

Tommy Austin

Hanslope Park 1945 – 1947. Royal Signals, manufacturing cipher equipment.

Having completed a seven-year apprenticeship with Albert Herbert Ltd, I continued to work there (which was classed as a reserved occupation), until Christmas 1944 when I received my call-up papers.

I was to report to the stationmaster at Castlethorpe railway station at 8 pm on 1 January 1945. It was snowing hard and when I arrived I found that three other chaps were in the waiting room. Their names were, Frank Morris, Alec and Ray Turton.

I said, "Are you here to go in the army?" and they said that they were. The stationmaster came in and said, "Now you are all here I will send for the transport". Shortly after this an army lorry came and picked us up and deposited us at an army camp where there was a guard on the gate. We were told to go into the guard-house and given supper, then we were shown beds, where we slept that night.

The following morning we were taken to the quartermaster's stores and kitted out. This is when we found out that we were in the Royal Signals at Hanslope Park in Buckinghamshire.

We were then taken once more by lorry to do two weeks military training at Barnet. We were shown where our billets, the cookhouse and the regimental office were and told by the sergeant that he didn't want to see us again for a fortnight.

During this time we went to a party at a Land Army girl's camp. As we entered the room we were supposed to take a slip of paper, which had a girl's name on it, from a hat, and that was your girl for the night.

Frank joined in musical chairs, where the men would go down on one knee and when the music stopped the girls who were circling would plump themselves down onto the nearest men's knee. The girl that plumped herself down on Frank's knee was exceptionally plump and she put his knee out of its socket, so he had to be taken to an army nursing home, where he spent the next two months.

At the end of the fortnight we were given travel warrants, a 48 hour pass and told to go home and return to Wolverton station. There was a lorry waiting when we arrived and we were taken to the camp at Hanslope.

It was then that we found out that we had been specially enlisted, together with other mechanical, electrical and radio engineers to make copies of the Enigma machine.

We had to line up in the regimental institute to salute and receive our Army pay and then we collected our Foreign Office pay, which was about 11 shillings per week. We worked in a factory in the grounds of the park on two shifts – 8 till 5 and 5 till 12.

I was the only pianist in the camp at Hanslope so I played the piano for the dances, and also for the parties in the sergeants' mess.

Colonel Cole-Adams fancied himself as a singer and an officer would say to him, "How about a song Colonel?" He would say to me at the piano, "What shall I sing, Austin?" I would then say, "Sing The Mountains of Mourne, Sir". (That was the only song he knew all of the words to.)

He came into the workshop one day and (everyone stood to attention) he said to me, "I've got another song, Austin, that I think that everyone will like. Come up to the officers' mess at 5 o'clock and I'll give you the music".

The song went something like this, "Oh will she be waiting up? Oh will she be cross with me? When a rough-haired pup is waiting to say goodnight to you!" He said, "What do you think Austin?" – I said, "It'll kill em Sir!"

Some of the other chaps I remember were: Major Reardon, Frank Morris, Quarter-Master Sergeant Terry Haddon, Major Hawkes, Bill Bailey (who later became my best man), Signalmans Plewis and Signalmans Riley.

Some pubs around the area were The New Inn at New Bradwell, The Galleon Inn at Stony Stratford and the Cock Inn at Hanslope. Dances were held in a hut behind the Cock Inn and this was where I learned to dance.

I had my own car, which was a Ford 8, which I decided to spray paint, but I got 14 days confined to barracks for "borrowing" the portable paint sprayer. My "jankers" was to clean out the cookhouse stores, which I duly did, removing tins of butter, jam and cheese into the boot of my car.

We had poached eggs on toast on Sunday mornings at a hut in the village, when we should have been on church parade. I remember Margaret waiting in my car for my evening shift to finish with a paraffin heater to keep her warm.

Margaret was in the ATS when I met her at the ack-ack camp in Bulkington Road, Bedworth, where I sometimes played the piano. We married on 7 April 1945 in Bedworth and I married in my uniform. I was a member of the local Druids Lodge and they formed an archway of their crooks for us to walk through on leaving the church.

Margaret's father was a CQMS in the Royal Engineers and was mentioned in dispatches for distinguished service and also received a certificate from the village of Dunkirk, for operations in the field from March to June 1940. Margaret's brother Bill was also in the Army in Germany, and she wrote and told him of the archway of crooks. He wrote back to ask what kind of a family had she married into!

To celebrate the end of the war with Germany there was a church parade from the Camp to the village. Major Hawkes changed step several times on the way up!

The conditions of my engagement were till the end of the Emergency or until our demob group came up. We were turned over to civilian when the war ended. My group was 34 but I was demobbed at the same time as Group 3.