



Major G K Rothwell (Ret'd)

Extract from his Biography

From March 1943 to June 1945.

1.	Special Operator Training Battalion	Douglas, IOM	14 Mar 1943
2.	1 Special Wireless Group	Harpenden	21 Apr 1944
3.	(X-4List 54 RHU)	Lewes	23 June 1944
4.	110 Special Wireless Section	Nonant, France	30 June 1944
5.	109 Special Wireless Section	Bruggen, Belgium	20 Oct 1944
6.	(33 C CS –X-2 List 53 RHU)	Venlo	27 Mar 1945
7.	X – 4 List 53 R HU	Bruges, Belgium	8 Apr 1945
8.	33 RHU		30 Apr 1945
9.	109 Special Wireless Section	Mielkendonk, Kiel	18 May 1945
10.	111 special Wireless Section	Minden, Germany	30 Jun 1945

Joining the Army

Conscription had been introduced initially for the Militia, in early 1939 so as 1942 came to an end I was thinking of my imminent entry into the Armed Forces, then usually at the age of 18. Being well informed (as usual!) I had discovered that if one volunteered one could choose one's Arm and employment, instead of simply being sent anywhere.

So I volunteered for Royal Corp of Signals, with the intention of becoming a wireless operator. I had first to go to Wigan for interviews, tests and a medical examination I received a Warrant which I exchanged for a railway ticket at the station and before, leaving was paid One Shilling (5p) being a day's pay for untrained soldiers!

There was then a hiccup, I do not know what went wrong but despite several inquiries I was not called forward to join until 17th December. This involved a rail journey to Richmond, where we were met, packed into Lorries (Trucks) and taken to Catterick Camp to join 5 Primary Training Centre, located on Le Cateau Lines. Incidentally all were initially enlisted into the General Service Corps.

Le Cateau Lines comprised huts constructed during the 1st World War and was still in existence and use when we were there in 1957 – 59. After being allotted a bed and locker and changing into Denim Fatigues, the first task was to pack up our civilian clothes for posting home.

The initial training was standardised for all arms and comprised six weeks of rigorous and exhausting infantry training. The training day ran from 07.30 to 18.00 including Saturdays. It was only after four weeks, when we were fitted with Battle Dress, that we were allowed out on a Sunday afternoon to go to the Club at Camp Centre.

I survived the training without shooting myself nor anyone else and there followed a move to the Signals Holding Battalion at Thirsk on 27th January 1942. One company was located in what had been the Work-House and the administrative elements were on the Race Course in the warren of rooms and storage space under the Grandstand. Most of the troops were under canvas. I recall spending most of my time as Company Messenger, which was quite congenial.

I was provided with a bicycle and when not on my rounds was able to use the sparse comforts of the Company Headquarters. It was only later that I realised why I spent nearly two months here, it was to allow completion of the Vetting process that preceded selection for training as a Special Operator. At the start of March 1943 I was granted seven days leave.



At That time one went on leave in uniform, in Full Service Marching Order (FSMO) which meant one had a complete set of webbing plus a kitbag rifle and 50 rounds of ammunition to carry. As the train was too long for the platform at Thrisk, it was a struggle to have one's kit and oneself up into the carriage from rail level!

After leave I was instructed to proceed to the Isle of Man where the Special Operator Training Battalion was located. A long row of Boarding House along the promenade had been requisitioned and the promenade divided in half by a wire mesh fence. Special Operators were trained to receive and send Morse to British Army standards and additionally learnt the styles, codes and procedures of German and Italian services.

After three months or so there was a test which eliminated the less proficient. The remainder continued the course until they qualified as Operator Special Class II after six months or so. Training continued with operational training, meaning one practised monitoring actual German networks. Additionally, Japanese procedures were taught as the Japanese Morse alphabet had 72 characters this was not at all simple.

So the training lasted over a year (extraordinary for the wartime) and it wasn't until April 1944 that I was to join No 1 Special Wireless Group, and then located in a large country house at Rothampstead in Harpenden.



But before that could be, it was necessary to pass the final theoretical and practical tests. The latter concluded with us being taken out at night in a closed truck and set down on our own somewhere in the wilder parts of the island.

One was equipped with a No 9 Set (which was a Transmitter/Receiver), a Rod Aerial, a Battery, Charging Engine, fuel, three days Compo Rations, water can and other essentials. The ploy was to set up your Station and establish communication with the Control station, then in daylight, work out one's location from the ground encode it in Mapcode and send it back to Control. If you got it right you were then collected if not you stayed out until you did get it right.

