, he was later sent to Italy and began the long journey up its length, heading for Germany. He said that he was at his lowest ebb when he was in the mountains in the far north of Italy. Apparently, the Italians treated them appallingly badly, far worse than the Germans did. He was still suffering from his wounds and the Italians were with-holding drugs and medicines from their prisoners. It was thick snow outside the huts and unbelievably cold inside them. He somehow got himself out of the hut and dragged himself into the snow to die. But, fortunately for him, somebody found him and brought him back into the hut.

He was transported into Germany and his final camp was Stalag 4B. This was located halfway between Potsdam and Dresden, close to the Polish border, in what became many years later, East Germany. Needless to say, he did not enjoy being incarcerated here. But, Dad never hated the Germans. The main problems there were boredom and the fact that you were never allowed to be alone. If you escaped, you ran the risk of being shot and if that did not happen, you were returned to the POW camp. Inside the perimeter wire, there was a line drawn on the ground about 10 feet in from the wire. POWs were not permitted to cross this line and if they did and the Germans in the watchtowers noticed them, as they inevitably did, there was a high risk that the Germans would turn their guns on you.

The British POWs organised many things to keep their fellow prisoners occupied and to keep up morale. Football and cricket, of course, card games,

music nights, plays and pantomimes. Somewhere in the family, there are a couple of photos of my Dad dressed as a woman in a comedy play. I have no idea how the POWs managed to take photos.

Back home in Liverpool, his Mum and Dad received a telegram from the War Office to say that Dad was missing in action. They later received a card to say that he was still missing and now believed to be killed in action. Of course, they were devastated and mourned their only son. Many months went by when they believed that he was dead, when out of the blue, they received a letter from the north east of England. It was from a girl that Dad had been friendly with before he was sent overseas. His Mum and Dad knew nothing about this girl as they were staunch Protestants and she was a Roman Catholic and in Liverpool in those days, the two religions never mixed. This girl had been listening to Vatican Radio which from time to time, gave the names, ranks and numbers of prisoners-of-war held by the Italians. She had recognised my Dad's name and, as he had given her his address in Liverpool before he sailed away, she wrote to Gran and Grandfather asking if they were aware of this and did they know how "Charlie" was doing.

This was wonderful news to the family. Eventually, through the Red Cross they established that their son was indeed not dead but wounded and captured. Once they knew this and ascertained which camp he was in, they managed to scrape together enough ration coupons to send Dad some cigarettes, food and other goodies every other week. On the week that they did not send a parcel via the Red Cross, other members of the family went on a rota and took their turn to send a parcel. Sadly, not one of the 100+ parcels ever found its way to my Dad. The war progressed and in the camp, it became obvious that Germany was losing. It was only a matter of time before the prisoners would be released. They just had to stay alive till that time came. Lice and other vermin were rampant throughout the camp and a great deal of time was spent trying to keep their bodies, clothes, bedding etc as clean as possible to prevent diseases such as typhus. The food rations were very poor and, when Dad did get home, he could not look at a cabbage for years as this had been the staple foodstuff in the camp. On April, 1945, the Germans fled in front of the advance by Russian troops and the Russians took over the running of the camp. Dad said that the only difference was that if you escaped, the Russians did not come looking for you. So on 23 April, Dad and several other men walked out of the camp. They made their way across Germany until they met up with some American troops who handed them over to the British.

He managed to get back home sometime in the early autumn of 1945 but he was not actually demobbed from the army till 1946. Life as a Junior Clerk in a shipping office did not appeal to him, even if he had been able to go back to his old job, so he joined the National Fire Service. This became the Liverpool Fire Service where he progressed up the ranks until, in 1966, the family moved to Luton where Dad continued his fire service career. About 2 years later, the family moved to Walsall where Dad became the Chief Fire Officer. Following local government re-organisation in the mid 70's, he became the Assistant Chief Fire Officer for the West Midlands.

When he reached retirement age, he did not go on to a formal second career. It corresponded with the time that my wife and I and my sister had our children. Dad became the chief child-minder (unpaid of course). If anyone asked him what he was doing now he had retired, his standard response was "I haven't retired, I have just changed my employers!". Sadly Dad died in 1995 shortly before his 73rd birthday.