In my case I had two misfortunes firstly I had to clamber up to the top of two hills before I could be sure I had located myself correctly on the map. And secondly in my enthusiasm to demonstrate my efficiency I threw the Send/Receive Switch over with such energy that the set slid off the ledge and down the hill fortunately it still worked

I do recall many opportunities on the Island nor that we had much free time to enjoy what little entertainment was available. I do remember that Kippers were still obtainable and that from time to time I used to buy a box and have them posted home. Level was allowed at least once during the training, when one sailed on the Manx Ferries from Douglas to Liverpool and return.



Rothampstead House accommodated the Headquarters and radio set rooms of No1 Special Wireless Group. There were three operating sections each housed in their own small camp, dispersed around Harpenden. The shift cycle was harsh it ran as follows:

- Day 1** 00.00 to 08.00
16.00 to 18.00 Camp duties or Training
- Day 2** 00.00 to 08.00
16.00 to 18.00 Camp duties or training
- Day 3** 00.00 to 08.00
16.00 to 24.00
- Day 4** 09.00 to 12.00 Camp duties or training
16.00 to 24.00
- Day 5** 09.00 to 12.00 Camp duties or training
16.00 to 24.00
- Day 6** 08.00 to 16.00
- Day 7** 08.00 to 16.00
- Day 8** 08.00 to 16.00
- Day 9** Day Off

Only on the short turn-round (days 3 & 5) when one had only eight hours off was transport provided and note, that at midnight on the day-off the cycle started again.

So one was kept busy to say the least! And when one had time off, there was little time to see and do. I did get to St Albans a couple of times. And from time to time one could claim a 48-hour break.

On one of these I thought I would try hitch-hiking home.

An American jeep took me all the way to the US Air Force Base at Burtonwood. Some of the buildings from this base are still visible from the Motorway I made my way to a railway station and from there to Formby. Curiously, I cannot remember how I made the return journey!

Another time, when I was going on leave and thus had a warrant for rail travel, I got off as soon after finishing my shift as I could then boarded the Liverpool train at Euston Station.

Although this was early in 1944 sporadic air rails were still taking place and the train was delayed, arriving in Liverpool in the early hours of the morning. So I had a long hike from Lime Street to Exchange Station and a long cold wait at the latter until the first train for Southport departed!

Preparations for the landings in France were in hand and as the Group held all the reserve Special Operators for 21st Army Group, I found myself moved into a Reinforcement Camp near Lewes in Sussex. Like all the other locations involved we were isolated from the outside world completely, to avoid any leakage of the invasion date.

This duty took place on the 6th June 1944. 110 (SWS) Special Wireless Section which landed on D Day lost some men when their landing ship was shelled. Consequently I was one of those selected to replace them. I was never able to weigh my kit but for this trip it was the heaviest I ever carried! In addition to the standard FSMO (Full Service Marching Order) we carried a 24 Hour ration pack and heater, an emergency ration pack (like a big bar of Chocolate), 50 rounds of ammo, a rolled blanket, entrenching tool and half a bivouac.



We3 marched to Lewes station (mostly downhill, fortunately!) And then travelled by military train to Newhaven. There we boarded an American Navy LCI (landing Craft Infantry which sailed early the next morning. About 36 hours later the shores of Normandy hove into view, presenting us with a spectacle we found hard to comprehend. The sea was a mass of vessels of all sizes moving in all directions or anchored or beached



Our craft nosed it's way slowly in until the bows beached. We were lucky in that instead of a ramp, our craft had long boarding ladders on either side of the bow (front). These were lowered and bridged the gap to dry ground, so that we got ashore without getting our boots wet! Bemused and

confused (and a little windy in our new surroundings), we were marshalled off the beach and into a holding area behind the sand dunes.

The whole area was incredibly cramped and crowded. There was constant movement and noise as men and vehicles landed from following ships while overall lay the sounds of not so distant fighting artillery fire, fighter and spotter aircraft flying low, the clank of tank tracks on metalled road and so on.

The night was spent in the staging area sleeping on the ground although we were not required to dig slit trenches. But all of us were still bewildered and naturally keyed up, so that sleep was in very short supply. Early the next morning we set off to march to Bayeux. March is really not the right term we stumbled in single file at the side of dusty roads constantly buffeted by passing Lorries (trucks). Apart from damaged houses and dead cows and horses scatted around the fields, there was not much to see. Having spent the night in the open again, I was eventually collected by a jeep from my new section. The story of my time in 110 SWS (Special Wireless Section) which appeared in the Journal of the Royal Signals Institution concentrated naturally upon operational aspects. But memories of more mundane affairs are stronger.

I joined the Section near the village of Nonant, which lay on a slight rise overlooking a valley towards Caen. I will never forget the slight of the heavy bomber raids on the town. They came in late in the evening, flying quite low, as the Germans had relatively few AA defences. The noise of the aircraft and the exploding bombs merged into a continuous roar as a vast cloud of smoke and dust arose from the town.



When it became known that I had learnt French at school, I was sent to a nearby farm, which was still occupied to try to buy butter and eggs. The latter were not available, but butter was there in abundance. But there was nothing in which to wrap it, resourcefully the wife used cabbage leaves to pack it. The couple were mistrustful of the allied French France we had been issued with, but settled with delight for a 50 tin of cigarettes!

A breakthrough failed to emerge as expected but in due course we were bivouacked in the Bocage country. Death has its own smell and it lay over the whole area, so that we had become used to it. But here it was especially strong and getting stronger. Seeking the source, the body of a German sniper was eventually located in a hedgerow so well concealed that he was totally invisible to a normal glance. Naturally, in that warm June bodies decomposed rapidly. So my first sight and handling of a dead body was not pleasant. In fact we dug a grave as near as possible and rolled his body into it. His papers and identity disc were sent through the usual channels to base.

During the battle for the Falaise Gap, we were covering the German division involved. The Germans were using a three letter Book Code. A Book Code provides little or no protection if the enemy has a copy of it. Thus the group FDW might mean midnight and FDX would have a totally unrelated meaning such as ammunition reserves.

Now we did have a copy of the code book! So when I began picking up a long message in this code, the Intelligence chap was sitting on the back steps of the radio van decoding it as I handed him each sheet as it was completed. And it turned out to be the complete plan for the counter attack the Germans planned at Mortain.

But the undoubted highlight of the campaign was the entry into Brussels. Once the battle for the Falaise Gap had ended, German defences collapsed rapidly and the advance to the Seine was almost unimpeded. The Guards Armoured Division were already over when we crossed by a Class 9 Pontoon bridge, though I cannot recall where. After a short overnight bivvy a start was made early the next morning in a long column of vehicles so that we entered Brussels in later afternoon.

The streets were crowded with cheering and celebrating inhabitants. Many passed up gifts of various sorts, flowers and so on. Others climbed on our Lorries and rode some distance with us. It was all quite exhilarating and roused emotions which I will never forget.

The section was destined for the grounds of the Royal Palace at Laeken, where the Queen Mother was still in residence. It was decided that slit trenches could be dispensed with and it was almost a pleasure to put up our bivouacs at ground level! Late in the evening the Queen Mother appeared and spoke to most of us as she distributed apples from a basket.

We did not remain long in Brussels; In October 1944 I left the section as one of the wounded I had replaced had returned. It was policy and a good one to return wounded to their original unit when they had removed. My new unit was 109 SWS then located at Bruggen (Belgium) under 8th Corps.

In the middle of November the section moved to Berchem Ste Agathe, a suburb of Brussels, to refit and retrain in the winter lull. The unit was accommodated in a requisitioned school, while the soldiers were billeted with Belgian Families. This really only meant a room with bed and use of washing facilities, as all meals were taken in the cookhouse set up in the school. In fact food for the Belgians was very scarce so we were very popular if we were any good at scrounging extras. My biller was with a family called Moeyensoon, at 78 Avenue Gisseliere Verse. Later their son was called up by the Belgian Army and sent to England for training. While there, he several times visited my parents at Formby, who were thus able to return some of the hospitality given to me.

Life was comparatively easy going I was able to get out and about and see much of the city, which had not suffered much damage. The tramway system was operating again and all personnel in uniform travelled free! Naturally, we were not unaware of the attractions of the Belgian girls and they seemed to enjoy our company too! One thing it helped to improve my schoolboy French enormously.

In mid-December I was one of a detachment sent to Weert in Holland, where we lived in a partially demolished house. A neighbouring Dutch family was very friendly allowing us to do our washing and so on. We also spent a lot of our free time in their kitchen, which was WARM. I cannot recall what fuel they used but think it must have been wood, as I recall a huge tiled oven in the kitchen.

It was a bitterly cold winter and snow lay from mid-December on. It was whilst there that the Allies panicked when the Germans counter-attacked through the Ardennes. There was a great deal of alarm and ill- thought-through actions before the situation was stabilised. Early in the New Year the detachment re-joined the section, which had moved to Rosieres in Belgium. I've not been able to find it on any maps, but it must have been near Mons, as I visited an immense Military cemetery from the Great War, and also the Menin Gate in Ypres.

Early in 1945 a scheme for leave to England had been introduced who went when was decided by lottery. It shows how soft we had become the fellows in the Middle and Far East went years without any leave at all! My turn came in February, with travel in old carriages without windows to Calais. A channel Ferry, converted for trooping conveyed us to Harwich and we continued to London by military train. The rest of the journey followed in normal trains.

The France and Germany Star had been introduced as an Campaign Medal for those who had served six months in North West Europe and great efforts were made to have made sure those going on leave at bore the ribbon on their uniform. But unfortunately as time went on the conditions for the award of the medal were progressively relaxed so that it ceased to be such distinction. But I am justly proud of mine, earned under the original conditions.

I returned to the section at Issum in Holland, where the Rheichswald forest was slowly being cleared in some very bitter fighting and preparations were being made for the crossing the Rhine. Shift working was back, with a continuous system without free days. The shifts were worked so: 08.00 – 13.00, 22.00 – 03.00, 13.00 – 17.00, 03.00 – and then 17.00 – 22.00 before starting round again.

And when one was not on a radio set, sleeping, meals washing (self & cloths) weapon cleaning, sentry duty and various other chores had all to be fitted in. And whenever we moved the old latrine pit had to be filled in and new slit trenches dug at the new site!

Then came the day of the Rhine crossing! During it I picked up a German Voice transmission so one the linguists came to listen. It was an Artillery OP, calling for counter-battery fire. He went off the air in mid-sentence and we assumed he had been knocked out. Two days later we crossed near Kleve on a Class 9 pontoon Bridge.



Not Long afterwards, an insect bite I had suffered in my armpit turned dangerously septic, so that I was taken to an RAP (Regimental Aid Post) and then to a CCS (Casualty Clearing Station). Movement by ambulance followed to a FDS (Field Dressing Station) on the west bank of the Rhine and a day later I was flown with genuine wounded in Dakota (DC3) from an airstrip near Venlo to Brussels. I had no inkling at the time of our later association with that city!

Transferred to a Base hospital in Louvain, I was operated on the next day and a drain was inserted into the lung. After two or Three weeks I was discharged and travelled by train to a RHU (Reinforcement Holding Unit) in Bruges in an old Belgian Barracks. We all simply wanted to get back to our units but by then Germany was collapsing and with the race across the North German Plain, logistics simply could not keep up. Eventually we were made up into drafts and travelled by very slow train to Venlo, from whence it was planned movement forward be by road. But we got no further. With Germany collapsing prisoners were mounting up into the tens of thousands and any available bodies were gathered in to get them on their way to the POW camps.

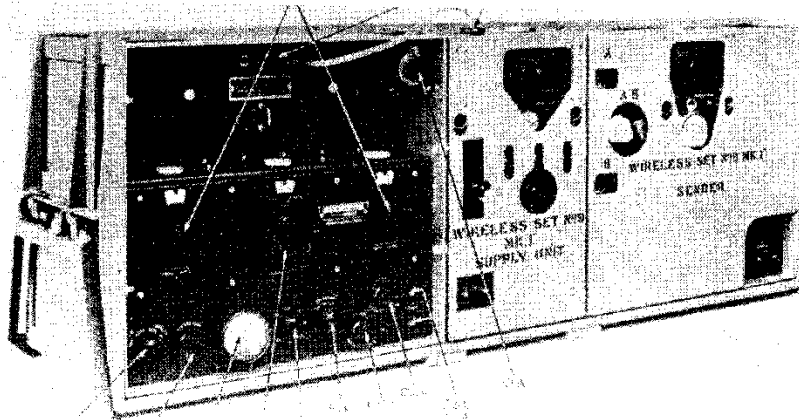
So I soon found myself at a member of a POW Escort which took charge of a couple of thousand and marched them to a nearby railway siding. Waiting were the well-known railway trucks (8 horses or 40 men!) into which they were packed. Every third wagon carried a portion of the escort. When the train reached Genval, outside Brussels, it was already dark and the Belgians took advantage, pelting the miserable POWs with rotten tomatoes and anything else they could lay their hands on. The atmosphere became very threatening and we found ourselves in the unaccustomed role of protecting our enemies from the wrath of our Allies!

Once the column of prisoners had been safely handed over to the camp guards, it was back to Brussels – Nord Station to be shipped north again and collect another party of POWs. This time it was in 3-axle passenger coaches with wire-mesh over the windows. Escort travelled at each end of the carriage, which was a very unpleasant environment as many of the prisoners had Gypsy Tummy and all were exhausted.

For some reason the train stopped alongside a crowded platform in Eindhoven. The Dutch became very abusive and there were usual hotheads who sought to escalate the fury of the crowd. The situation became very ugly and we fixed bayonets to deter the Dutch from storming the train. We were very relieved when it finally pulled out of the station.

It was in the early hours of the morning when we were dumped at Brussels-Nord to await a train north again that evening. It was a perfect spring day which I mostly spent sitting on the wall of the Jardin Botanique, watching all the pretty girls go by.

As I hadn't had my clothes nor my boots off for ten days or more and washing had been an infrequent event I was in no fit state for even the most simple of social activities. And so I spent the 8th May 1945 which I later learnt had been VE Day!



WIRELESS SET No 9 (1939)

DATA SUMMARY

Purpose: Medium range communication for AFV and Divisional Signals, vehicle station in truck and ground station.

System: AM R/T, MCW and CW

Frequency Coverage: 1.875-5MHz

Receiver IF: 420kHz

Range: (miles)	Aerial	CW	MCW	R/T
On the move	6ft rod	15/20	10/12	8/10
Stationary/ground	6ft rod	35	25	15

Types of Aerial:

Vertical rod, roof aerial or horizontal wire

RF Power Output: 10 watts CW, 5 watts R/T

Power Supply: 12V, 125Ah accumulator, feeding 80-watt rotary transformer 1100V to transmitter and Anode Converter 200V to both transmitter and receiver

Consumption: Receive 4A, transmit 23.5A (without oven 21.7A)

Size (inches) and Weight:

	height	length	depth	weight
Transmitter	14 ¹ / ₄	15 ¹ / ₄	11 ³ / ₄	58 ¹ / ₄ lb
Receiver	14 ¹ / ₄	15 ¹ / ₄	11 ³ / ₄	46 lb
Supply Unit	14 ¹ / ₄	8	11 ³ / ₄	57 ¹ / ₄ lb
Complete set on carrier No. 1	16	41	12	192 lb

Valves:

Transmitter function	type	Receiver function	type
Master osc.	AT20	RF amp.	ARP3
Power amp.	ATS70	Local osc.	ARP3
Modulator	AT20	Mixer	ARP3
		IF amp.	2x ARP3
		Detector/AVC	ARDD1
		BFO	ARP3
		AF amp.	ARP3

General Description

Wireless Set No. 9 was primarily developed for use in tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles. However, due to the difficulty of mounting the set in medium and small tanks, it was later used principally as a general purpose vehicle station, e.g. in Trucks, 15-cwt, 4-wheeled, Wireless, from which it could be removed to be used as a ground station.

Mechanically and electrically the set shows good craftsmanship, but with the drawbacks of being very expensive and difficult to manufacture in large quantities. This was painfully realised at the start of World War II when large quantities of radio equipment were required.

The No. 9 Set comprises three basic units; Receiver, Transmitter and Supply Unit, each unit built in an aluminium alloy framework and fitted with a detachable guard plate over the front panel.

The three units are mounted in a steel frame, 'Wireless Set No. 9 Carrier No. 1', (units fitted side by side) or 'Carrier No. 2' (receiver mounted on top of the transmitter and supply unit). The carrier consists of two parts, a mounting frame for the three units, supported by a rubber suspended cradle frame.

The connections between the various units are made by means of sockets on the back of each unit and plugs, attached and wired in the carrier.

The set operates on 12 volts DC. Normally, the power supply is provided by two 'Batteries, Secondary, Portable, 6V, 100/125Ah, Mk.IV', connected in series and charged from the vehicle generator. This arrangement allowed quick transformation from a vehicle station to a ground station.

The transmitter consists of four detachable sub-units: master oscillator, RF power amplifier, aerial tuning and modulator, mounted in a frame. The valves are easily accessible from the front (behind doors) and the entire RF power amplifier unit slides out on a tray with automatic disengagement of connectors. The transmitter has two identical master oscillator circuits and aerial tuning circuits which could be set to different frequencies. A quick change from 'A' to 'B' frequency can thus be made by a two position frequency change switch (also called 'flick' mechanism).

To prevent mistakes in tuning, the controls of the 'A channel' are coloured red and those of the 'B channel' blue. Additionally, a lamp indicating the channel in use lights up.

At the time when the set was developed it was thought that in a moving vehicle, crystal control was the only means by which a frequency could be kept constant. As it turned out, the frequency of the production models was sufficiently stable and it was decided to provide crystals on a very limited scale for calibration of control sets only.